

# OUR CONTESTED — STORY —

CHRISTIAN FAITH IN AN AGE OF DOUBT



DANIEL B. CLENDENIN

# **Our Contested Story Christian Faith in an Age of Doubt**

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## Endorsements

“Clendenin's newest book is a robust affirmation of both the ancient Christian story and our modern critical consciousness.”

— *John Bravman, President of Bucknell University.*

“Critical but hopeful, scholarly but accessible, steeped in the sage insights culled from his own vast reading, Clendenin's book is a fascinating overview of the state of Christianity today and a beacon of light pointing the way to a happier, more vibrant future.”

— *Ron Hansen, author of A Stay against Confusion: Essays on Faith and Fiction.*

“*Our Contested Story* is a whirlwind ride through the ancient yet contemporary conversation between Christian and secular cultures. The ride is sometimes joyous, sometimes steely-eyed, sometimes tearful, frequently poignant. From Creation to CRISPR, from St. John's Apocalypse to modern Darfur, from biblical ‘texts of terror’ to ultimate biblical hope for ‘the renewal of all things,’ few stones are left unturned. In the end, the words of St. John, the nonagenerian evangelist, resonate authentically with me. When asked why, in his terribly weakened state, his repeated message to his congregation was, ‘Little children, love one another’... John replied, ‘It is the Lord's command, and if only this is done, it is enough.’ Clendenin weaves a story that is faithful to modern knowledge and sensibility, and also to the vibrant historic core of Christian faith.”

— *Bill Newsome, Vincent V.C. Woo Director of the Wu Tsai Neurosciences Institute at Stanford University, Harman Family Provostial Professor, and a member of the National Academy of Sciences and the American Philosophical Society.*

## About the Author

After ten years as a professor in Michigan and Moscow, Russia, and eight years as a campus minister at Stanford University, in 2004 Daniel B. Clendenin founded the webzine [\*Journey With Jesus\*](#). Since its launch, *JWJ* has served over eight million page views to readers in 238 countries. Clendenin and his wife have walked the 493-mile *Camino Santiago* in Spain (2012), the 458-mile pilgrimage in France called *Le Chemin du Puy* (2014), and the 350-mile *La Via di Francesco* from Florence to Assisi to Rome (2016). His previous books include:

*Eastern Orthodox Christianity: A Western Perspective*

*Eastern Orthodox Theology: A Contemporary Reader*

*Many Gods, Many Lords; Christianity Encounters World Religions*

*Problems in Christian Philosophy*, co-editor

*From the Coup to the Commonwealth; An Inside Look at Life in Contemporary Russia*

*Scholarship, Sacraments and Service: Historical Studies in Protestant Tradition*, co-editor

*Theological Method in Jacques Ellul*

Clendenin and his wife live in Palo Alto, California.

# Acknowledgments

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Soren Kierkegaard

Herr! gieb Uns blöde Augen  
für Dinge, die nichts taugen  
und Augen voller Klarheit  
in alle Deine Wahrheit.

Lord! Give us weak eyes  
for things that do not matter  
and eyes full of clarity  
In all your truth.

From the preface to *The Sickness Unto Death* (1849)

## Introduction

Around the time that I turned sixty, I had a most ambiguous moment of self-realization—that I've gone to church almost every Sunday of my life. That's well over three thousand services.

I'm grateful for my heritage. My mother was a church organist for twenty-five years in a small Presbyterian church. Her grandfather was a Presbyterian pastor, her mother spent seventy-nine years in great-grandfather McGrath's church, and her sister has worshiped there for ninety-two years — ever since she was born.

Nonetheless, such long term religiosity has its risks. Boredom. Cliches. Jargon. Cynicism. Merely going through the motions, however well intended. Plus, anyone who has gone to church for sixty years and has paid attention has honest questions about complex issues. For his part, my father quit church when I was in high school. I have my own critical questions, but I've decided to do my doubting within the community of faith, and my believing within the broader cultural conversation.

At about this same time, I began to notice something brazen, even bizarre, at the church that I attend every Sunday. It's always been

there, and in some form has a history as old as the gospel itself. So, it was nothing new, but for some reason it suddenly grabbed my attention, and ever since then has not let go.

My Episcopal church is in many ways quite old school. The building has a steeple and stained glass. The priests wear robes. We even have a paid organist. And week after week we do what churches have done for two millennia. We sing a few hymns, we pray for each other and the world, we listen to a sermon, we celebrate communion, at the end come the announcements, and then we go drink coffee on the patio. A sort of standard operating procedure for a churchy church.

But there's one part of our religious routine that now feels like a gut punch. It's something akin to street theater, or performance art, and strategically placed at the centerpoint of the service.

The service begins at the back of the church with a processional down the center aisle. First comes what's called a vergers, who leads our little line of clergy. Then there's a teenage acolyte who carries our local church banner, complete with red ribbons and tinkling bells. The last person in line, very much in a conspicuous pride of place, is a priest who holds high overhead a large and bright red book. These are the four gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John.

When they reach the front of the church, they place the red book on the altar, they bow to this book, and then sit down. After a few prayers and a hymn, there's a reading from the Jewish "old" testament, a psalm that our choir sings a capella, and a reading from one of the epistles. There's a lot of reading the Bible out loud in my church—a lost art in our culture, and ironically counter-intuitive when you consider that we're very much a "liberal" church. Then, during the middle of the next hymn, we repeat the processional in reverse.

Once again the acolyte holds the gospel aloft, walks back down the center aisle, and stops in the physical center of the church. The congregation turns toward the text. As the acolyte opens the book in front of her, the priest makes a tiny sign of the cross on her forehead, lips, and chest—commending her mind, her speech, and her heart to the reading of this text. She then proclaims, "the holy gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ." The congregation responds, "Glory to you, Lord Christ."

After reading the gospel passage that's assigned for that Sunday, she takes the book from the acolyte and again holds it high overhead, and then concludes, "the gospel of the Lord!" The congregation responds, "Praise to you, Lord Christ." The priest and the acolyte then retrace

their steps to the front, place the gospel back on the altar, and again genuflect before it.

If I really want to feel the liturgical fire, I sit in a seat that's right on the center aisle, positioned perfectly so that I could touch the priest and that text, physically closer than a comfortable psychological space between two people, and in so doing try to fathom exactly what's going on. Except for the reading, which ricochets off the hard surfaces of the interior of the church, you could hear a pin drop.

When I watch this liturgical drama about a book, so full of symbolism both verbal and physical, I want to shout, "Stop! Wait! What's going on here? What are we saying and doing and meaning with this huge, bright red book? And why? We wouldn't bow down to a volume of Sappho or Shakespeare, would we, however venerated?"

The public reading of the gospel invites us to reconsider, each and every Sunday, and with as much brutal honesty as we can muster, exactly what the "good news" of "our Lord Jesus Christ" means, and why we don't just salute or honor him but offer to him our praise and worship. We're exploring over and over again the heart of the gospel and the core of our faith. In addition, we're imagining our own selves

into his ancient story, and trying to understand and shape our contemporary lives in light of it.

After the Jesuit priest John Dear met Daniel Berrigan in 1984, he asked him for a piece of advice. “Make your story fit into the story of Jesus,” said Berrigan. “Ask yourself: does your life make sense in light of the life of Jesus? All we have to do is close our eyes to the culture and open them to our friends. We have enough to go on. We can’t afford the luxury of despair.”

This book is an invitation to a conversation. It’s an ancient conversation about the story of Jesus that has been contested from its beginnings, and always will be contested. It’s about how our contemporary stories might make sense in light of his ancient story that’s read aloud every single day in churches all over the world.

Two thousand years ago in Palestine, a Jewish sect of downwardly mobile people made a preposterous claim. Although they were at first incredulous disbelievers themselves, they later insisted that a dead man named Jesus had been raised to life, and that in him God had destroyed death and reconciled the cosmos to himself.

Only thirty years later, his movement had so many followers in Rome, 1500 miles northwest of Jerusalem, that secular historians at the time

recorded how the emperor Nero scapegoated them. A generation after Nero, the emperor Trajan received a letter from his governor in Turkey, who was fretting about public policies. Was torturing Christians acceptable? What about tracking down adherents based upon anonymously circulated lists of names? What constituted a reliable renunciation of faith? Governor Pliny wrote to Trajan that he was worried about the “contagious superstition” because it was spreading like wildfire and included people of every rank and age.

Today Christianity is the world’s largest religion, with over two billion adherents. And two thousand years later it still has many detractors. Moreover, it’s only one voice in a much larger global conversation that those first Christians could not have imagined. Our contemporary conversation includes 150 mega-religions that have at least a million adherents each, plus another four thousand distinct faiths.

There are also non-religious narratives with powerful voices in today’s conversation. Science tells a most compelling but strictly limited story. Many atheists co-opt the story of science in an effort to burnish the credentials of their own worldview. Having lived in the Silicon Valley since 1995, I can say with confidence that technology promises a gospel of salvation, even a utopia. American exceptionalism, Russian

nationalism, and Islamic terrorism are only a few of our many political narratives today.

Human beings have always been meaning-makers. We need stories, explanatory narratives, or what Joseph Campbell called myths. They define an essential part of what it means to be human, so much so that it's impossible for us to live without them. Stories help us to consider the most important questions that anyone can ask, like the search for significance, the meaning of the material world, the nature of good and evil, the responsibility of community, and the struggle for life in a world of death. Stories help us to make sense of a complex world.

The Christian story has shaped my life since I was baptized as a baby in 1955 by my mother's grandfather, that Presbyterian pastor in Ohio. In the sixty years since then, I've worked and worshiped from different perspectives within my Christian tradition.

After finishing graduate school in 1985 with a dissertation on the French sociologist Jacques Ellul (1912-1994),<sup>[1]</sup> I spent six years as a professor at a tiny Christian college in Michigan, where I was very much a "liberal." I then spent four years as a visiting professor at the massive Moscow State University, where I was very much a

“conservative” —an American Protestant in the land of Russian Orthodoxy, teaching in the Department of Scientific Atheism, in what was still the communist Soviet Union.<sup>[2]</sup>

After ten years as a professor, I spent eight years as a campus minister at Stanford University with a Christian organization called InterVarsity. My colleague and I worked with graduate students, and then in the fall of 1997 I started three faculty fellowships that met on a weekly basis—one in the faculty club, another one in the Bing Dining Room of the hospital, and a third one for physicists at the Stanford Linear Accelerator Center.

After that, on June 23, 2004, with the help of many friends, I launched a “weekly webzine for the global church” called *Journey with Jesus*, and so I began to write full time for a digital audience. That was fifteen years and over seven million pageviews ago.

The centerpiece of *JwJ* has always been a weekly essay based upon the Revised Common Lectionary, weekly book and film reviews, and some poetry. I didn’t know it when I started, but *JwJ* forced me into a weekly discipline of reading, writing, and thinking in conversation with a broad diversity of global voices. For example, I’ve reviewed over seven hundred books in over a dozen subject categories, and films

from 106 countries.<sup>[3]</sup> London has always been the city with the most *JwJ* readers, followed by New York City. In an average month we serve readers in 140 countries (Google Analytics).

My church life has likewise been varied. I grew up as a Presbyterian. In Russia we attended the Moscow Protestant Chaplaincy, a church of expatriates from thirty countries that was about 30% African. In Palo Alto we have spent fourteen years in a Presbyterian megachurch, and ten years in an Episcopal church. Along the way I've traveled in forty countries, and backpacked three pilgrimages with my wife—the *Camino Santiago* in Spain (2012), *Le Chemin du Puy* in southern France (2014), and *La Via di Francesco* (2016) from Florence to Assisi to Rome.

In this book I tell the Christian story in conversation with important alternative narratives. In the first chapter I explore the decline of Christian belief in the modern west, and suggest five prerequisites for a meaningful conversation between its defenders and detractors. I then devote successive chapters to the claims of atheism, science, technology, and pluralism. After that, I consider the Christian story from a trinitarian perspective—God as the Father of us all, Jesus as the Son of Adam, and the Holy Spirit as the Breath of all Life.<sup>[4]</sup> I end

with an epilogue on the words of Jesus about the renewal of all things. Each chapter concludes with a poem for further reflection, for some things are best and perhaps only said with poetry.

In this conversation I include voices from Scripture, history, theology, literature, film, poetry, and personal experiences. Sometimes there are points of overlapping agreement with alternate stories, and at other times irreconcilable differences. At Stanford I've also been surprised at the profound ignorance of some otherwise very smart people about basic questions. Tired stereotypes and stale cliches are a chronic threat to clarity. Some people are so hostile to the Christian story, sometimes for good reasons, that there's no conversation to be had with them.

David Foster Wallace once observed that we live in an environment of Total Noise. To borrow language from our engineering friends, in this book I'm searching for the gospel signal amidst the cultural noise. I offer what the apostle Paul called a defense and confirmation of the story of Jesus amidst the marketplace of many other alternatives. [\[5\]](#)

### **For further reflection**

Emily Dickinson (1830–1886)

*Tell it Slant*

Tell all the Truth but tell it slant —  
Success in Circuit lies;  
Too bright for mind's infirm intent,  
The Truth's superb surprise.  
As Lightning to the Children eased,  
With explanation kind;  
The Truth must dazzle gradually,  
Or every man be blind.

Famous as an eccentric recluse who lived much of her life in isolation in Amherst, the American poet Emily Dickinson wrote some 1800 poems, only a handful of which were published during her lifetime. For 1100 of Dickinson's poems, see Cristanne Miller, editor, *Emily Dickinson's Poems as She Preserved Them* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2016), 845pp. The 2017 film "A Quiet Passion" is a biographical take on Dickinson.

# Chapter One

## A Contested Story

### Faith Interrupted

For many people in the west today, Christian faith has become problematic, if not impossible. This observation isn't true for most of the world, which is and always has been robustly religious, but it's true for people who live in Europe and North America. It's certainly true where I live, about a mile from Stanford University in California, where it's a commonplace to believe that elite science and authentic faith are incompatible. What used to be a common narrative shared by most people has become a contested story.

In the (post) modern and secular west, many people wonder if religion still matters, and, in the off chance that it does, what shape it might take today compared to its past traditional forms. Scholars debate the extent to which society has been secularized, but many ordinary people nonetheless sense that our culture is increasingly characterized by unbelief. They resonate with the cognitive scientist Daniel Dennett of Tufts University, who twenty years ago compared

religious faith to a childish fable like believing in Santa Claus, something that an “undeluded adult” could never believe. Dennett called himself an enlightened “bright,” and for two decades now has forcefully argued for a strictly materialist view of the world and even human consciousness.[\[6\]](#)

Many important opinion-makers in our universities, science, technology, media, and entertainment are what the German theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768–1834) called the “cultured despisers of religion.” Sometimes their unbelief is characterized by the benign neglect of something that’s considered harmless. At other times, there’s an active hostility toward religion that is construed as an obstacle to human progress. In this view, religion is the domain of the uneducated, downwardly mobile, and culturally marginal people who don’t know any better.

For about two hundred years, since the time of the French Revolution and the earliest beginnings of the United States, there has been an active “de-Christianization” of western culture. In France, this was a horribly violent process, both physically and mentally, in the cause of a secular “liberation.” In the former Soviet Union, where I lived for four years from 1991 to 1995, and which had been a deeply Christian

country for a thousand years, atheist communism closed 98% of the Orthodox churches, 1,000 monasteries, and 60 seminaries. Between 1917 and the start of World War II, 50,000 Orthodox priests were slaughtered. Historians cite similar figures for the aggressive and comprehensive persecution of the church during the French Revolution or in Nazi Germany.

Today, Europe's magnificent cathedrals are mostly empty on Sunday mornings. When I was at Oxford University in October of 2003, I attended the Evensong service at Magdalen College Chapel (founded in 1458) every night for two straight weeks. Except for the priest, the boys choir, and a handful of tourists, there was almost no one there. Anyone who has traveled in places like Scandinavia, Germany, or France could tell similar stories. [\[7\]](#)

Compared to the long history of Europe, the United States is still a young and religious country, with about seventy percent of its people identifying themselves as Christian. But that also means that about 100 million Americans are non-Christian, including rising numbers of people of other faiths. More Americans are becoming less religious in their beliefs and practices than ever before. This is especially true

among the Millennial generation of young adults. Consider these three trends from the social sciences.

Since their peak in the 1950's, there's been a dramatic decline in membership among the "mainline" Protestant denominations, which, since the founding of the United States, have been home for the majority of American Christians.<sup>[8]</sup> A sad and symbolic reminder of this demise is the former home office of the National Council of Churches, the ecumenical organization that represents about forty mainly mainline denominations. The NCC was a founding, anchor tenant at the 19-story Interchurch Center that was built in 1958 at 475 Riverside Drive in Manhattan, overlooking the Hudson River. After occupying multiple floors with a massive bureaucracy for over fifty years, in 2013 the NCC vacated the building and consolidated its drastically downsized organization to its Washington, DC office.

Roman Catholics, who make up about twenty percent of the American population, face similar demographic losses. They are declining in absolute numbers and as a percentage of the population. In its 2014 study called "America's Changing Religious Landscape," the Pew Research Center reported significant decreases among American Catholics. About six Catholics leave the church for every one convert

who joins, which means that it's losing more members at a faster rate than any other denomination.[\[9\]](#)

According to Georgetown University's Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate, American Catholicism has experienced dramatic losses since 1965. The number of priests has dropped about 36%, from 58,600 to 37,200. In 1965, 549 parishes did not have a resident priest; in 2016 that number was 3,499. During the same fifty-year period, the number of "graduate level seminarians" dropped from 8,325 to 3,520. There were 179,954 "Religious Sisters" (nuns) in 1965. Today there are 47,170, a decline of over 70%.[\[10\]](#)

Nor does it help when one of the country's most prominent intellectuals, who is also one of Catholicism's most fierce critics and devoted members, refers to popes and priests as a "failed tradition" and a much later addition to the original Jesus story that Catholics could do without.[\[11\]](#)

Third, and more broadly still, Pew reported that the percentage of Americans who say that they are "absolutely certain" that God exists has dropped from 71% in 2007 to 63% in 2014. Of special interest are a relatively new demographic group called the "nones"—religiously unaffiliated people who don't identify with any group, including but not

limited to atheists and agnostics. The vast majority of nones (78%) were raised in religious homes. They now account for 23% of adult Americans, up from 16% in 2007. That makes them larger than Catholics, significantly larger than mainline Christians, and almost as large as Protestant evangelicals.[\[12\]](#)

Robert Jones of the Public Religion Research Institute has documented similar demographic losses. Most notable is his research that shows that these declines now include white evangelical Protestants, a group that was once thought to be an exception to the trends. In 2008 they comprised about 21% of the population, whereas by 2015 that figure had dropped to 17%. The conservative Southern Baptist Convention, the largest evangelical Protestant denomination in the country, has reported nine straight years of declining growth rates.[\[13\]](#)

In addition to these observations from history and social science, there's also anecdotal evidence for an erosion of Christianity in the west. In the fall of 1997, when I started three faculty fellowships at Stanford University as a campus minister for InterVarsity Christian Fellowship, one professor expressed his amazement at our first meeting: "I never knew there were this many Christian professors at

Stanford!" he exclaimed. "Many," in this context, was still a tiny minority of the entire university, but even that tiny minority was more than he expected.

Harvey Cox might have discovered the Nones before demographers coined that term. His course at Harvard called *Jesus and the Moral Life* was so successful that the president took him to lunch to discover why. Cox described his students as "dissatisfied seekers" who had a genuine interest in spirituality if not religion. He says that they despaired of conservative, self-assured, and smug literalists on the one hand, and "wimpy 'well whatever' laxity" on the other. Most of his students were "benevolent but uncomfortable relativists" who longed for a better alternative. [\[14\]](#)

Similarly, Marcus Borg of Oregon State University described how his university students had a uniformly negative image of Christianity. When he asked them to write a short essay about their impressions of Christianity, Borg's students consistently used five adjectives. They viewed Christians as literalistic, anti-intellectual, self-righteous, judgmental, and bigoted. David Kinnaman and Gabe Lyons reached similar conclusions in their own book, that "it would be hard to

overestimate how firmly people reject — and feel rejected by— Christians."[\[15\]](#)

## **Honest Questions**

People lose faith for all sorts of reasons, some of them quite understandable.[\[16\]](#) My own father never said why he left the church. The appalling carnage of two world wars in “Christian” Europe made many people question religion—over 100 million deaths from war, disease, and famine.

During his last two years of college at Princeton, the American political philosopher John Rawls (1921–2002) considered studying for the Episcopal priesthood. That was before he fought in World War II as an infantryman, and saw Hiroshima after it had been bombed. A friend died in the war. After the war, Rawls was deeply shaken to learn about the Holocaust.

The war made Rawls doubt any connection between human prayer and divine providence: "How could I pray and ask God to help me, or my family, or my country, or any other cherished thing I care about, when God would not save millions of Jews from Hitler?" In the end, Rawls lost his Christian faith. He found it impossible to reconcile some

ostensible perfect will of God with the brutal realities of human history.

[\[17\]](#)

In the name of God's love Christians have slaughtered Muslims, Jews, and Native Americans. We have humiliated and exploited slaves, women, and gays. Clerical pedophilia has devastated thousands of families. And whether Orthodox, Catholic or Protestant, Christians have persecuted each other with cruelty. It's understandable that many people want nothing to do with such religious hypocrisy.

Hypocrisy has in turn caused some people to reject organized religion and its bureaucratic institutions. Some of the "nones" in the Pew survey described their interest in religion as personal but not institutional. "I no longer believe in organized religion," said one respondent. "I don't attend services anymore. I just believe that religion is a very personal conversation with me and my creator, and I don't need church for that." The Episcopal priest and professor Barbara Brown Taylor says that she left the institutional church in order to save her faith.[\[18\]](#)

For many people, the church hasn't dealt honestly or credibly with important questions. Instead, some Christians have defended the dubious, like the theory of a young earth, or that being gay is a choice

rather than a neurobiological inheritance. The distinguished professor Bart Ehrman of UNC Chapel Hill made a radical break with his religious past due in part to superficial responses to his intellectual doubts— in his case, from growing up as a conservative evangelical to what he now calls agnostic atheism.<sup>[19]</sup> As we shall see, these intellectual doubters often appeal to science as incompatible with religion.

Still others leave church because they find it mediocre or boring. Annie Dillard once described her ambivalent church experience in a memorable passage: "Week after week I was moved by the pitiableness of the bare linoleum-floored sacristy which no flowers could cheer or soften, by the terrible singing I so loved, by the fatigued Bible readings, the lagging emptiness and dilution of the liturgy, the horrifying vacuity of the sermon, and by the fog of dreary senselessness pervading the whole, which existed alongside, and probably caused, the wonder of the fact that we came; we returned; we showed up; week after week, we went through it."<sup>[20]</sup> Dillard stayed in church, but many people today consider it a culturally irrelevant institution that's living only in its own echo chamber, and as portrayed in movies like *Babette's Feast* (1987), *Chocolat* (2000), and Paul Schrader's *First Reformed* (2017).

Secularization has been so effective that some people have never had any faith to lose. The English novelist Julian Barnes says that he has never attended a church service in his life, and that he was raised in a family that didn't want any of that "religious mumbo jumbo." I found this lifelong lack of religion to be true among my students at Moscow State University in the former Soviet Union, where I taught in the "Department of Scientific Atheism" from 1991 to 1995. People often told me that they had never experienced any religious faith, never felt any need for it, and didn't have any interest in it.

Any church that wants to survive today will have to address reasons like these for why people leave institutional Christianity. Having said that, we need to consider the contested story of Christian faith within a broader historical context.

## **Detractors**

Criticisms of Christianity didn't begin with Voltaire and the Enlightenment *philosophes* two hundred years ago, much less today. Dennett's sarcasm is nothing new. From the earliest beginnings of the Christian story, there have always been doubters and detractors, including some of the closest followers of Jesus. The Christian story has always and everywhere been a contested story.

Only our modern hubris, what the British historian EP Thompson called "the enormous condescension of posterity," could believe that not until today — finally! — have we advanced to a level of critical inquiry like no one before us. C.S. Lewis similarly called our self-congratulatory fixation on the most modern a form of "chronological snobbery." Critical questions about the gospel, and thoughtful responses to them, are as old as the faith itself.

Jesus was a cause for controversy beginning with his birth. Simeon prophesied to Mary that her baby would be "a sign to be opposed." Jesus was rejected by his hometown of Nazareth, the people of Capernaum ran him out of town, and a Samaritan village wouldn't even let him enter their town. In John's gospel, we repeatedly read how "the people were divided because of Jesus." His detractors said that he was demon-possessed and "raving mad." His own family tried to apprehend him as insane. His brothers didn't believe in him. "Many" of his closest disciples quit following him. The religious elite "opposed him fiercely."

In the end, Rome executed Jesus as a politically subversive criminal. Luke's passion narrative is revealing. Luke says that Jesus was executed for three reasons: "We found this fellow subverting our

nation, opposing payment of taxes to Caesar, and saying that he himself is Christ, a King.” In John’s gospel, the angry mob warned Pilate, “If you let this man go, you are no friend of Caesar. Anyone who claims to be king opposes Caesar.”<sup>[21]</sup> Herein are the origins of the charges that the first Christians were politically seditious. Twenty years after Jesus died, critics complained that his followers undermined the values of Roman society.

In Philippi, a mob dragged Paul and Silas before the city magistrates, then had them stripped, beaten, flogged, and imprisoned: "These men are throwing our city into an uproar by advocating customs unlawful for us Romans to accept or practice." In Thessalonica, "some bad characters from the marketplace" dragged Jason and some fellow believers before the city officials, shouting, ‘These men who have caused trouble all over the world have now come here... They are all defying Caesar's decrees, saying that there is another king, one called Jesus.’”<sup>[22]</sup>

This harsh opposition to a divisive Jesus reverberates throughout the New Testament. Peter called Jesus "the stone of stumbling and the rock of offense." Writing to the Corinthians, Paul called Jesus the foolishness of God, a stumbling block to Jews, and a laughingstock to

Gentiles. When Paul made his defense (*apologia*) before Festus, Luke says that the king scoffed that he was mad.

In the decades after these original events, we find more derisive dismissals of Christians, questions about public policy, and even whether Christians could be good Roman citizens. After a period of invisibility because of their insignificance, it wasn't long before believers had made such a social impact that they provoked scorn from the highest levels of society. Here are four examples from our earliest sources.

In his biography of the emperor Nero, the Roman historian Suetonius (75–160) mentions with contempt how “punishment was inflicted on the Christians, a set of people adhering to a novel and mischievous superstition.” Nero seems to have blamed the Great Fire of Rome in 64 AD on the Christians.[\[23\]](#)

The Roman senator and historian Tacitus, writing around the year 116, refers to the crucifixion of Jesus by Pontius Pilate, the sizeable number of Christians who were already living in Rome, and their torture by Nero. Tacitus sneered at the “pernicious superstitions” of the believers—what he calls “a class hated for their abominations.” He believed that they deserved their punishment. He also admits that they

were a convenient scapegoat for the “refined cruelty” of the sadistic Nero—like being sewn into animal skins and thrown to ravenous dogs, or burned as human torches at night. Ironically, this hatred toward the nascent movement turned to pity, says Tacitus, because it was clear that the persecutions were “not for the welfare of the state, but due to the savagery of a single man.”[\[24\]](#)

Pliny the Younger ruled Pontus-Bithynia (modern Turkey) as governor from 111–113. In a brief exchange of two letters with the emperor Trajan back in Rome, he expressed frustration about how to prosecute Christians, especially because they comprised a considerable portion of his populace from every walk of life. He described to Trajan his ad hoc policy, and one case in particular. "I judged it so much the more necessary to extract the real truth, with the assistance of torture, from two female slaves, who were styled deaconesses, but I could discover nothing more than depraved and excessive superstition. I therefore adjourned the proceedings, and sought immediately your counsel. For the matter seemed to me well worth referring to you especially considering the numbers endangered. Persons of all ranks and ages, of both sexes, are and will be involved in the prosecution. For this contagious superstition is not confined to the cities only, but has

spread through the villages and rural districts; it seems possible, however, to check and cure it."[\[25\]](#)

Pliny doesn't specify the crimes of the Christians. He's less concerned about what he considers a harmless fable than that it is spreading far and wide, and disrupting Roman ways. He also expresses his discomfort with an "anonymous document containing the names of many persons." Nonetheless, after three interrogations, and the opportunity to recant, he executed those Christians who maintained their faith. And so, he asks Trajan whether his practices constituted sufficient due process.

In his own short letter, Trajan supported Pliny's "proper procedure," then clarified four matters. Pliny should not actively hunt down believers, but if a person admitted to being a Christian, that was enough to warrant punishment. Christians could be pardoned if they convincingly renounced their faith, by worshipping Rome's gods and the image of the emperor with wine and incense. Finally, Trajan insisted that anonymous accusations "have no place," for they were "both a dangerous kind of precedent and out of keeping with the spirit of our age." So, the believers were not tracked down, and accusations

couldn't be anonymous, but, on the other hand, merely confessing one's Christian faith in a public way was crime enough to be executed.

A generation later, in the most comprehensive attack on Christianity until then, a Greek philosopher from Alexandria named Celsus (fl.175) combined socioeconomic snobbery with intellectual elitism to deride Christians: "In some private homes we find people who work with wool and rags, and cobblers, that is, the least cultured and most ignorant kind. Before the head of the household they dare not utter a word. But as soon as they can take the children aside or some women who are as ignorant as they are, they speak wonders...If you really wish to know the truth, leave your teachers and your father, and go with the women and the children to the women's quarters, or to the cobbler's shop, or to the tannery, and there you will learn the perfect life. It is thus that these Christians find those who will believe them."[\[26\]](#) This sounds like some contemporary critics, only two millennia earlier—the Christian story is a childish fable for the ignorant and the downwardly mobile masses.

## **Defenders**

Just as there were detractors from the very beginning, there were also defenders of the faith. Whether on the margins or in the mainstream of

culture, Christians have always engaged their critics over their contested story. As one might expect, Peter and Paul led the way in this defense of the good news.

The epistle of 1 Peter was written about sixty years after Jesus, so the recipients of the letter were second generation Christians. The first verse of the letter indicates that it's a circular letter written to Gentile believers who lived in five Roman provinces a thousand miles east of Rome, in what is now north-central Turkey.

The author writes from Rome, but he doesn't use the word "Rome." Rather, he uses the politically provocative code word "Babylon." It's hard to imagine a more derogatory epithet than the ancient empire that conquered and subjugated God's people back in 586 BCE. John similarly disparages Rome as "the Great Babylon, the mother of whores, and of the abominations of the earth who is drunk with the blood of the saints."[\[27\]](#)

Like the author of the epistle, the recipients lived on the fringes of their culture. Three times the letter characterizes them as "strangers and aliens" to Rome's polytheistic paganism. He calls them a "scattered" people, a diaspora that lived a life of exile. They belonged not to Rome but to their own "peculiar people and nation." These believers

didn't conform to the social conventions of the day. The author describes them as "maligned" and "reviled." Even "the name" Christian was offensive to their detractors (cf. Pliny above). The letter is thus addressed to "folks who do not belong, who eke out their lives on the periphery of acceptable society, whose deepest loyalties and inclinations do not line up very well with what matters most in the world in which they live."[\[28\]](#)

Despite their disenfranchisement, Peter is insistent. He rejects the charge that the earliest believers followed "cleverly invented tales." He calls his readers to engage their critics. In fact, he says that it's incumbent upon every believer "always to be ready to make a defense (*apologia*) to everyone who asks you to give an account for the hope that is in you, yet with gentleness and reverence."[\[29\]](#) Those words echo down to believers today.

Then there is Paul, who logged some 10,000 miles spreading the good news of God's love. At least ten times in Acts and the epistles, we read how Paul made his "defense" or *apologia* before the Jews, Gentiles, public audiences of all sorts, and civil magistrates. Writing from a Roman prison where he was awaiting trial, he told the

Philippians that he was appointed by God “for the defense (*apologia*) and confirmation of the gospel.”

When Paul landed at the ancient city of Athens, he followed a set pattern. “As usual,” writes Luke, he went to the synagogues and “reasoned” with the Jews and the God-fearing Greeks.

After that, he went to the *agora* or the marketplace. Five hundred years before Paul, the Athenian *agora* was the center of civic life. It contained residences, religious temples, law courts, government magistrates, the city council, and economic commerce. In Paul's day it included small shopkeepers. “Day by day” in the *agora*, writes Luke, he defended his gospel to those who happened to be there.

In the *agora*, Paul engaged a group of Epicurean and Stoic philosophers who ridiculed him as a *spermologos* or seed-picker—the only occurrence of this word in the Greek New Testament. Translators struggle with this slang word, but whatever the exact meaning, they derided Paul as a babbler, a plagiarist, or a poser. His audience was unimpressed when he spoke about the resurrection of Jesus, and for a specific reason: “He seemed to be advocating foreign gods.”

From the *agora*, Paul moved to the Areopagus, which was both a place and a group. It's a small rocky hill northwest of the Acropolis in

Athens. The Areopagus was also the most prestigious council of elders in the history of Athens, so-named because it met on that site. Dating back to the 5th-6th centuries BCE, by Paul's day it was a place where matters of the criminal courts, law, philosophy and politics were adjudicated. The intelligentsia there invited Paul to present his "new teaching" and "strange ideas."

Their robust polytheism agitated the Jewish and monotheistic Paul, for it even included an altar with the inscription "To An Unknown God." But he met them on their own intellectual ground. He quoted two poets: the Cretan Epimenides (600 BCE), that "in him we live and move and have our being," and then the opening lines of the *Phaenomena* by Aratus (315–240 BCE), a Greek poet and Stoic of Cilicia, that "we are all God's children." As we shall see, a fundamental part of Paul's message was that God is the father of every person and family.

As in the *agora*, so too at the Areopagus—Paul's *apologia* for the resurrection among the intelligentsia elicited a tepid response. Some people "sneered," while others said, "We want to hear you again on this subject." Luke ends this story by saying that "a few people believed," including Dionysius, a "member of the Areopagus," a

woman named Damaris, who is otherwise unmentioned in the New Testament, "and a number of other" women.[\[30\]](#)

The age of the apostles was followed by the period of the apologists, This tradition of engaging critics of the gospel, in the marketplace with ordinary citizens and among the intelligentsia on their own ground, took root early, and has continued down to our own day. It's indicative of how far, how fast, and of how deeply the Christian story spread. Just as the critiques started early and have never stopped, there have always been corresponding *apologias* for the contested gospel story.

Trajan wasn't the only Roman emperor to get an earful about the troublesome Christians. Justin the Martyr wrote an *Apologia* to Trajan's successor (after Hadrian), the emperor Antoninus Pius, who ruled from 138 to 161. Justin addressed his defense to Antoninus, the emperor's sons, the "sacred senate," and even to "the whole people of the Romans." Justin was from a pagan family in Palestine, in what today is Nablus on the West Bank. He came to Rome after his conversion, where he founded his own school.

Justin petitioned Antoninus to investigate the unfair treatment of Christians. Believers, he said, were "unjustly hated and wantonly abused." Like both Pliny and 1 Peter, he describes how the very

“name” of being a Christian was cause enough for persecution. He admits that from Rome’s perspective the believers were “atheists,” albeit with his own twist on that word. Justin’s defense seems to have fallen on deaf ears. Around the year 165, at the age of sixty-five, he was beheaded with six of his students by an urban prefect named Junius Rusticus.

A generation after Justin, Clement of Alexandria (150-215) and Tertullian (155-230) of Carthage (modern Tunisia) wrote their own *apologias* from the north coast of Africa. At the same time, 2500 miles to the northwest in what is now contemporary Lyon, a bishop named Irenaeus (130–202) wrote his book *Against Heresies*. His work repudiated the gnostics who claimed to have a secret sort of wisdom, as opposed to the gospel that was a public story available to all. And a thousand years after that, Aquinas in the thirteenth century wrote his defense of the gospel called *Summa contra Gentiles*, or "book on the truth of the Catholic faith against the errors of the unbelievers."

Back and forth they went. These attacks and apologies have continued down to our own day. The Christian story has been contested and defended for two millennia. These criticisms of the faith,

along with competition between different religions, have pushed and pulled Christians in two directions at the same time.

### **Internal Tradition, External Boundaries**

Criticisms of Christianity have forced its followers to define their own faith, to clarify and develop their own *internal* tradition. "Telling, retelling, and refashioning sacred narratives," writes Robert Gregg, "were intentional efforts at reinforcing each community's core beliefs, codes of behavior, and modes of worship."[\[31\]](#)

To defend the gospel, to offer an *apologia*, begs an important question—what is the gospel? That is, what is the indispensable core or essence of Christianity to defend, and what other beliefs might be considered peripheral and of lesser significance? The gospels of Mark and John, for example, include nothing at all about the birth of Jesus. It's fascinating to contemplate being part of a Christian community that, in effect, had no Christmas story, but that's the legacy of the earliest and latest of the four gospels.

What is the internal core or *sine qua non* (literally, "without which not") of the Jesus story, the essential distillation without which it would no longer be what it is? As with the first *apologias*, we find efforts to

identify an “essence” of the gospel in the earliest beginnings of the movement.<sup>[32]</sup>

One of the earliest summaries of faith was just three words: “Jesus is Lord,” which occurs at least three times in the New Testament.

<sup>[33]</sup> Today this sounds like a pious and utterly innocuous cliché, but in those earliest days it wasn’t just a religious confession, it was also a political subversion: if Jesus was the only sovereign “lord,” then Rome’s caesar was decidedly not lord. As we saw above, the emperors and his defenders clearly understood this.

When Paul wrote to the Corinthians, he made a careful distinction. He says that he passed on to them what he himself had received, an oral tradition, or “the gospel that I preached.” Of “first importance” in this oral tradition was the affirmation that Christ died for our sins, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day, and that he appeared to Peter, then to the Twelve, and later to many other witnesses. Paul addressed other important matters in his letter to the Corinthians, but compared to this core tradition of “first importance” they were of a “secondary” nature.<sup>[34]</sup>

Later still there developed formal creeds, confessions, and catechisms that summarized the core tradition into a precise formula, rule, or

canon. The Apostles Creed and the Nicene Creed are good examples that are still recited today by the vast majority of Christians, but these are only two of hundreds of creeds that developed across many and diverse times and places.<sup>[35]</sup> Although creeds can feel like the worst sort of rote repetition, some confessions have saved the very soul of the church, like the *Barmen Declaration* (1934) during Nazi Germany and the *Kairos Document* (1985) during apartheid in South Africa. These creeds served as a “rule of faith” with which to distinguish between the essential and the peripheral matters of faith inside the church community.

Criticisms of the faith also functioned in an *external* way, to differentiate and draw boundaries, to oppose and repudiate, to confront one's non-religious and religious competitors. In defending their core beliefs against attacks, in clarifying boundaries and borders, Christians have tried to “score victories over their opponents' arguments.”<sup>[36]</sup>

Today this sounds off-putting, and in the worst case scenarios it has led to horrible violence against one's religious competitors. But clarifying the differences between other faiths and those of no faith has an important benefit—it belies the contemporary claim that all

religions “really teach the same thing.” To argue that all religions teach the same thing is historically and demonstrably false; that's precisely what they don't do. It might be a “lovely sentiment,” but it is also “dangerous, disrespectful, and untrue.”[\[37\]](#)

At the end of his book on five sacred stories that are shared in the Hebrew Bible, the Christian Bible, and the Qur'an, Gregg concludes by flipping our contemporary script with a provocative suggestion:

"Perhaps interreligious conversations in our era would more honestly proceed by taking up difficult and irreconcilable variances in belief and practices, working toward understanding—even appreciation—of these. Notions of an essential and unbreakable familial closeness and concord that enwraps Jews, Christians, and Muslims are romantic, and also historically false.”[\[38\]](#)

## **A Way for Today**

Our issues in the third millennium are different from those in the third century. Today we wonder about things like gene-editing, not whether we should eat meat that had been offered to pagan idols and later sold in the marketplace.[\[39\]](#) In our own day, definitions and defenses of the faith have come from and responded to every sort of intellectual endeavor, and from the highest levels of scholarship.[\[40\]](#) Today we

must find our own way forward in defining and defending the story of Jesus.

This book joins the 2,000-year-old conversation about the contested story of Jesus. It's a conversation inside the church's own communities as it defines and develops the core essence of "mere Christianity." It's also a dialogue outside the church's own narrow boundaries—that dreaded echo chamber where people only talk to themselves. This book thus attempts to be both a reasoned apology to the world and a faithful essence for the church.

A way forward for today, a way to live among our critics and in fidelity to our own tradition, will require five virtues or commitments.

Christians have benefitted from their critics, and should be open to them. When at our best, we have been grateful for them instead of defensive. Contrary to a popular misconception, and despite the headline-grabbing zealotry from all sides, across the centuries there has been a genuine dialogue and not just a monologue between the detractors and the defenders. A healthy conversation among people who differ about important matters begins with **gratitude for your partner.**

In addition to openness and gratitude, good conversation requires a **spirit of theological modesty**. Sanctified common sense dictates such. Who in their right mind, asks Paul, would ever consider himself adequate for the task?<sup>[41]</sup> To speak the unspeakable. To name the Unnameable. The presumption. The audacity. The futility.

In Exodus 3 God called Moses to return to Egypt, the land of Israel's genocide, to mediate between God and his people, and between God and pharaoh. He appeared to Moses "in flames of fire from within a bush." Moses's call was an impossible burden, fraught with ambiguities. At first he responded: "Here am I!" But later he wondered, "Who am I?" God assured him that "the people will listen." But Moses worried, "they won't listen."

So, he was full of ambivalence, inhibitions, fears, and doubts, and rightly so. As Zornberg puts it, "there's a certain kind of reticence, or circumspection, that halts the true prophet, faced with the inscrutable God, whose revelation must be narrowed into what can be said." And so Moses removed his sandals on that "holy ground," and instinctively "hid his face, because he was afraid to look at God." Such is the paradox and burden of prophecy, observed Martin Buber: "It is laid upon the stammering to bring the voice of Heaven to Earth."<sup>[42]</sup>

I honor the wisdom of Peter of Damaskos in the 12th century, that "St. John Chrysostom says that we do not know wholly even what is given in part, but know only a part of a part." The apostle Paul wasn't a person lacking in zeal or conviction, but he nonetheless reminded us that on this side of heaven we see through a glass darkly. As one who recently had cataract surgery, I appreciate the power of his metaphor.

Blasphemy and idolatry are the besetting sins of religion, and so in theological modesty I invoke the spirit of CS Lewis's *"Footnote to All Prayers"*:

He whom I bow to only knows to whom I bow  
When I attempt the ineffable Name, murmuring Thou,  
And dream of Pheidian fancies and embrace in heart  
Symbols (I know) which cannot be the thing Thou art.  
Thus always, taken at their word, all prayers blaspheme  
Worshiping with frail images a folk-lore dream,  
And all men in their praying, self-deceived, address  
The coinage of their own unquiet thoughts, unless  
Thou in magnetic mercy to Thyself divert  
Our arrows, aimed unskillfully, beyond desert;  
And all men are idolaters, crying unheard

To a deaf idol, if Thou take them at their word.

Take not, O Lord, our literal sense. Lord, in thy great  
Unbroken speech our limping metaphor translate.

Third, this book is written in **a spirit of ecumenical generosity**, or what my friend W. David Buschart calls **theological hospitality**. In the second verse of the Bible, we read that God's Spirit hovers, broods, or flutters over the entire cosmos like a tender mother. There is literally no time or place that is void of the Spirit's presence. He is always and everywhere among us. The wind or breath of God, said Jesus, blows when and where he wills.

The Jesus movement fragmented into competing cliques early on. Paul's letter to the Corinthians, written about 55 AD, describes deep divisions in the church there. This Christian superiority complex is endemic in the church. Eastern Orthodox believers confess that they alone are "the one true church of Christ on earth." Catholics have claimed that "outside the church there is no salvation." On November 18, 1302, Pope Boniface VIII left no ambiguity when in *Unum Sanctum* he wrote, "We declare, say, define, and pronounce that it is absolutely necessary for the salvation of every human creature to be subject to the Roman Pontiff." The Protestant Reformation fragmented

the global church into thousands of denominations, each one claiming to have more magic than the next.

We should be vigilant about our propensity to exclude people who are different from us. When Jesus' closest followers saw a man casting out demons, they "told him to stop, because he was not one of us."

[\[43\]](#) That attitude earned a rebuke. Instead of defaulting to our insecurities about those whom we find strange or fringe, to ignorance, fear, and what Buschart describes as "sincere yet uninformed stereotypes" of others, we do well to celebrate the considerable diversity that exists among our traditions. After all, he observes, one mark of a cult is "enforced conformity," In theological hospitality we welcome traditions different from our own into our lives with the express intent of learning from them.[\[44\]](#)

The Yale theologian Hans Frei (1922–1988) thus advocated a "generous orthodoxy" as he urged the church to move beyond the binary liberal-conservative impasse. "Generosity without orthodoxy is nothing," wrote Frei, "but orthodoxy without generosity is worse than nothing."[\[45\]](#)

Fourth, this book places itself within a broad, consensual tradition that's sometimes called **the *via media***. That Latin term has historic

roots in the Anglican tradition that has tried to navigate a middle ground between partisan Catholics and radical Protestants. There are two historical examples from very different times and places that both appeal to a consensual middle ground that deserve mention.

Writing in an abbey off the southeast coast of France near Cannes, Vincent of Lerins (d. 445) wanted “to secure a kind of fixed and, as it were, general and guiding principle for distinguishing the true Christian faith from the degraded falsehoods of heresy.” Yes, he said, Christians agree that the Scriptures are “complete and abundantly sufficient,” but Vincent also observed that people interpret the same Scriptures in different ways, and that even heretics quote the Bible.

In his *Commonitorium*, Vincent proposed a way to determine the essence of true faith: “We take the greatest care to hold that which has been believed everywhere, always, by all.” Thus, his three criteria to identify the core of Christianity: *universality*, *antiquity*, and *consent*.

Universality implies geographical breadth, that a belief has been held throughout the church the world over. Antiquity deals with time and asks whether a teaching can claim support from our earliest forebears in the faith. Then there is ecumenicity, or the consent of all or nearly all the fathers, creeds and councils. In sum, says Vincent, we should

follow that faith that has been “held, approved and taught, not by one or two only but by all equally and with one consent, openly, frequently and persistently.”

In the 17th century, the Lutheran pastor and theologian Peter Meiderlin had grown tired of the rancor, doctrinal disputes, and fragmentation caused by the Protestant Reformation. In the early 1620s he wrote a book under the pen name of Rupert Meldenius, all but forgotten until it was re-published in 1850 by Friedrich Luecke with the title *A Prayerful Admonition for Peace to the Theologians of the Augsburg Confession*.

Meiderlin coined a phrase that has since become justly memorable: “in essentials unity, in non-essentials liberty, and in all things charity.” German theologians called this the *Friedensspruch* or “Peace Saying.” In following Meiderlin's dictum, said the Puritan Richard Baxter (1615–1691), Christians “tolerate tolerable differences,” and otherwise try to keep the main thing the main thing.

There has never been a golden age in church history that fulfilled the three criteria of the Vincentian Canon, nor have believers fully followed Meiderlin's plea. But that doesn't mean that we shouldn't aim for a broad consensual middle and avoid sectarian extremes. It's not

uncommon for careful thinkers to appeal to a consensual tradition. Despite his many public criticisms of Catholicism, the historian Garry Wills, for example, says that he believes in those things which are central and essential, like the Apostles Creed, rather than incidental and peripheral. "That seems a fair amount to believe," he says tongue in cheek. [\[46\]](#)

Finally, even when we have done our best to define the faith for the church and defend it before the world, the story of Jesus will remain a contested story. There are three reasons why we will always have unfinished business, and will have to "rest patiently in unknowing." [\[47\]](#)

Jesus himself will always be "the stone of stumbling and rock of offense," what the novelist Mary Gordon calls the "'irresistible incomprehensible," and Michael McClymond "the familiar stranger." What Jesus signified is always "more challenging than we expect, more outrageous, more egregious." The search for the original "historical Jesus" behind the later "Christ of faith" has strict limits, and even if we identified the "true" Jesus behind the Biblical texts, he would become *more* and not less incomprehensible to us. [\[48\]](#)

In addition, our own stories will always remain unfinished. In his class at Harvard, Harvey Cox said that he never felt like he had to answer

every question that his students raised, or eliminate all their (or his) gnawing uncertainties: "They were in the process of growing up, as we all are, as long as we live. And growing up means learning to live with unsatisfying and incomplete endings, with people whose lives are cut off before they should be, or spin out in unexpected directions and sometimes crash in flames. No matter how ordinary they are, all our lives end with a kind of question mark as we reach the threshold of the final mystery."<sup>[49]</sup> Questions without answers are a part of every life.

Across the years 1902 to 1908, a young military cadet and amateur poet named Franz Kappus corresponded with the famous poet Rainer Maria Rilke, asking the latter for his advice. Rilke wrote ten letters to Kappus, who later published them in 1929 as a book, three years after Rilke's death from leukemia. The book is called *Letters to a Young Poet*. In one letter Rilke gives Kappus advice that still rings true today: "Be patient toward all that is unsolved in your heart and try to love the questions themselves, like locked rooms and like books that are now written in a very foreign tongue. Do not now seek the answers, which cannot be given you because you would not be able to live them. And the point is, to live everything. Live the questions now. Perhaps you will then gradually, without noticing it, live along some distant day into the answer."

The Christian conversation with the world will also remain contested because of the non-falsifiable nature of disciplines like history, poetry, philosophy, and religion. Although not unproblematic, this distinction is the genius and strict limitation of the basic criterion of science, that its results *are* repeatable, falsifiable, testable, and refutable. But as we shall see, many of life's most important questions, like love and compassion, or guilt and regret, are inherently non-falsifiable. Unfalsifiable and unscientific hardly mean that something is unimportant.

Defenders and detractors of religion are both on contested ground here. To repudiate the faith because of the problem of evil, for example, doesn't mean that the problem disappears for an atheist. There are no knock-out punches or intellectual slam dunks in this book, only a defense of the idea that a Christian view of the universe makes enough sense, or even more sense, that it explains more, and is more satisfying, than a non-Christian view.

We're in the realm here of personal persuasion rather than of mathematical proofs. We're looking for what the physicist John Polkinghorne calls verisimilitude or "the ring of truth," or the Yale historian Jaroslav Pelikan called "public evidence for a mystery." In the

book of Acts, Luke writes that the Jesus story is an open book and available for all to consider, for “these things were not done in a corner.” But he also admits that the resurrected Jesus “did not appear to all the people, but to witnesses who were chosen beforehand by God.”[\[50\]](#)

In this book, I seek a meaningful articulation of faith in a world of honest doubts, a personal confession that engages a larger public conversation. I want to move beyond sentimentality, tired cliches, and pious platitudes in order to struggle with the strange story of Jesus. And so I resonate with the Yale poet Christian Wiman: "What I crave now is some speech that is true to the transcendent nature of grace yet equal to the hard reality in which daily faith operates." I seek that elusive balance between "active devotion and honest modern consciousness."[\[51\]](#)

### **For further reflection**

Denise Levertov (1923–1997)

*The Beginning of Wisdom*

You have brought me so far.

I know so much. Names, verbs, images. My mind

overflows, a drawer that can't close.

Unscathed among the tortured. Ignorant parchment  
uninscribed, light strokes only, where a scribe  
tried out a pen.

I am so small, a speck of dust  
moving across the huge world. The world  
a speck of dust in the universe.

Are you holding  
the universe? You hold  
onto my smallness. How do you grasp it,  
how does it not  
slip away?

I know so little.

You have brought me so far.

Denise Levertov (1923–1997) was born in England to a Welsh mother and a Russian Hasidic father, who converted to Christianity and became an Anglican priest. After moving to the United States in 1948, Levertov taught at a number of places, including eleven years at Stanford (1982–1993). It was at Stanford, where her papers are now

housed, that Levertov converted to Christianity at the age of sixty. Her little book *The Stream and the Sapphire* collects thirty-eight poems that trace her "slow movement from agnosticism to Christian faith." See Denise Levertov, *Collected Poems*, edited and annotated by Paul A. Lacey and Anne Dewey, with an Introduction by Eavan Boland (New York: New Directions, 2013), 1063pp.

## Chapter Two Secular Faiths

### The Witness of History

The philosopher John Hick once observed that if you collected all the images of God that have been created by religion, they'd form a book the size of a telephone directory. I thought of Hick when I walked through the Egyptian section of the British Museum in 2004. There I saw the god Sobek, portrayed as a man with the head of a crocodile. Or consider the Hindu fire god Agni. He has two faces smeared with butter, seven tongues, gold teeth, seven arms, and three legs.

Sobek and Agni are relatively recent gods, dating back about 5,000 years. In fact, for as far back as we can peer into the mists of history, our human ancestors have always been religious. We have always and everywhere been in search of the sacred. We have sought the transcendent. Who are we? What is our place in the cosmos, and the meaning of our existence?[\[52\]](#)

In our rites and rituals, in our art, music, and morality, we have been meaning-makers who bear the burdens of transcendence. This witness of human history recalls the very first paragraph of Augustine's *Confessions*: "Thou hast made us for Thyself, and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in Thee." But as we shall see in this chapter, not everyone reads this witness of history in the same way.

### **Signs of the Sacred**

The earliest undisputed evidence for our religiosity are the funeral rites and burial customs that were discovered in Israel and Africa from 130,000 years ago. People painted the bodies of the dead with red ochre pigment, and then laid them to rest in special places, with special objects, and in special ways. Death, these rituals seemed to say, was more than just the end of life; it was a door to another place rather than to nothingness.<sup>[53]</sup> To put these rites in chronological perspective, the invention of writing that ended our "pre-historical" period occurred a little over 5,000 years ago.

Or consider humanity's artistic impulse. In 1994, Jean-Marie Chauvet and two friends stumbled upon a 1300-foot long cave in southern France that contains some of the earliest human art ever found—400

animal representations, palm prints, and stencils made of red ochre, black charcoal, and etchings into the rock walls. There are also foot and paw prints, smoke stains, and charcoal remains.

Radiocarbon dating confirms that the artwork is 30,000 years old. In one case, a more recent painting was superimposed on an original one five thousand years later. Hundreds of bones and skulls from at least thirteen species, but not a single human bone, litter the floor of the cave. Clearly, this was a sacred place for art, community, rites, and rituals. [\[54\]](#)

Well over 300 caves with prehistoric art have been found in France and Spain alone. There is similar cave art found all over the world with comparatively ancient dating—in Indonesia, Namibia, Australia, South America, and the American southwest.

The earliest known musical instruments were found in caves in the Swabian region of southern Germany. Flutes, perforated with five finger holes, had been carved out of bird bones and ivory tusks over 40,000 years ago. Other caves near the *Geissenkloesterle* Cave contained the figurative art, personal ornaments, and mythical images that indicate symbolic thought and behavior. These instruments were likely used for both religious and recreational purposes.

Instrumental music is especially instructive because it is abstract, and has no representational meaning through words or images.

Nonetheless, it bears an emotional power that has always spoken deeply to us. Instrumental music, observed the neurologist Oliver Sacks, “can have wonderful, formal, quasi-mathematical perfection, and it can have heartbreaking tenderness, poignancy, and beauty.”[\[55\]](#)

We also seem to have a moral grammar that’s embedded into us, and into the nature of reality, a sense of right and wrong that’s more than mere social convention or neurobiological hardwiring. The Babylonian Code of Hammurabi, the Hebrew Ten Commandments, or a Dostoyevsky novel are just three examples from our literary legacy that elucidate the most important questions that people can ask about human life, like the mystery of good and evil, the nature of integrity, the meaning of fidelity, or the necessity of honesty.

In nurturing our moral sense, we honor the sanctity of life, the meaning of love, and their power to bind us together in community. When we flaunt or ignore the moral grammar of the universe, we risk spiritual, emotional, and psychological death. In the Terrence Malick trilogy of films that considers the hedonistic excess of our

contemporary hipster culture, one character admits, “I revolted against goodness.” Another one laments, “I spent thirty years ruining my life instead of living it. Where did I go wrong?”<sup>[56]</sup> However superficially enviable, and however hard to admit, a life dedicated to wanton pleasure is a spiritual train wreck waiting to happen. It’s just not how we humans are hardwired.

This witness of history regarding our rituals, art, music and morality suggests that human beings have never been mere “Darwinian survivalists” who exist only at a material level, and who only need to master “adaptive fitness.” Rather, we have always been “maximalists” who need meaningful narratives in order to flourish. Food, for example, is about community and sharing, and not just nourishment. Sex is more than the means to natural selection. People need a spiritual life in addition to their biological existence.<sup>[57]</sup>

These are important observations from history, but they’re not the empirical conclusions of science. To state the obvious—longevity, even 130,000 years, is no test for truth. Many tragic errors and falsehoods have persisted for millennia. Nonetheless, these clues from our human history aren’t for that reason any less important.

Wilfred Cantwell Smith, former professor of comparative religion at Harvard, thus flips our cultural script. He's worth quoting at length:

“Rather than feeling called upon to defend the awareness of what some of us call the divine before the bar of modern sceptics’ peculiar logic and exceptional worldview, I am at least equally inclined to call them before the bar of world history to defend their curious insensitivity to this dimension of human life. Seen in global perspective, current anti-transcendent thinking is an aberration. Intellectuals are challenged, indeed, to understand it: how it is arisen that for the first time on this earth a significant group has failed to discern the larger context of being human, and has even tried (with results none too encouraging thus far) to modify its inherited civilization so. After all, the overwhelming majority of intelligent persons at most times and places, and all cultures other than in part the recent west, have recognized the transcendent quality of man and the world. To be secularist in the negative sense is oddly parochial in both space and time, and to opt for what may be a dying culture. It is important that we keep in conversation with this group, but important also that we do not fall victim to, nor treat with anything but compassion, its incapacity to see.”[\[58\]](#)

In the overall context of world history and human cultures, religion has not only mattered for virtually all people and places, it has been our defining modus. All human history, says Smith, has been a religious history or *Heilsgeschichte*. It's astonishing that anyone would ever believe something so wrongheaded like the idea that religion will or should wither away, or that it's nothing more than the unconscious psychological projections of our own insecurities (Feuerbach, Marx, and Freud<sup>[59]</sup>).

Nonetheless, there are important voices in our cultural conversation who believe exactly that, although some of them deserve more of our attention than others. We don't live in all of human history, or 40,000 years ago, we live in the (post) modern west. Here and now we rightly ask whether religion matters. We live in what Yale law professor Stephen Carter calls a "culture of disbelief," where religion has been marginalized and trivialized despite its long heritage in our history.

### **Carnival Barkers**

The most notable exception to the witness of history about our human religiosity has been the very white and western atheism that began roughly around the time of the French Revolution that "de-christianized" Europe. This atheism has often been linked with the

progress and prestige of science, in both the popular imagination and by some of its most important proponents.[\[60\]](#)

Today an aggressively secularist viewpoint finds expression in the so-called new atheism of people like Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennett, Sam Harris, and Chris Hitchens. For thinkers like them, religion is a dangerous superstition, an intellectual cop-out, a political disaster, and a possible mental illness. This sounds exaggerated, but in their case it's not. Their zeal and rhetoric have honored few boundaries.

There's a large and burgeoning literature that's quite critical of the new atheism, including important denunciations by fellow atheists. The atheist critiques of the new atheism offer no support for religion, but they do intend to change the tone and misleading generalizations of the conversation.[\[61\]](#)

My own thinking about atheism has been shaped by my personal experience of living in an officially atheist country. Just as there is a history of human religiosity, there is a history of atheism's crimes against humanity.

As I mentioned in the Introduction, in September of 1991, my family moved to Moscow State University, where I took a position as a visiting professor in the Department of Scientific Atheism. Just three

months later, on December 24, 1991, we were in the American Embassy celebrating Christmas Eve when Mikhail Gorbachev went on national television and resigned.

The Soviet experiment, in which a nation where Russian Orthodoxy had flourished since the baptism of Prince Vladimir of Kiev in the year 988 had become one of the most violent purveyors of atheism, had lasted just seventy-four years (1917–1991). One week later, at the turn of the New Year, our family was in Red Square when the red and yellow Soviet flag with its hammer and sickle came down at the Kremlin, and the new tricolor flag of the Russian Republic was raised.

I was paid a full professor's salary in cash (rubles), the equivalent of about \$20 a month. My appointment was for two years, but since I couldn't get a job back home, we stayed for four years, coming home on June 19, 1995. I will always be grateful for the generous hospitality of my Russian hosts who afforded me such an intellectually and spiritually rich experience.<sup>[62]</sup>

The atheist regimes of the Soviet Union, Nazi Germany, Mao's Cultural Revolution, Pol Pot's Khmer Rouge in Cambodia from 1975 to 1979,<sup>[63]</sup> and North Korea<sup>[64]</sup> have had catastrophic consequences—the mass murder of over 100 million people in less than a century,

the starvation, exile and imprisonment of many millions more, and the decimation of their economies, science, art, education, religion, and even or especially their histories. Muslims have a long way to go before they catch up with the colossal scale and scope of this slaughter that was carried out in the name of a western secular “liberation.”<sup>[65]</sup> And ironically enough, as Michael Walzer of the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton has shown, secular revolutions of national liberation are often followed in short order by fundamentalist religious counter revolutions.<sup>[66]</sup>

Given this historical record of annihilationism, and my personal experience of living in the former Soviet Union, the new atheism of Dawkins, Dennett, Harris, and Hitchens feels like an irresponsible parlor game played out in the comfortable confines of Oxford and Boston, if not a cavalier and grotesque mockery.

In many ways, these zealots are the reverse image of the religious fundamentalists that they mock. The Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist and now Presbyterian pastor Chris Hedges describes them as “carnival barkers” whose stock in trade includes gross intolerance for any “other” who is different from them, facile analysis, the abuse of evolutionary biology as a “surrogate religion,” the confusion of

scientific progress with moral progress, racist and crude generalizations (especially about Muslims), and what he calls “a staggering historical and cultural illiteracy.”

What really angers Hedges about the new atheists is their uncritical belief in the utopia promised by the Enlightenment, thanks to the inevitable progress of science and the innate goodness and rationality of humanity. He objects to their evangelistic efforts to remake the world in the image of an ostensibly “enlightened” west.

My experience with the Stanford faculty fellowships that I mentioned in the Introduction, which has similar iterations on campuses around the country with my InterVarsity colleagues, also belies the popular myth that elite intellectuals can’t be earnest believers. There are many respectful and substantive interactions between believers and nonbelievers taking place all around the country.

The Veritas Forum deserves special mention. Since their founding at Harvard in 1992, Veritas has hosted more than 2,000 forums at 200 universities in the US, Canada, Europe, and Asia. Their mission is “to help students and faculty ask life’s hardest questions... The Veritas Forum is committed to courageous conversations. We place the

historic Christian faith in dialogue with other beliefs to invite participants from all backgrounds to pursue Truth together.”[\[67\]](#)

Just as some people lose their religious faith, there are others who have lost their faith in atheism, like the novelist Mary Karr, the journalist Peter Hitchens (younger brother of Chris Hitchens), the philosopher Anthony Flew, and the computer scientist Rosalind Picard of MIT. One of the more noteworthy conversions was by the literary critic A.N. Wilson.

When Wilson (b. 1950) entered St. Stephen's House at Oxford University, he planned to become an ordained priest in the Church of England. That lasted just a year, until he renounced his faith and focused on a career in writing — which, having published nearly fifty books in a prolific and award-winning career, seems to have been a good vocational choice.

After attending church all his life, Wilson became what he calls a "born again atheist." For thirty years he was a well known and outspoken sceptic: "I had become like one of the Billy Grahamites, only in reverse." In 1991, he published a pamphlet called *Against Religion: Why We Should Live Without It*.

Then came his re-conversion. In 2009, Wilson published an essay in the *New Statesman* and the *Daily Mail* called "Why I Believe Again." Religious belief, he came to understand, isn't primarily about who has the best intellectual arguments, pro or con. Religion concerns the whole person, and in particular those deeply mysterious and meaningful aspects of being fully human—like music, love, language, and ethics, that a strictly materialist point of view fails to capture. [\[68\]](#)

### **Conversation Partners**

There's a more modest, interesting, and important version of atheism that deserves our respect as a genuine conversation partner. Because of the acknowledged constraints on all human knowledge, this atheism is often closer to agnosticism. This form of unbelief recognizes that no appeal to science can prove the truth of atheism or the falsehood of religion. You can't prove a negative, that God doesn't exist, as my agnostic friend and Stanford law professor Hank Greely likes to say with a shrug and a smile. In addition, atheists of this sort, like the poet Philip Larkin, often acknowledge the moral implications of the nihilism that seems inherent in their position. [\[69\]](#) Here are four examples.

For some atheists, the “book of nature” doesn’t declare the glory of God, it invokes dread. Consider the cell biologist Ursula Goodenough and her description of a camping trip when she was about twenty years old.[\[70\]](#)

She writes, “I found myself in a sleeping bag looking up into the crisp Colorado night. Before I could look around for Orion or the Big Dipper, I was overwhelmed with terror. The panic became so acute that I had to roll over and bury my face in my pillow... When I later encountered the famous quote from the physicist Steven Weinberg—‘The more the universe seems comprehensible, the more it seems pointless’—I wallowed in its pointless nihilism. A bleak emptiness overtook me whenever I thought about what was really going on out in the cosmos or deep in the atom.”

A worldview that’s limited to the scientific method alone might be intellectually coherent, but for many people it is not emotionally satisfying. It’s very hard to begin with nothing more than a reductionistic, empirical “is” and discover a robust, moral “ought.” And so elsewhere in her book, Goodenough tries to “sweeten the sour apple” by embracing what she calls a non-theistic religious naturalism.

This sounds similar to the position of Einstein (1879–1955), who appealed to Cosmic Awe. Einstein spurned all religious institutions, never attended worship services or prayed, rejected all dogmatic theology (eg, miracles, the afterlife, or prayer), did not believe that God was in any sense personal, and was a strict determinist.

Nevertheless, he thought of himself as religious in the broad sense of humility and awe at the mystery, rationality and complexity of the cosmos. "The eternal mystery of the world," he said, "is its comprehensibility." For Einstein, the mysterious book of nature betokened some superior intelligence: "I believe in Spinoza's God who reveals himself in the orderly harmony of what exists, not in a God who concerns himself with the fates and actions of human beings."

Einstein also repudiated what he called "the fanatical atheists" who tried to claim him for their cause. About a year before he died, he wrote in a letter to Hans Muehsam that he thought of himself as a "deeply religious unbeliever" (March 30, 1954). For Einstein, science and religion were complementary rather than antagonistic, seen in his aphorism that "science without religion is lame, religion without science is blind." Science cannot determine ethics or inform us of

ultimate purpose or meaning, and so it could never displace or supercede religion. [\[71\]](#)

Another atheist who favors cooperation over conflict is the biologist Edward Wilson (b. 1929). Since 1996 he's been an emeritus professor at Harvard, where he's spent some forty years. He's written over thirty books, two of which won Pulitzer Prizes.

Wilson was born in Alabama and raised in the evangelical faith of the Southern Baptists, a faith that he rejected long ago in favor of scientific humanism. He was one of the authors of the 1973 *Humanist Manifesto*. He's described himself as more of an agnostic than an atheist, and in one place called himself a "provisional deist."

Wilson is hard on religion. He considers it the main source of violence and tribalism, an "irrational" obstacle to progress that we must outgrow. The grand narrative of science, "not the archaic version soaked in religion and ideology," is "clear and massive." To wit: "We were created not by a supernatural intelligence but by chance and necessity as one species out of millions of species in Earth's biosphere. Hope and wish for otherwise as we will, there is no evidence of an external grace shining down upon us, no demonstrable destiny or purpose assigned us, no second life vouchsafed us for the

end of the present one. We are, it seems, completely alone. And that in my opinion is a very good thing. It means we are completely free." As an "accident of evolution," and with no God to save us, we must save ourselves.

To the extent that religion neglects the earthly present in order to emphasize a heavenly future, and as a consequence abuses creation, Wilson blames religion for many of our environmental woes. His history of humankind reads like a long, slow march from superstition due to religion to liberation thanks to science. But Wilson is also as wary of scientific and technical optimism as he is of religious pessimism.

Despite these harsh criticisms, Wilson has argued for the unification, convergence, synthesis, or "consilience" of science and the humanities. His book *The Creation* is written as a letter to a fictional pastor. He says that scientists ought to "offer the hand of friendship" to religious leaders and build an alliance with them, for "science and religion are two of the most potent forces on Earth and they should come together to save the creation." Thus the last sentence of his book *The Meaning of Human Existence*: "If the heuristic and analytic power of science can be joined with the introspective creativity of the

humanities, human existence will rise to an infinitely more productive and interesting meaning."[\[72\]](#)

My favorite atheist is the English novelist Julian Barnes (b. 1946). Barnes was never baptized and says that he has never attended a church service in his life, and so he's never had any faith to lose. He came by this unbelief honestly; his father was an agnostic and his mother said that she didn't want "any of that [religious] mumbo jumbo."

But the prospect of total extinction, both personal and cosmic, and the terror which absolute annihilation provokes in him, causes Barnes to admit in the first sentence of his book that while he doesn't believe in God, he misses him. In effect, Barnes is obsessed with the question first posed by our human ancestors 130,000 years ago about what happens at death.[\[73\]](#)

The title for his disquisition on death comes from one of his journal entries over twenty years ago: "People say of death, 'There's nothing to be frightened of.' They say it quickly, casually. Now let's say it again, slowly, with re-emphasis. 'There's NOTHING to be frightened of.' Jules Renard: 'The word that is most true, most exact, most filled with meaning, is nothing.'"

Exactly where the emphasis on nothingness rightly falls is what occupies Barnes' considerable talents. The result is a book characterized by deeply personal candor and broad-ranging critical inquiry that encompasses art, music, philosophy, science, literature, and family memories.

The Christian story claims that Jesus "conquered death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel."[\[74\]](#) This story succeeded, says Barnes, not because people were gullible, because it was violently imposed by throne and altar, because it was a means of social control, or because there were no other alternatives.

No, the Christian story succeeded because it was a "beautiful lie" or "supreme fiction." It's the stuff of a great novel, "a tragedy with a happy ending." And good novelists, says Barnes, tell the truth with lies and tell lies with the truth. For Barnes there's always a "haunting hypothetical": what if this Grand Story is true?

The strictly secular-materialist option is simple enough. When your heart and brain cease to function, your self ceases to exist. But in this view, the "self" is nothing more than random neural events.

[\[75\]](#) There's no ghost in the machine to begin with, so there's no "self"

that ceases to exist. In post-modern parlance, personal identity is only a social construction.

But Barnes has nagging suspicions about this secular scenario. Even if they are hard to define or describe, a common sense outlook, endorsed by the vast majority of humanity that has ever lived, is that intelligence, aesthetic imagination, our moral impulse, consciousness, love, gratitude, guilt, regret, and the longing for immortality — all of these seem to point beyond themselves. They have the ring of truth that make them hard to reduce to mere biology.

And so Barnes wonders, given his genuine lack of religious faith, is it proper to assign any meaning to his personal story? Does his life enjoy a genuine narrative? Or is it only a random sequence of events that ends with total extinction, such that any and all meaning-making is pure "confabulation?" One thing you can be sure of, Barnes reminds us — in the end, it doesn't matter what you think. The divine reality, or lack thereof, is what it is, and so "the notion of redefining the deity into something that works for you is grotesque."

When the atheist Christopher Hitchens died of esophageal cancer in December 2011, the world lost one of its most colorful and controversial public intellectuals. I'll always remember attending one of

his readings at a bookstore. In a short posthumous volume, Hitchens described his last days with the grim reaper. [\[76\]](#)

Among other things, he meditated on the poetry of TS Eliot: "I have seen the moment of my greatness flicker, / And I have seen the eternal Footman hold my coat, and snicker; / and I am afraid." As for Philip Larkin's famous poem "Aubade," with its terrifying description of fear in the face of death, Hitchens described it as an implied reproof of stoicism, and then concluded: "atheists ought not to be offering consolation either."

In a last chapter of unfinished, random jottings, there's this enigmatic remark: "If I convert it's because it's better that a believer dies than that an atheist does." This is left unexplained, and otherwise Hitchens remained an atheist to the end. His "chief consolation" was in friends, including very kind words for the Christian geneticist and Director of the National Institutes of Health Francis Collins. I like to imagine that his trademark sarcasm had finally given way to an appropriate sort of intellectual and spiritual modesty.

## **Scientism**

Closely related to atheism is what I would call "scientism" (to be distinguished from science proper). In fact, it's revealing to play with

the words. "Atheistic science" implies that science demands disbelief. "Scientific atheism" suggests that unbelief enjoys the support and prestige of science. I believe that both of these claims are false.[\[77\]](#)

There are two broad types of scientism. A "soft" version appears in popular culture, the media, entertainment, and everyday conversations with friends, and is illustrated in assumptions like, "How can you be both a scientist and a believer?" A "hard" version argues a sophisticated position in intellectual treatments of the subject.[\[78\]](#)

Scientism makes two separate but related claims, sometimes implicitly but at times also explicitly: (1) *positivism*, the belief that the scientific method is the only or most reliable way of gaining valid knowledge (an epistemological claim about how we know); or (2) *materialism*, that the physical world of nature is all there is to know (an ontological claim about the nature of reality). Science so conceived has moved far from its rightful but limited purview. In her four Terry Lectures on science and religion at Yale, Marilynne Robinson coined the word "parascience" to describe this sort of worldview.[\[79\]](#)

In his book *River Out of Eden* (1995), Richard Dawkins writes that "all my books have been devoted to expounding and exploring the almost limitless power of the Darwinian principle." But many of life's most

important questions cannot be answered by the scientific method:

What is love? Should I get married? Is it sensible to bear children? We rightly do not expect science to answer these or many other important questions.

There are important aspects of everyday life that science cannot explain by itself—morality, aesthetics, the rational intelligibility of the world, and the stubborn religiosity of human beings from all times and places as previously observed by Cantwell Smith. In fact, as the theoretical physicist, former president of Queens College, Cambridge, and Anglican priest John Polkinghorne (b. 1930) once observed, science has been so successful precisely because of “the modesty of its ambitions, by its self-limitations” to describe only the physical world.

Science limits itself to empirical evidence, which makes much of it so compelling, but empirical evidence alone yields only limited information. Further, even such an ostensibly objective act as "empirical observation" is both theory laden and "tainted" by the subjective knower. All scientific facts are interpreted facts, and rely on a circular interplay between theory and experiment. In addition, like all disciplines, science operates with its own unprovable assumptions (eg, that the world is rational).

Science deals with what Aristotle called "efficient causes"—a description of *how* something happens, but not with "final causes"—an explanation of *why* something happens. At its best, science adopts a methodological naturalism as a research strategy, and thus remains neutral about metaphysical or philosophical claims outside of its narrow purview. "It is just as wrong," writes Gingerich, "to present evolution in high school classrooms as a *final* cause as it is to fob off Intelligent Design as a substitute for an efficacious *efficient* cause."[\[80\]](#)

The ontological claim that the material universe is all that exists is exemplified in the claim of the astrophysicist Carl Sagan (1934–1996), famous for his grave intonation on his show *Cosmos* that the universe is all there ever has been, is, or ever will be. That's a fascinating myth, in the best and robust sense of the word, one that deserves genuine debate, but it's neither scientifically verifiable nor religiously satisfying. It's a philosophical article of faith.[\[81\]](#)

You would never know it from the viewpoint of scientism, but many scientists are people of deep religious faith. My favorite is Polkinghorne. Others come to mind, like Gingerich, professor of astronomy and the history of science at Harvard, or Ian Hutchinson, a plasma physicist who heads MIT's Department of Nuclear Science

and Engineering. High up there in my pantheon of saints is the neurobiologist Bill Newsome of Stanford.[\[82\]](#) I have already mentioned Francis Collins, head of the National Institutes of Health.[\[83\]](#)

We should also let the best of science speak for itself. The prestigious National Academy of Sciences has issued two booklets on themes relating to the relationship between science and religion. They make six important caveats, concessions or qualifications regarding the scientific enterprise that I think would surprise many people, and that repudiate the ideas of scientism.

First, the NAS acknowledges that science is not the only way of knowing. A worldview without broader knowledge beyond science would be deeply impoverished. Second, it affirms that many scientists are deeply religious and "hold that God created the universe and the various processes driving physical and biological evolution," a simple statement of fact that often goes unnoticed. Third, it reminds us that many religious people see no conflict with evolution. In fact, the report concedes that theistic evolution "is not in disagreement with scientific explanations of evolution." That would imply, for example, that science need not be materialistic or atheistic, even though its purview is the merely material.

Fourth, because its scope is so very narrow, science "cannot comment on the role that supernatural forces might play in human affairs." That is, it must remain agnostic about areas outside of its empirical method.

Fifth, the report seems to embrace a view similar to Stephen Gould's "non-overlapping magisteria," when it advocates that "science and religion occupy two separate realms." Thus, questions of morality, aesthetics, philosophy, politics, economics, social policy, and the like "extend beyond science's realm."

In practice this is hardly ever true; scientists can and do comment on these issues, and when they do, the mantle of prestige and authority that often attaches itself to science accompanies their opinions that, strictly speaking, lie outside of the scientific method.

Do scientists really remain silent on the social, medical, economic, or moral implications of stem cell research, CRISPR gene editing (already the subject of billion dollar lawsuits over the commercial implications), or whether or when we might use the nuclear weapons that science created? Or consider the political ramifications of scientific conclusions about the heritability of intelligence, crime, sexuality, and aging. If scientists discover a genetic marker for

aggression, should society do anything about it? Recall the movie *Minority Report* (2002) in which police arrested murderers before they committed their crimes.

Finally, in several places, the report notes that in science no truth is ever final, in the sense that scientific conclusions always remain open to correction and revision.<sup>[84]</sup> I like to imagine how our best scientific knowledge a thousand years from now, or even a mere hundred years from now, will judge our current scientific conclusions.

Contrary to a popular image of science, the history of science includes important mistakes. After reading Mario Livio's book, the physicist Freeman Dyson of Princeton wrote that he now "looks on the history of science in a new way." Livio looks at five scientists who made "brilliant blunders"—the naturalist Charles Darwin, physicist William Thomson (Lord Kelvin), the chemist Linus Pauling (two Nobel prizes), and the physicists Fred Hoyle and Albert Einstein. Livio helped Dyson to see many more brilliant blunderers "in every century and every science."

Darwin's views of blending inheritance and pangenesis were "fundamentally flawed" and "catastrophic" for his view of natural selection. Kelvin was an "obstructionist" who tried to discredit

geologists' conclusion that the earth was 4.5 *billion* years old (and not 100 *million* years like he argued). Pauling was "preposterously wrong" about the structure of DNA. Hoyle's view of a steady state universe with no beginning or end rejected the consensus view of the Big Bang. Einstein posited a "cosmological constant" to support his idea of a static universe, in opposition to the reality of an expanding cosmos.

Livio corrects this popular notion that science proceeds from one success to another. "Nothing could be further from the truth," he writes. Mistakes and failures are not only inevitable, they are essential as catalysts for progress. He also speculates about the causes of blunders. Science is a human enterprise subject to oversights, memory lapse, haste, competition, personal distractions, opposition to new ideas, cognitive dissonance, bad math, misplaced confidence, misguided intuition, willful blindness to obvious facts, finances and funding, etc.

Dyson concludes his review of Livio with a story about his own biggest blunder. He concurs with Livio's main point, that "the passionate pursuit of wrong theories is part of the normal development of science." Darwin and Einstein were gracious losers who admitted their mistakes. Kelvin and Pauling were "not so good." Hoyle was a bad

loser who denied to the end that he had made a mistake. "The greatest scientists," writes Dyson tongue in cheek, "are the best losers."[\[85\]](#)

Over fifty years ago, when the Jewish novelist Herman Wouk (born in 1915 and still alive as I write!) was researching his books *The Winds of War* (1971) and *War and Remembrance* (1978), he met with the Caltech physicist Richard Feynman to learn about the Manhattan Project and the atom bomb. "Do you know calculus?" Feynman asked the humanist Wouk. "You had better learn it," said Feynman, "it's the language God talks." Wouk never did learn calculus, but he later had two more conversations with Feynman at the Aspen Institute.

Wouk ruminated about those conversations for a long time, and in particular about an off-the-cuff remark that Feynman made in a television interview that later became a famous sound bite. In the interview, Feynman expounded an agnostic or atheist outlook: "It doesn't seem to me that this fantastically marvelous universe, this tremendous range of time and space and different kinds of animals, and all the different planets, and all these atoms with all their motions, and so on, all this complicated thing can merely be a stage so that

God can watch human beings struggle for good and evil — which is the view that religion has. The stage is too big for the drama."

No, Wouk amicably objected, the stage is not too big. He might not know calculus, but he insisted that he knew God's "other language" in the Talmud. He fondly remembered his upbringing as a Russian immigrant in the Bronx and studying the Torah with his grandfather once a week. Even today Wouk reads the Hebrew Scriptures daily.

Wouk reminds us that science, too, is part of our messy human drama of doubt, error, vanity, ignorance, ridicule and politics. It depends upon faith in the opinions of elite authorities, which opinions sometimes disagree about fundamental matters ("No one understands quantum mechanics," Feynman once said.). It can explain the magic of genetics but not how to raise a teenager.

Has the last 15 billion years really been such a "vastly drawn-out complex purposeless nonsense?" asks Wouk. "I'll venture that not even a solid savant like Steven Weinberg can believe that, not in his innermost soul." Art, human joy and sorrow, the mystery of human consciousness, altruism, all these hints do not "prove" anything, but they do suggest that our human drama does have an overall Plot and Author. [\[86\]](#)

I thought about Wouk's remark about the physicist, Nobel laureate and atheist Weinberg when, in October of 2016, I saw the American premiere of Tom Stoppard's new play "The Hard Problem," which questions the reduction of consciousness to physical matter. After the play, there was a panel discussion of neurobiologists and psychologists. The British Stoppard recalled that Dawkins had been a friend of his for a long time, and that several decades ago he questioned the Oxford atheist: "Do you actually *know anybody* who believes your atheist-materialist account of the world?!" "No," said Dawkins, "I've thought about that, and it sort of bothers me."

"The greatest myth in the history of science and religion," says historian Ron Numbers, "holds that they have been in a state of constant conflict." By "myth" he means "a claim that is false." The twenty-five authors in his book each write a chapter to debunk one particular myth. About half of the authors are atheists or agnostics, five are mainline Protestants, two are evangelicals, one is Catholic, one Jewish, one Muslim, one Buddhist, and two hold "other" beliefs.

So, on the face of it, there's no axe to grind here except for correcting the historical record.

The so-called “military metaphor” used to describe the relationship between science and religion found its most polemical and influential expression in two books at the end of the nineteenth century: *A History of the Warfare of Science with Theology in Christendom* (1896) by Andrew Dickson White (the first president of Cornell University), and John William Draper's *History of the Conflict between Religion and Science* (1874). Both books excoriated religion for undermining scientific progress. Both were widely translated, are still in print today, and prime examples of myth mongering.

The conflict thesis holds sway in popular culture, the imagination of ordinary lay people, and on local school boards, but as the epigraphs that begin each chapter show, some of the most irresponsible myth makers are our best scientists—like Steven Weinberg repeating the trope that medieval Islamic culture was inhospitable to science (myth 4), or Stephen Gould insisting that creationism is only “a local, indigenous American bizzarity” and not a global phenomenon (myth 24).

But believers don't get a free pass, either; three chapters debunk myths that ostensibly support religion—that Christianity gave birth to modern science (myth 9), that evolution is based upon circular

reasoning (myth 15), and that quantum physics demonstrates the truth of free will (myth 22).

Some of these powerful myths are not just wrong but convey the exact opposite of the truth, like the myth that Isaac Newton believed in a mechanistic or "clockwork" cosmology (myth 13). Others seem so obvious that you would think that they don't need rebuttal, like the idea that the Scopes trial spelled defeat for anti-evolution forces (myth 20), or that modern science has secularized society (myth 25).

I especially appreciated the reminder that medieval Catholicism did not impede science, but was "probably the largest single and longest term patron of science in history." The Jesuits were established in 1540, for example, and by 1625 they had founded 450 colleges across Europe.

Believers should do their part and take care of their own business. We might reflect on the wisdom of Saint Augustine. In his *Literal Commentary on Genesis* he lamented the ignorance of some Christians regarding the natural world, like "the motion and orbit of the stars and even their size and relative positions, about the predictable eclipses of the sun and moon, the cycles of the years and seasons, about the kinds of animals, shrubs, stones, and so forth... Now it is a

disgraceful and dangerous thing for an infidel [a non-Christian] to hear a Christian... talking nonsense on these topics; and we should take all means to prevent such an embarrassing situation, in which people show up vast ignorance in a Christian and laugh it to scorn."[\[87\]](#)

## **Conclusion**

The challenges of atheism, scientism, and especially technology, are relatively recent. They raise the bar very high indeed when they suggest that all religions are false. We should stay in conversation with these people (with modest expectations), but the real action is elsewhere, I think. A much older question, as old as the beginnings of Christian history itself, argues the opposite of atheism and scientism, that all religions are false. Instead, pluralism argues that all religions are somehow true.

## **For Further Reflection**

Philip Larkin (1922–1985)

### *Church Going*

Once I am sure there's nothing going on

I step inside, letting the door thud shut.

Another church: matting, seats, and stone,

And little books; sprawlings of flowers, cut  
For Sunday, brownish now; some brass and stuff  
Up at the holy end; the small neat organ;  
And a tense, musty, unignorable silence,  
Brewed God knows how long. Hatless, I take off  
My cycle-clips in awkward reverence.

Move forward, run my hand around the font.  
From where I stand, the roof looks almost new -  
Cleaned, or restored? Someone would know: I don't.  
Mounting the lectern, I peruse a few  
Hectoring large-scale verses, and pronounce  
'Here endeth' much more loudly than I'd meant.  
The echoes snigger briefly. Back at the door  
I sign the book, donate an Irish sixpence,  
Reflect the place was not worth stopping for.

Yet stop I did: in fact I often do,  
And always end much at a loss like this,  
Wondering what to look for; wondering, too,  
When churches will fall completely out of use  
What we shall turn them into, if we shall keep

A few cathedrals chronically on show,  
Their parchment, plate and pyx in locked cases,  
And let the rest rent-free to rain and sheep.  
Shall we avoid them as unlucky places?

Or, after dark, will dubious women come  
To make their children touch a particular stone;  
Pick simples for a cancer; or on some  
Advised night see walking a dead one?  
Power of some sort will go on  
In games, in riddles, seemingly at random;  
But superstition, like belief, must die,  
And what remains when disbelief has gone?  
Grass, weedy pavement, brambles, buttress, sky,

A shape less recognisable each week,  
A purpose more obscure. I wonder who  
Will be the last, the very last, to seek  
This place for what it was; one of the crew  
That tap and jot and know what rood-lofts were?  
Some ruin-bibber, randy for antique,  
Or Christmas-addict, counting on a whiff

Of gown-and-bands and organ-pipes and myrrh?

Or will he be my representative,

Bored, uninformed, knowing the ghostly silt

Dispersed, yet tending to this cross of ground

Through suburb scrub because it held unspilt

So long and equably what since is found

Only in separation—marriage, and birth,

And death, and thoughts of these—for which was built

This special shell? For, though I've no idea

What this accoutred frowsty barn is worth,

It pleases me to stand in silence here;

A serious house on serious earth it is,

In whose blent air all our compulsions meet,

Are recognized, and robed as destinies.

And that much never can be obsolete,

Since someone will forever be surprising

A hunger in himself to be more serious,

And gravitating with it to this ground,

Which, he once heard, was proper to grow wise in,

If only that so many dead lie round.

In a 2003 poll conducted by the Poetry Book Society and the Poetry Library, Philip Larkin was voted Britain's favorite poet of the last fifty years. On December 2, 2016, the 31st anniversary of his death, he was memorialised with a floor stone in the Poet's Corner of Westminster Abbey, taking his place with the likes of Chaucer, Shakespeare, Milton, Handel, Charles Dickens, Jane Austen, and many others.

## Chapter Three

### Many Gods, Many Lords

#### A Prolific Polytheism

In the summer of 2016, my wife and I walked the *Via Francigena* in Italy—350 miles in 28 days of hiking through the Tuscan and Umbrian countryside. This was our third pilgrimage. In 2012, we walked the 493-mile *Camino Santiago* in northern Spain. In 2014, we backpacked the 458-mile pilgrimage across southern France called *Le Chemin du Puy*.

We began in Florence, curled clockwise to Assisi, then continued southwest in a backwards "C" to Rome. After a month in rural Italy, Rome was something of a shock, but we were happy to be tourists and stay in a nice hotel on the Campo de' Fiori. On our first day, we walked through the "Door of Mercy" of St. Peter's Basilica designated by Pope Francis for the "extraordinary" jubilee Year of Mercy.

The Vatican and St. Peter's filled me with ambivalence—the art, architecture, history, massive wealth, and bureaucracy of Catholicism. The catacomb of Domatilla connected me with holy history. It's the oldest of the sixty catacombs, with nine miles of underground caves

that held 150,000 bodies and a trove of the earliest known Christian art.

Then there was the Pantheon, maybe the best preserved of Rome's many ancient buildings. Even two thousand years after its dedication by the emperor Hadrian in the year 126, its dome is the largest unreinforced concrete dome in the world. And as every tourist learns, the diameter of the dome and the height to the oculus are both an identical 142 feet.

The Pantheon was a "temple to all the gods" that epitomized ancient Rome's prolific polytheism. Hadrian himself was a deeply superstitious man of magic, religion, astrology, and Greek initiation rites<sup>[88]</sup> Before our pilgrimage I had read the magisterial history of ancient Rome by the Cambridge classicist Mary Beard. Standing in the Pantheon, I recalled her description of how in Rome "the range of deities worshiped was proudly elastic." The more gods, the merrier. "The basic rule," says Beard, "was that as the Roman Empire expanded, so did its pantheon of deities."<sup>[89]</sup>

### **Troublesome Christians**

Roman polytheism was a point of civic pride, except for one irritating exception—what Beard calls "the troublesome Christians." In her

telling (not everyone agrees), there was an "irreconcilable clash" between early Christianity and ancient Rome. Christians were "far worse" than the Jews, says Beard. Christianity preached a comprehensive message "that threatened to overturn some of the most fundamental Greco-Roman assumptions about the nature of the world and of the people within it."[\[90\]](#)

The monotheistic Christians rejected the polytheistic gods that Rome depended on for success. And ironically enough, the Romans derided Christians as atheists, a charge that Justin Martyr (100-165) freely admitted: "Hence, are we (Christians) called atheists. And we confess that we *are* atheists, so far as gods of this sort are concerned, but not with respect to the most true God, the Father of righteousness and temperance and the other virtues, who is free from impurity."[\[91\]](#)

When the apostle Paul traveled from the *agora* and the Areopagus in Athens to Corinth, he once again faced questions about the relationship between Christian monotheism and Greco-Roman polytheism. Should a believer eat meat that had been sacrificed to pagan idols and then afterwards sold in the local market? Some said yes, others said no. Some Corinthian believers were even "eating in

an idol's temple." Paul's answer? A definite maybe, depending on questions of conscience and context.<sup>[92]</sup>

This ambiguous relationship between the "atheist" Christians and the polytheistic Romans continued down through the centuries. Writing at the end of the second century, Tertullian bragged that Christians had permeated every level of Roman society, but he makes one notable exception: "We are only of yesterday and have filled everything you have: cities, apartment blocks, forts, towns, marketplaces, even the military camps, tribes, town councils, the palace, the senate, the forum. We have left you only the temples."<sup>[93]</sup> For Tertullian, who (in)famously opposed Jerusalem and Athens as having nothing in common, a Christian might inhabit any number of cultural spaces, even the senate (if that was true), but a pagan temple wasn't one of them.

Similarly, a Roman lawyer and Christian named Minucius Felix of the early third century wrote a dialogue between a Christian named Octavius and a pagan critic called Caecilius. Whether the dialogue is actual history or just a literary device isn't clear. What's clear is that Roman believers lived on the cultural fringes in a relationship of mutual antagonism.

Caecilius derided the Christians as "utter boors and yokels, ungraced by any manners or culture." In style and content their Scriptures were crude. They believed absurd doctrines like the resurrection of the body and providence. Rumors about their cannibalism, incest, and infanticide were well known.

And so, Caecilius complained and condescended: "Isn't it scandalous that the gods should be mobbed by a gang of outlawed and reckless desperadoes? They despise our temples as being no more than sepulchers, they spit after our gods, they sneer at our rites, and, fantastic though it is, our priests they pity— pitiable themselves; they scorn the purple robes of public office, though they go about in rags themselves." Then comes the clincher. The Christians, griped Caecilius, "do not understand their civic duty." They were monotheists who lived on the periphery of Roman polytheism.<sup>[94]</sup> They struggled to follow a Christian way of life in Rome's pluralist society.

### **Pluralism: Our Social Reality**

"Pluralism" is a slippery word with a broad semantic range, and that bears numerous meanings and agendas (religious, ethnic, cultural, racial, gender, etc.). For some people it has necessarily negative connotations, while for others it's the watchword of a positive social

agenda. I've come to think about pluralism in three interrelated but distinct ways.

First of all, pluralism is simply our social reality. That we live in a pluralistic nation and world is an empirical fact of life. This is neither positive nor negative in itself, although many people experience this empirical pluralism as such.

However prolific Roman polytheism was, today we experience a far greater, richer and more complex pluralism than they could have imagined. This surplus of religiosity comes as no surprise when we remember that we've been developing it for 130,000 years. And it fits with a Christian view of people as divine image bearers, of God as the father of every person, of every person as his child, and with his stated intention to bless all the earth and to gather to himself "a great multitude of every nation, tribe, people, and language."[\[95\]](#)

A few years ago I gave away about 80% of the books in my small bedroom office. I only kept "the good stuff," which included a favorite book called *Ethnologue*. The book itself has a fascinating history that now sounds quaint, but which also points to our pluralist world.

In 1951, when the linguist Richard Pittman (1915–1998) compiled a mimeographed list of the known languages of the world, his

"ethnologue," as he called it, identified 46 languages. Today, the 20th edition of *Ethnologue* documents 7,099 "known living languages," including 103 languages previously unidentified in the 14th edition of 2000. From A Fala de Xálima, which is spoken in Portugal, to Zyudin, a dialect of Komi-Permynk spoken in the Urals, *Ethnologue* has distinguished itself as the best single source of information about all the languages of the world, including 497 languages threatened with "language death" because they have fewer than 50 speakers.<sup>[96]</sup> It's a book that makes you appreciate the Genesis 11 story of the tower of Babel and the Acts 2 "tongues of fire" at Pentecost.

What Pittman did for understanding ethno-linguistic pluralism, at about the same time a sociologist did for appreciating American religious pluralism. In 1955, the Jewish scholar Will Herberg published a book that as recently as 2003 was hailed as "one of the most influential books ever written about American religion."<sup>[97]</sup> And as with Pittman's initial efforts, Herberg's conclusions, groundbreaking and accurate at the time, are now badly antiquated.

In his book *Protestant, Catholic, Jew*, Herberg argued that America was not just one melting pot; it was what he called a "triple melting pot." America, he observed, was no longer homogeneously

Protestant, but instead a “three religion country.” In that newly pluralistic reality, wrote Herberg, to be American “means to be either a Protestant, a Catholic, or a Jew.” The election of the Catholic John Kennedy as president in 1960 broke a religious barrier as shocking as the racial barrier that Obama broke in 2008. Both elections signaled something new about America.

Herberg noted the connection between immigration, ethnicity, and religion. In a single generation, between 1880 and 1920, more than 20 million Europeans immigrated to America. More broadly, some 50 million people moved from Europe to the United States during the nineteenth and early twentieth century.<sup>[98]</sup> But we shouldn’t limit the impact of immigration to that short period. Every American has an immigrant past.<sup>[99]</sup> And global immigration remains a powerful driver of social pluralism.

My first ancestor in America was Charles Clendenin (1714–1790), who was born in Dumfriesshire, Scotland, and died in Fort Lee-Fort Clendenin in the town named after him, Charleston, West Virginia. On my mother’s side, Michael and Catherine Esterly were born in Wurttemberg, Germany in 1762 and 1766 respectively. In May of 1804 they loaded up their four kids and worldly possessions, boarded the

American ship *Aurora* in Amsterdam, then two months later landed in Baltimore. They migrated to Pittsburgh, then to little Columbiana, Ohio, where that side of my family has lived for five generations.

Today immigration is often plagued by violence and nationalism. About 60 million people worldwide have been forcibly displaced from their homes. In Mohsin Hamid's novel *Exit West* (2017), set in an unnamed city "swollen by refugees but still mostly at peace, or at least not yet openly at war," the two migrants Nadia and Saeed capture the *Zeitgeist* of our contemporary world when, at the end of the book, they observe that sometimes it seems like "the whole planet is on the move."

Similarly, Viet Thanh Nguyen's eight short stories in *The Refugees* (2017) explore migrants who live hyphenated lives between two worlds, between past and present, the old country that you left and the new country where you live, between your mother tongue and your adopted language, remembering and forgetting, assimilating and conforming, or living on the periphery of a new culture. Refugees are third culture people who can be obsessed with identity. They are in the throes of culture shock about religion, language, food, the landscape, and "even the quality of light" in a new country.

Gianfranco Rosi's strange movie *Fire at Sea* (2016), which won the top prize at the 2016 Berlin Film Festival, tells the story of the refugee crisis on Lampedusa, a tiny Italian island just eight miles square, and that sits only seventy miles from the north coast of Africa. In the last twenty years, 400,000 migrants have landed on Lampedusa, fleeing war, poverty, and ethnic strife. About 15,000 people have died trying.

Millions of other people are what Rebecca Hirsch has called “climate migrants.” By the year 2050, she estimates that some 25 million people will become involuntary migrants due to climate changes.

[\[100\]](#) In the next 25 years, 40-50 island nations will disappear. Tuvalu in the South Pacific and Kivalina in Alaska will be gone in ten years.

Where will these fellow citizens of the world call home?

As I mentioned in the previous chapter, according to the Pew Research Center, about 71% of Americans identify as Christian. That means nearly 100 million of our fellow citizens aren't Christian. About 6% of Americans follow non-Christian faiths, and 23% say that they are unaffiliated, that is, atheist, agnostic, or “nothing in particular”—the so-called “nones.”

When we widen our lens beyond our one country, we see that America is merely a microcosm of a far greater proliferation of

religious pluralism all over the world. In his *World Christian Encyclopedia* (2001), David Barrett identifies 10,000 distinct religions, 150 of which have a million or more followers. Within Christianity alone, Barrett and his researchers have identified over 33,000 separate groups.

Admittedly, this is a complex claim. What is the definition of a religion? How do you define “god?” How do you count adherents, and those who switch religions? Even so, the scale and scope of our global empirical pluralism is, judged by ethnicity or language or religion, remarkable.[\[101\]](#)

Love it or hate it, we live in a pluralistic world. Pluralism is our empirical reality. It’s just the way things are. How we engage it becomes an important question. Pluralism as our social reality raises questions about pluralism as our civic responsibility.[\[102\]](#)

### **Pluralism: Our Civic Responsibility**

Both early Christians and their pagan critics described the monotheistic believers as living on the fringes of Rome’s polytheistic culture. For about a hundred years after Jesus, the emergent movement was invisible to most people in the Roman empire. But across the decades Christians earned a reputation as an alternate

community that spurned the *res publica* or "the public thing."

Christians were considered fanatical, seditious, obstinate, and defiant.

They scorned long-held Roman religious traditions. Many of their adherents came from the lower classes and seemed gullible. They refused military service, and met for clandestine rites rumored to include cannibalism, ritual murder, and incest. We have seen how Justin Martyr proudly admitted to the charge of "atheism."

The Roman senator and historian Tacitus, who died in 117 CE, called Christians "haters of mankind." Caecilius complained that they "did not understand their civic duty." They undermined Roman society with their indifference to civic affairs.

This conflict narrative has been a staple of historians. In his *History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (1776), Edward Gibbon argued that the success of the early Christians was based upon their "intolerant zeal" of Roman ways. That is, the new faith was utterly incompatible with and "obstinately different" from the old ways of the ancient empire. Even Mary Beard adopts this narrative when she speaks of an "irreconcilable clash."

In this standard telling, it's true that the Roman state executed Jesus as a subversive threat, then attacked the church for 300 years. At first

these persecutions were sporadic, localized, or at the whim of an emperor like Nero. But under Decius (249–251) persecution became a systematic and universal state policy. Diocletian (284–305) meted out the last, most severe and cruel terror. In his *Ecclesiastical History*, Eusebius (265–339) describes the Imperial edict issued by Diocletian in March 303: “It was enacted that the meetings of the Christians should be abolished, churches be razed to the ground, that the Scriptures be destroyed by fire, that those holding office be deposed, and they of their household deprived of freedom, if they persisted in their profession of Christianity.” Only with the Edict of Toleration issued by Galerius in 311 did these persecutions of Christians end.

Still, there’s a more nuanced narrative than this binary way of thinking. In an important if controversial book in 2013, Candida Moss, formerly a professor of New Testament and Early Christianity at Notre Dame, rejects the common idea that early believers were badly persecuted. She argues that the early Christians endured only about a decade of aggressive persecution by the Roman government, and even that was sporadic in both time and place. “Christians were never the victims of sustained, targeted persecution,” says Moss. In her view, this persecution narrative was invented by church authorities in the fourth century and later. [\[103\]](#)

The persecution narrative becomes dangerous when it allows believers even today to claim a victim status in which they demonize their persecutors, complain about perceived unfair treatment like a “war” on Easter, or seek special privileges like prayer in public schools. Furthermore, in the persecution narrative, any sort of cultural compromise or collaboration between Christians and non-Christians becomes difficult if not impossible. “You cannot collaborate with someone who is persecuting you,” says Moss. “You have to defend yourself.”

What’s important here is not a precise reconstruction of a murky historical past two thousand years after the fact, and that’s based on scant sources, or any given cultural issue today (say, the place of the Ten Commandments in public life). What’s important, says Moss, is the level and type of rhetoric from all quarters that helps or hurts our shared civic life. The persecution narrative short circuits dialogue and discussion.

Douglas Boin, a classicist, historian, and archaeologist at St. Louis University, similarly rejects Gibbon's characterization of Christians as zealous sectarians. He offers a refreshingly nuanced interpretation. Boin says that there were many, different ways to be both Roman and

Christian. He argues that the early believers lived “hyphenated” lives and “juggled their identities in highly creative ways.” They lived in a middle murky ground characterized by many shades of gray.

For the most part, says Boin, early believers were just ignored, even “entirely invisible” when judged by the paucity of their archaeological remains. He references newer scholarship like Moss’s that argues that they weren’t as persecuted as some standard histories suggest. In addition to confessing their faith, at least some believers served in the military, went to the games, enjoyed the festivals, and attended the theaters, just like their neighbors. I mentioned above in an incidental detail from Paul’s letter to the Corinthians that some of the believers there were “eating meat in an idol’s temple,” and that Paul didn’t categorically prohibit that.

For these Christians, the Roman state wasn’t the whore of Babylon or the great dragon of John’s Revelation, but perhaps a fascinating place to live. It was even an institution ordained by God to which believers rightly submitted and paid their taxes.<sup>[104]</sup> Boin discerns a pattern not of hostility and withdrawal, not of some zero sum game, but one of engagement and dialogue.

Many believers did their best to fit in with what he calls "shared civic values," which is just what we read in the epistles. Wives were to obey their husbands, slaves their masters (cf. Philemon), and all believers were to "honor the emperor" and "live at peace with all people." And yes, "pray for the king," says Paul, "and for all those in authority." "Submit yourselves to the governing authorities," he tells the believers in Rome, for they were ordained by God.

Before too long, though, Boin observes a remarkable historical paradox: the greatest persecutor of the church (the Roman state) became its biggest supporter (Constantine) and the center of its ecclesiastical power (the Roman papacy). And then came an ominous turn. By the late fourth century, this civic participation by Christians had eroded into violent cultural clashes — the burning of a synagogue, the destruction of a pagan temple, and government legislation that punished non-believers. We've been living with the sad consequences ever since. [\[105\]](#)

In our own day, Jon Meacham has argued against the oppositional extremes of both secular and religious zealots. There is, he insists, a well-defined historical tradition of a common middle ground. He calls this a "sensible center" that best serves the many and varied interests

of our country. Meacham wants to move beyond discord and division to both reverence and tolerance, to the "shrewd compromise" that our founders made between protecting private faiths and insuring public freedoms.

Meacham calls it "wishful thinking" rather than sound history to imagine that America was founded as a specifically Christian nation. George Washington, for example, is not known to have taken communion, and one bishop who knew him was confident he was not a believer. Jefferson's scissored-down New Testament is well known. In the realm of "public religion" the American founders assiduously avoided sectarian bias. They strongly protected the right of every citizen to freely exercise "private faith," or no faith at all, as each individual conscience saw fit. Such was the paradox between political liberty and religious faith: "Many, if not most, believed; but none must."

On the other hand, and understood in a broad, generic sense, America is a very religious if not specifically "Christian" nation. On the whole, Meacham thinks the benefits of this legacy have outweighed the costs. Even today it would be silly, and impossible as a practical matter, to deny or try to eradicate this collective cultural consensus that we have inherited. The Declaration of Independence thus argues

that our rights are inherent and God-given rather than granted by the state, even though this "God" is vaguely defined, and the Constitution never mentions him. He considers it natural and probably healthy for our country that virtually all presidents and our most important leaders make public if deliberately vague appeals to the Almighty, from Lincoln and FDR to Martin Luther King, Jr.[\[106\]](#)

Christians should be not only people of conviction, but people of compassion and civility. We're commanded to "pursue peace with everyone," and to "show every courtesy to everyone."[\[107\]](#) Civility doesn't mean we have to like everyone we meet, forfeit our convictions to a relativistic perspective, or befriend people as a manipulative ploy to evangelize them. Rather, it means caring deeply about our *civitas* and our *res publica*—"the public thing." And we do so precisely because God so cares.[\[108\]](#)

Despite the many differences inherent in a pluralist society, we have shared civic values. We must learn to live together and build a common life. In the words of the early but unofficial motto of the United States, *E pluribus unum*, we must accept the challenge of the original thirteen colonies to form a single nation, and to "make one out of many."

The genius and the challenge of the American experiment is that this “oneness” can never be based in religious or ethno-linguistic homogeneity; it can only be a civic unity that is genuinely pluralistic, that is, that embraces religious (or ethnic, racial, cultural, etc.) diversity and differences as constituent parts of a larger political community. The pluralist appeal, writes Diana Eck, says “come as you are, pledged only to the common civic demands of citizenship.” We need, she urges in what now feels like a gross understatement, “energetic bridge builders.”

In a world where religious identity often tears countries apart, is a source of horrible violence, and is presumed to be the most divisive difference of all, the challenge is great.

How we move from being a nation that puts up with what are infelicitously called ‘aliens’ to being a nation that welcomes newcomers of every religion—how we move from being strangers to neighbors—is one of the greatest challenges of America's new century of religious life. Nothing is more central to most religious traditions than hospitality toward the neighbor, even toward the stranger.

The good news is that there are rich resources in our own tradition to fulfill our civic obligations in a pluralistic world.[\[109\]](#)

In the Hebrew tradition, to take just one example, there is Jeremiah 29 that recalls the destruction of Jerusalem in 586 BCE. The army of the king of Babylon besieged Jerusalem, breached the city walls, then "burned down every important building." They plundered and pillaged, executed government officials, deported the elite, and left the poor to fend for themselves amidst famine and disease.

The puppet king Zedekiah consulted with Jeremiah: "Is there any word from the Lord?"

Yes, said Jeremiah, there was a word from God. Surrender to Babylon. Give up. Don't fool yourself. Don't listen to the "reckless lies" and "false dreams" of your sycophants. This is the end of the end. Accept your defeat.

Later, Jeremiah wrote a letter to the prisoners of war who had been exiled to Babylon:

"This is what the Lord Almighty, the God of Israel, says to all those I carried into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: 'Build houses and settle down; plant gardens and eat what they produce. Marry and have sons

and daughters; find wives for your sons and give your daughters in marriage, so that they too may have sons and daughters. Increase in number there; do not decrease. Also, seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the Lord for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper."

Seek the welfare of your pagan conqueror that just burned your sacred temple to the ground. May the blessing of God be on Babylon. Embrace your exile, for there will be no miraculous exodus this time. Most of all, remember that God is every bit as present in cultural exile to Babylon as he was in the miraculous exodus from Egypt.

In the gospel of John, Jesus calls his followers "*out* of the world," even while we live very much "*in* the world." And so his deeply ambiguous prayer: "I have given them your word and the world has hated them, for they are not *of* the world any more than I am of the world. My prayer is not that you take them *out* of the world but that you protect them from the evil one. They are not *of* the world, even as I am not of it. As you sent me into the world, I have sent them *into* the world."

Called to love God's world, separatism and withdrawal are not options, for they lead to cultural irrelevance. And yet because of that very proximity, assimilation and conformity to the world will always be

temptations. Yes, believers are God's "peculiar people" who are "set apart" for his own purposes, an early Christian sentiment rooted in identical language to the ancient Jews a thousand years earlier.

[\[110\]](#) But believers are also people of the common good who are next door neighbors and school board members.

Commenting on the best-selling book *The Benedict Option* (2017) by Rod Dreher—he calls it "the most discussed and most important religious book of the decade," David Brooks observes that religion often comes in one of two forms, the purist and the ironist modes. For the conservative Dreher, who converted from Methodism to Catholicism to Eastern Orthodoxy, the cultural war is over and Christians have lost. As a purist, he commends a strategy of "[seceding] culturally from the mainstream." We should turn off our smartphones and watch only movies and television that are consistent with Christian values. Christians should "pull their children from public school, and put down roots in separate communities."

I follow Brooks, who favors the ironist mode that appreciates the many ambiguities of existence, not to mention a sense of the tragic. The Baptist preacher and civil rights activist Will Campbell (1924–2013) once remarked that the turning point in this thinking was when he

came "to understand the nature of tragedy. And one who understands the nature of tragedy can never take sides." Purist ideals are for the next world, not this world. "By retreating to neat homogeneous monocultures," says Brooks, "most separatists will end up doing what all self-segregationists do, fostering narrowness, prejudice and moral arrogance. They will close off the dynamic creativity of a living faith." [\[111\]](#) This, as we saw above, is precisely the fear of Moss and Eck.

Miroslav Volf, a systematic theologian at Yale and director of the Yale Center for Faith and Culture, has explored this theme of how believers can live in the world without becoming worldly. There are many ways that our faith "malfunctions," he observes. There's a general fear, not entirely unfounded, that believers will try to impose their faith on others, and then a predictable backlash of suppression and secular exclusion of religion from the public square. Some retreat into what he calls the mystical, and neglect their prophetic call. Somehow we need to avoid the pitfalls of accommodation, abandonment, and coercion.

As H. Richard Niebuhr showed in his classic book *Christ and Culture* (1951), there's no one single way to be faithfully present in the world. The earliest believers "were not major social players at all" but a fringe sect on the periphery of the powers, so there's no reason to

bemoan any sense of diminished influence. And today, with power widely diffused through media like the internet, there are fewer places where it is obviously centralized.

There are elements of culture Christians will accept, other elements we should reject, and still others we might adopt and transform. In the end, Volf objects to the criticism that Christian faith in a pluralistic world is inherently violent. Rather, he appeals to the "golden rule." Believers should treat others in the world like they want to be treated. This is a "vision of human flourishing" for all people, not just a favored few, and "the most important contribution of the Christian faith to the common good."[\[112\]](#)

Christians ought to be a people of hospitality or, what Volf called in an earlier book, welcoming embrace.[\[113\]](#) We affirm without reservation or qualification that every person is a child of God. Every person is God's "offspring," says Paul.[\[114\]](#) We all belong to one human family. We all breathe the same air, and drink the same water. Each and every one of us was created by God and bear his image. Every person can claim the promise of Isaiah 43:1, "I have called you by name, you are mine."

God isn't the God of Jews alone, or the private possession of Christians. America isn't his favorite nation. Rather, he's the "father of all fatherhood," the "father of every family," or the "father of the whole human family."[\[115\]](#) He's the God of Muslims, Buddhists, and atheists, the father of citizens and undocumented immigrants alike. No one is excepted.

So, there is no "them," only "us." To those who would partition people according to ethnicity, economic class, or gender, Paul wrote that in Christ "there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female."[\[116\]](#)

God doesn't limit his fatherly love to the morally upright. Jesus says that God "makes his sun rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous."[\[117\]](#) Since every person is a child of God, we're called to protect every person's safety and dignity. Proverbs 31:8–9 puts it this way: "Speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves, for the rights of all who are destitute. Speak up and judge fairly; defend the rights of the poor and needy."

The Hebrew Scriptures are adamant—do not oppress the stranger, the people outside your group. Why? Because you know what it's like to be oppressed as a stranger in a strange land.[\[118\]](#) The Hebrew

word *ger* (alien, immigrant) occurs 92 times in the Jewish Scriptures, along with similar words like *toshav* (migrant), *zar* (stranger or outsider), and *nocri* (foreigner). Don't oppress the stranger, have mercy on them, remember that you too were once aliens.

Sanctuary cities are an ancient idea. In Leviticus and Deuteronomy, the Hebrews were required to set aside six "cities of refuge." People who were charged with manslaughter could find asylum in these cities. They were protected from vigilante justice until the due process of genuine justice ran its course.

The eighth century prophets like Amos were likewise insistent—protect the weak, care for widows and orphans, help the poor. Do justice and love kindness, said Micah.

There are some positive signs out there. In February of 2017, when President Trump issued an executive order temporarily banning some refugees, conservative evangelicals took out a full-page ad in the *Washington Post* to denounce his order, saying they were “deeply concerned.” Over 6,500 people signed the online letter. For all the grief they get, our evangelical friends were spot on when in the first paragraph of their letter they wrote, "Our care for the oppressed and suffering is rooted in the call of Jesus to 'love our neighbor as we love

ourselves.' In the story of the Good Samaritan, Jesus makes it clear that our 'neighbor' includes the stranger and anyone fleeing persecution and violence, regardless of their faith or country."

An early work called the *Letter to Diognetus* (c. 130 AD) articulates an important point —our Christian identity is ultimately defined by our "wonderful method of life" rather than by our geo-political allegiances.

"For the Christians are distinguished from other men neither by country, nor language, nor the customs which they observe. For they neither inhabit cities of their own, nor employ a peculiar form of speech, nor lead a life which is marked out by any singularity. The course of conduct which they follow has not been devised by any speculation or deliberation of inquisitive men; nor do they, like some, proclaim themselves the advocates of any merely human doctrines. But, inhabiting Greek as well as barbarian cities, according as the lot of each of them has determined, and following the customs of the natives in respect to clothing, food, and the rest of their ordinary conduct, they display to us their wonderful and confessedly striking method of life. They dwell in their own countries, but simply as sojourners [or resident aliens]. As citizens, they share in all things with others, and yet endure all things as if foreigners. *Every foreign land is*

*to them as their native country, and every land of their birth as a land of strangers."*

For Diognetus, and contrary to the conflict narratives of Justin Martyr, Tacitus, Caecilius, or Edward Gibbon, Christians gladly engage whatever time and place they live. We support and enjoy our various countries, but we do so as if we were resident aliens. We experience an ambivalent and divided loyalty—ultimate loyalty only to the city of God and its "politics" of self-sacrificing love, and penultimate but genuine loyalty to the city of man and to what *Diognetus* called its "merely human doctrines." We honor "every foreign land" as if it were our own, and experience our own countries as a sort of "foreign land." In the end, there's no inherent conflict between a robust Christian faith and a responsible civic pluralism.

### **Pluralism: A Theological Challenge**

"All men need the gods," said Homer.<sup>[119]</sup> That seems to be the case. For 130,000 years our ancestors have been religious in every time and place, so much so that today, as we have seen, David Barrett has identified over 10,000 distinct religions, 150 of which have more than a million followers. Is it reasonable to believe that any one of these

religions is the only way to the only God, and that the other 9,999 religions are false? This is the challenge of theological pluralism.

This isn't a new question, as much as we'd like to congratulate our enlightened selves, but indeed a very old one. Nearly 500 years ago the French jurist Jean Bodin (1530–1596) imagined a conversation about this question in his book *Colloquium of the Seven about Secrets of the Sublime*: "Who can doubt that the Christian religion is the true religion or rather the only one?" asked the Christian. "Almost the whole world," responded the unbeliever. [\[120\]](#)

Like the Jewish people from whom they come, and their cousins of Ishmael in Islam, Christians inherited a radical monotheism. So, it's no real surprise to read Peter's declaration that "there is no other name [than Jesus] under heaven given to men by which we must be saved," or the words of Jesus, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." [\[121\]](#)

Radical monotheism has many critics today who believe that it fosters an exclusionary and violent posture toward what are perceived as false faiths. And there's sadly at least some truth in this claim. In a subsequent chapter I will explore sacred violence and texts of terror.

For these critics, radical monotheism is morally repugnant, intellectually untenable, and politically disastrous.

Consequently, many people today adhere to some form of theological pluralism—the belief that no one religion is normative for all people. A truly consistent pluralism demands a radically egalitarian perspective that grants parity and validity to all religions. For example, a traditional Japanese saying suggests that despite their outward differences, all religions connect with the same divine reality—"Although the paths to the summit may differ, from the top one sees the same moon." Or, in the *Bhagava-Gita* of Hinduism, Lord Krishna proclaims, "Whatever path men travel is My path; no matter where they walk it leads to me." Whereas atheism claims that all religions are false, consistent pluralism argues that all religions are true.

As I mentioned with atheism in the last chapter, there are two broad types of religious pluralism. A "soft" version appears in popular culture, the media, entertainment, and everyday conversations with friends, and is epitomized in the rhetorical question, "Don't all religions really teach the same thing?" A "hard" version among academic scholars like John Hick argues a sophisticated pluralist position in historical, philosophical, and religious treatments of the subject. Both of these

versions of religious pluralism dismiss the words of Peter and Jesus as untenable. John Hick speaks for many people when he writes of Christian exclusivism that "only diehards who are blinded by dogmatic spectacles can persist in such a sublime bigotry."[\[122\]](#)

We can begin with a simple but important point that I mentioned in the last chapter. The claim that all religions teach the same thing is patently false; this is precisely what religions *don't* do. At a general level, one can identify broad similarities among religions, such as various renditions of the Golden Rule. But when you examine the historical and theological particulars of religions you discover drastic differences. For example, Judaism, Christianity and Islam are all characterized by their radical monotheism; they all teach that their religion alone is right. But Shinto and many African traditional religions are polytheistic, Theravada Buddhism is non-theistic, and the scientific materialism of a Richard Dawkins is atheistic.

Common sense would suggest that some religious views and practices are clearly false, harmful, and even despicable. Aztec human sacrifice and Buddhist almsgiving can't expect equal respect. Hindu widow-burning, female infanticide, phallic worship, and the mass suicide of 913 people at Jim Jones' "People's Temple" in

northern Guyana are badly wrong. So, any pluralism that consistently treats all religions as equally valid comes at the unacceptably high price of endorsing the diabolical as well as the divine. In other words, most people do not and should not believe that all religions are true or that they all teach the same thing.

Two corollaries follow from this observation. First, it's patronizing in the extreme to say that all religions teach the same thing, to tell a Bahai person, for example, that her beliefs are really no different than those of a Rastafarian. Further, contradictory religious truth claims like the ones I've just mentioned might all be false, but they can't all be true — atheism, monotheism, and polytheism, for example, can't all be true.

Consistent pluralism that argues for radical parity tries to solve this problem of contradictory truth claims in two ways. John Hick and many others appeal to agnosticism. Hick says that the "Ultimately Real" (he thinks the word "God" biases the discussion) is unknown and unknowable, "forever hidden beyond the scope of human conception, language, or worship." For Hick, religions are imperfect, cultural, relative and symbolic expressions of "the Real."

But if we apply his criterion to his own religious views of pluralism, how can Hick stand "outside" or "above" the discussion and claim to know the way things "really" are? Clearly, he does not think that his position is just one imperfect one among others; he thinks that he's right, he wants to persuade us of that, and even convert us to his opinion. And why does Hick argue that all religions are true? Why not argue that they are all false? Most important of all, if the appeal to agnosticism remains consistent, you can't confidently claim to know *anything* about any ultimate religious reality.

A second strategy identifies a "common essence" in all religions, some lowest common denominator in them all. But this tends toward subjective interpretation, it stumbles upon the previous point, and it distorts how adherents understand their own religious traditions.

Christians need not reject everything about other religions. They acknowledge areas of both agreement and disagreement, and struggle over the latter. In most areas of human knowledge, when you encounter contradictory views you don't throw up your hands and concede, "they're both true." No, you study hard, make an informed choice, then remain open to further insight. Note, too, how this

Christian view is far more tolerant and liberal than atheism, which rejects all the beliefs of every religion.

The conundrum of relating 10,000 religions to each other is not only a "Christian" problem. It's an equal opportunity problem that confronts every religion and person. Dismissing the Christian approach as wrongheaded, which is admittedly one option, does not solve the problem or make it disappear. It awaits an alternative and better view from atheists, Jews, Muslims, Zoroastrians, and the 9,995 other religions that David Barrett has identified. Nor do we have unlimited alternative solutions; we all operate with limited options. By and large, Christians can do as adequate a job at addressing this thorny issue as believers from other traditions.

I agree with the liberal Jewish writer Michael Kinsley that it's not inherently wrong or intolerant to try to convert other people. If you think that someone is wrong on some issue, it's reasonable to try to change their mind.<sup>[123]</sup> Christians should vigorously protect and promote the right of every person to hold any faith, or no faith at all, and extend to every individual and culture unfailing courtesy and kindness. We should never prohibit, hinder, manipulate, or coerce the beliefs of others. The commitment to genuine civic pluralism is firm.

But that doesn't mean you can't conclude that someone's beliefs might be false and consequently try to persuade them of your understanding of what is true. Pluralists like Hick insinuate that you cannot disagree with a person, engage them in dialogue, and still be civil to them. That's just not true.

A rule of thumb in Bible interpretation is to understand the complex and ambiguous parts of Scripture in light of simple and straightforward passages. For Christians it's unthinkable that God will treat any person of any time, place or religion unfairly. We are unqualified optimists when it comes to the character of God. There are many things in the Bible that I don't understand, but I have absolute confidence that God will treat every person with perfect love and justice.

Instead of discarding what you don't like or understand in Scripture and ending up with a Bible that reflects only your own biases, Christians should hold together two broad themes—the universal and the particular. First, God desires that no person should perish, and that every person be saved and come to a knowledge of the truth. Jesus is the atoning sacrifice not only for Christians "but for the entire cosmos." Peter anticipates the "universal restoration of all things," and

Paul looks forward to the redemption of the entire cosmos. Second, Jesus alone is God's ultimate mediator of salvation.[\[124\]](#)

Exactly how the universal love of God and the particularity of Jesus fit together isn't clear. I commend the view of the Oxford professor C.S. Lewis, who in his book *Mere Christianity* wrote, "Here is another thing that used to puzzle me. Is it not frightfully unfair that this new life should be confined to people who have heard of Christ and been able to believe in Him? But the truth is God has not told us what His arrangements about the other people are. We do know that no man can be saved except through Christ; we do not know that only those who know Him can be saved through Him."

Most Christians readily invoke something like Lewis's logic when affirming the salvation of people who lived before the time of Christ, adults with severely limited cognitive abilities, babies and children who die young, and people today who have no reasonable opportunity to hear the gospel — they are saved by Christ even though they can't call upon Christ. There's no reason not to apply that logic to everyone without exception. This is all the more apparent when we consider the radical truth, clearly expressed in Scripture that God is the Father of us all—the subject of the next chapter.

## For Further Reflection

Jane Wilson Joyce

### *Crazy Quilt*

The Liberty Bell in Philadelphia  
is cracked. California is splitting  
off. There is no East or West, no rhyme,  
no reason to it. We are scattered.  
Dear Lord, lest we all be somewhere  
else, patch this work. Quilt us  
together, feather-stitching piece  
by piece our tag-ends of living,  
our individual scraps of love.

Jane Wilson Joyce is Charles J. Luellen Professor Emerita of Classics at Centre College in Danville, Kentucky. This poem is taken from her book *Quilt Pieces* (Gnomon Press, second printing, 2009).

## **Chapter Four Father of All**

### **Introduction**

Humanity's 130,000 years of religiosity has not been an unmitigated good. History shows that some of our religiosity is characterized by the legitimation of violence. We find this sacred violence in foundational sacred texts, and then in the subsequent long histories of religious traditions. In humanity's earliest extant work of literature, for example, the Babylonian *Epic of Gilgamesh* about our cosmic origins (2100 BCE), violence, chaos, and struggle characterize the original and natural state of the world. Such sacred violence makes it hard to conclude that all religions are equally valid paths to God, or that they all teach the same thing. Rather, it suggests that there are true and false gods, good and evil religious practices, angels of light and demons of darkness, and that we must differentiate between the two.

### **Redemptive Violence**

"They shall either be converted or wiped out," wrote St. Bernard of Clairvaux (1090–1153) of the Slavic pagans in the Baltics. It would be

convenient to dismiss these chilling words as an aberration, but that risks the danger of a comforting and self-serving illusion.

For the crusaders, genocide and forced conversions, butchery and baptisms, were equally works of God. The medieval church not only justified and sanctified the Crusades, it canonized them as meritorious deeds that earned one remission of sins and eternal salvation. For 500 years, from Urban II's preaching campaign in 1095–1096 to "the last crusader" Pope Pius II (1405–1464), from Greenland to Iberia and from England to Iraq, the church exterminated Nordic pagans, European Jews, Muslims in Spain and the Middle East, fellow Christians in Constantinople, and heretical Cathars in France.

The Crusades permeated public consciousness so broadly and deeply that even long after the events they found expression in literature, liturgy, art, architecture, and even in wills that bequeathed inheritances to fund future crusades. At the end of his thousand-page history of the Crusades, Christopher Tyerman warns of the dangers of sentimentality and naivete when it comes to religion: "It is a fond myth of the religious that piety excludes greed, coercion, conformity and lack of reflection, that it is freestanding. The language of transcendence should not distract or dupe."[\[125\]](#)

Although some critics vilify Christendom as the worst of all offenders, religious violence knows no boundaries and plays no favorites, either with the perpetrators or the victims. And as we saw earlier, that most certainly includes the secular faith of atheism. In 1487, the Aztecs sacrificed thousands of people in four days at the consecration of the Great Pyramid of Tenochtitlan. In our own day, there's the decades of horrific persecution of the minority Muslim Rohingyas by the majority Buddhist government of Myanmar.

No person or religion should feel morally smug. In his book *Terror in the Mind of God* (2000), Mark Juergensmeyer includes separate chapters on violence by Christians, Jews, Muslims, Sikhs, and Buddhists. Charles Kimball covers similar ground with a thematic approach in *When Religion Becomes Evil* (2002). He identifies five characteristics of sacred violence: fanatical claims of absolute truth, blind obedience to totalitarian, charismatic or authoritarian leaders, actively trying to usher in the end times, justifying religious ends by any means, and all forms of dehumanization. Widow burning, caste systems, female genital mutilation, witch hunts, ritual abuse, ethnic cleansing, suicide bombers, apartheid, and mass suicides—the list is depressingly long and as common as the morning newspaper.

Why people commit violence and evil in the name of religion might seem inexplicable. After studying the Crusades all his life, Tyerman concluded that it's an "irreconcilable paradox" why medieval crusaders who followed the Prince of Peace endured unimaginable personal risks and privations in order to slaughter fellow human beings with such sincerity. Perhaps, he intimates, such violence is embedded in the contradictions of being human.

David Livingstone Smith appeals to science. Why do humans kill each other on such a mass scale and with such ferocious cruelty? How and why do we ignore or overcome our deepest inhibitions about taking another's life? He frames the question as a choice between two broad alternatives. He rejects the idea that war is a learned behavior or mere "cultural artifact." Rather, he argues that war is deeply embedded in our human nature, that it's innate, and our natural impulse. In his view, war is not so much a pathology or aberrant choice, it's "a normal feature of human life."

Much of Livingstone's book is about neurobiology, Freudian psychology, evolutionary biology, anthropology, history, and archaeology. He's a strict materialist who rejects the notion that there is any "credible alternative to a materialistic conception of mind." As

for ethics, "the idea that moral values are objective simply does not hold water." He's convinced that "our taste for killing was bred into us over millions of years by natural and sexual selection," and a "hideously cruel" evolutionary process. In his bleak view, hope for a better life with the transcendent seems impossible. [\[126\]](#)

Our history of religious violence is bad enough. Even more disturbing is all the violence that we encounter in the Bible itself. One of the most remarkable features of the Hebrew Scriptures is how instead of avoiding or denying sacred violence, it embraces and includes it. Nor is this violence episodic or incidental. Consider the four most important figures in all of Jewish history—Abraham's deceits and child sacrifice, Moses' murder, the adultery and murder of King David, and, as we shall see in the next chapter, the genealogy of Jesus that includes stories of incest, prostitution, widowhood, adultery, and the pregnancy of an unwed teenager.

Nonetheless, I shall argue that the Scriptures repeatedly transcend, deconstruct, and subvert these Scriptural stories of our religious violence. Rene Girard of Stanford and others have argued that the Bible is the first text to present sacred violence from the perspective of the victim, and thus, paradoxically, it is the Bible itself that encourages

us to criticize its own stories of religious violence. Contrary to the *Gilgamesh Epic* that presents violence and chaos as our natural state, or Smith's conclusion that it is our implacable biological destiny, the Hebrew creation stories point to a good world created by a good God who creates humanity in his own image. Humanity is not destined to violence, but can freely choose to reject it.

Here are four examples in which religious violence is described and then simultaneously subverted by the Biblical story. In short, historical description is not a moral prescription.

### **Sibling Rivalry**

Only a few pages into the first book of the Bible, in Genesis 4, the first religious act by the first child of Adam and Eve led directly to the first murder. Cain and Abel offered their sacrifices to God. When God rejected the former's gift and accepted the latter's, we read that "Cain was very angry." Despite God's efforts to calm him down, the result is religious fratricide: "Cain attacked his brother Abel and killed him."

God's verdict about Cain's sacred violence is as true today as it was back then: "Your brother's blood cries out to me from the ground." A few pages later, God wept over the breadth and depth of our human violence. Yes, the story says, we *are* our brother's keeper.

Following the work of Freud and René Girard, Rabbi Jonathan Sacks locates the origins of religious violence in sibling rivalry and mimetic desire. Sibling rivalry is "the most primal form of violence," and "the dominant theme of the book of Genesis." We desire what others have, become rivals for it, and then fight to get it in what we wrongly think is a zero sum game. And so Jews, Christians and Muslims all claim to be the true heir of Abraham. We fight to be the sole inheritor of the divine promise.

In Sacks's "close reading" of these Genesis stories, sibling rivalry is revealed and then subverted. With Isaac and Ishmael we learn that "God chooses (Isaac), but he doesn't reject (Ishmael)." That is, election does not mean exclusion. The story of Jacob and Esau is "*the refutation of sibling rivalry in the Bible.*" Recall how Jacob returned the blessing that he stole from his blind father Isaac to Esau. The story of Joseph and his brothers who tried to kill him takes up a third of the book of Genesis, and in the end, the victim forgives and the perpetrators repent. Rachel and Leah exemplify the "rejection of rejection."

Sibling rivalry is natural, says Sacks, but it's not inevitable. Human beings cannot live without a group identity, and religion might be the

most powerful of them all. By definition, groups require an Us and a Them. There's no middle ground, no subtlety or nuance, only black and white, in and out. By nature, we extend altruism toward my In group, and hostility toward my Out group.

But here again the Hebrew revelation subverts our natural inclinations by commending a radical role reversal. Do not oppress the stranger, the people outside your group. Why? Because you know what it's like to be oppressed as a stranger in a strange land. Love your neighbor, protect the weak, care for widows and orphans, help the poor, speak up for those who have no voice. Do justice, love kindness. Don't long for power, for you can't impose faith or truth by force. For Sacks, as with Walzer, Berrigan, and Ellul (below), religion is an anti-politics that lives without power. Instead, it compels by example.

Demographers tell us that people of religion will increase in the coming decades, whereas secular populations will decrease. We must reclaim our common humanity that takes precedence over our religious differences. However powerful the natural impulse, we don't have to desire what my rival has, says Sacks, because "it is for what we uniquely are that we are all loved by God." So, whereas the roots of human violence are found in religion, so too is its subversion, for, as

we shall see, the original Abrahamic promise was that "through you *all* the families of the earth will be blessed."[\[127\]](#)

## **Texts of Terror**

In 1984 Phyllis Trible published a book called *Texts of Terror* that explored the Bible's cruel treatment of women. Since then, the title of her book has served as shorthand for all sorts of violence that we find in the Bible. In his own study, Philip Jenkins, professor at Penn State University, tackles the most terrifying texts of all, those in which God commands his people to exterminate their enemies without mercy. In a table he lists nineteen disturbing texts.

For example, there's Deuteronomy 7:1-2: "Thou shalt smite them, and utterly destroy them; thou shalt make no covenant with them, nor show mercy unto them... Do not leave alive anything that breathes — completely destroy them."

The bloody book of Joshua begins with the death of Moses and the ascension of Joshua, his aide-de-camp. The first half of the book is a triumphalistic history of military conquests. The second half of the book details the division of the conquered lands among the twelve tribes of Israel.

Moses had led Israel out of Egyptian bondage, whereas under Joshua the oppressed became the new oppressors. His military campaigns "left no survivors. He totally destroyed all who breathed" (Joshua 10:40). Cities were burned, vanquished kings were publicly hanged, wealth was plundered, and peoples were enslaved. "Extermination without mercy" (11:20) was the stated goal, "not sparing anyone that breathed." (11:14). A divine mandate was the putative rationale.

This religious legitimization of violence came at a steep price. Instead of political sanity, the reign of Joshua was followed by madness and mayhem—the period of the judges. In a single generation after the death of Joshua, Israel descended into 400 years of anarchy where, in the words of the very last sentence of the book, "every person did what was right in his own eyes" (Judges 21:25, 17:6). Israel's genocides had unleashed the dark forces of self-destruction.

In its religious life "the word of the Lord was rare" (1 Samuel 3:1).

Idolatry was rampant. Debauchery characterized civic morality.

Judges chapter 19 records the murder of a nameless woman who was gang raped all night and then dismembered, a crime so heinous that it subsequently provoked civil war. "Think about it!" exclaims the

exasperated narrator, "Consider it! Tell us what to do!" (Judges 19:30).

In 1 Samuel 15, God instructed Saul, "Go, attack the Amalekites and totally destroy everything that belongs to them. Do not spare them; put to death men and women, children and infants, cattle and sheep, camels and donkeys." When Saul disobeyed the genocidal command and spared the Amalekite king Agag, Samuel then did the deed: he "hewed Agag in pieces before the Lord in Gilgal." For his disobedience, God rejected Saul as king of Israel.

David beheads Goliath and then parades his head in Jerusalem. 1 Kings 18 recalls Elijah's mass murder of 450 prophets of Baal.

Today we would call these stories war crimes or crimes against humanity. Believers have developed numerous strategies to read these texts of terror. Consider these various alternatives.

Practically speaking, most people ignore them. An early bishop named Marcion (c. 85–160) rejected the violent deity of the Old Testament in favor of the heavenly father of Jesus. Other readers dismiss them as the crude stories of a savage antiquity. Some people appeal to a divine wisdom that's incomprehensible to mere mortals. Still others argue that enemies like the Canaanites were evil and deserved their

fate. Many people observe that texts of terror are a problem for most all religions, and that, on par, no one religion is worse than another when it comes to sacred violence. Other interpreters read these texts with a degree of historical scepticism and not as eyewitness reportage. Early Christian exegetes like Origen employed allegorical interpretations. It's also true that a religion is more than its texts, that a minority of extremists don't represent the mainstream majority, and that the causes of violence can't be reduced to religion alone. In his book *The Evolution of God* (2009), Robert Wright argues that religion has evolved from the barbaric polytheistic deities of the Stone Age to the benevolent monotheistic god of the three Abrahamic faiths. Finally, the Bible's historical descriptions of violence don't necessarily imply ethical prescription for us today.

Jenkins argues that all these strategies of selective editing aren't helpful or even necessary. Rather, we should read, absorb, comprehend, and even preach these texts of terror. Since these texts were written about five hundred years after the purported events, and since they enjoy little to no archaeological support, Jenkins says we should "treat these stories with real [historical] scepticism."

He urges us to dig deeper for a core message: "The imagined war against outside peoples and customs symbolized a rejection of any and all things that distract or separate a people or an individual from God." In other words, however crudely expressed, the core truth of radical monotheism is that the absolute God deserves unconditional obedience from his chosen people.[\[128\]](#) Another way to state this is the absolute prohibition against all the many forms of idolatry (below).

### **Political Pathologies**

As the foundational documents of the nation of Israel, the thirty-nine books of the Old Testament are remarkably negative about political power, no matter who reigned. 1 Samuel 8 narrates the emergence of Israel's centralized, royal power. The people wanted a king "like the other nations." Samuel objected to their desire to mimic the pagan nations, he prayed to God, and was rebuffed by the people. He ceded to their request, but warned them of the harsh consequences to follow—the government would conscript their children for wars, make them domestic slaves, confiscate their land, and levy exorbitant taxes. Israel's first king, Saul, did all this and more. His successors were worse. In Solomon's case, religious sincerity was no guarantee of political or personal wisdom. In the end, the Biblical revelation about

Solomon is tragic, and thus subversive, regarding political power. The larger Bible context is even more so.

The political panorama of 1-2 Kings includes the reigns of forty kings and one queen (Athaliah in 2 Kings 11) in the 400 hundred years from the death of David to Israel's exile to Babylon in 586 BC. Only two kings received unqualified approval by the narrator (Hezekiah in 2 Kings 18:3 and Josiah in 22:2). With monotonous regularity, over thirty times he renders the ominous judgment that a king "did evil in the eyes of the Lord."

Instead of the glorification or legitimation of political power, this history of politics is unremittingly negative, in keeping with Samuel's dire warning in 1 Samuel 8. The narrative conveys a radical relativization, subversion and even judgment of Israel's politics, a remarkable feat when you consider that these are Israel's sacred writings and that such negative conclusions about royal power must have put the authors at some risk.[\[129\]](#)

In his meditations on the books of 1–2 Kings, the Jesuit priest, poet, and peace activist Daniel Berrigan wonders, how should we read these ancient texts about a territorial god who slaughtered his pagan enemies, and who punished his own people when they disobeyed

genocidal commands? In what sense are these pages inspired? What do they tell us about politics, and why the endless stream of evil kings in the Good Book?

Berrigan reads 1–2 Kings as self-serving imperial records that portray Israel's kings as they saw themselves and wanted others to see them — God is with us and against our enemies. He blesses us with their treasure. No war crime is too heinous as a means to these delusional ends. And so on page after page we see hell on earth. There is one political end, says Berrigan: *extra imperium nulla salus*, "outside the empire there is no salvation." There are many pathological means to this self-serving end: untrammelled imperial ego, political power with absolute impunity, military might, revisionist history, manipulation of memory and time, grandiose building projects, economic exploitation, virulent nationalism, and, sanctioning it all with divine approval, religious legitimation.

In 1–2 Kings, Berrigan concludes, the Bible is thus "deconstructing" itself; "the medium itself is the message." A few dissenting voices object to imperial power, but they are silenced as unpatriotic and seditious (cf. Jeremiah and Amos). Only with the eighth-century prophets are these "official" texts amended so that we see and hear

the real perspective of Yahweh about justice, kindness, and humility for all peoples everywhere.[\[130\]](#)

In his panoramic study of Israel's history and literature, Michael Walzer, professor emeritus at Princeton's Institute for Advanced Study, explores the covenants, the legal codes, the conquest and holy wars, the kings and prophets, exile and priests, wisdom literature, and then messianism. His most provocative conclusion echoes both Berrigan and Ellul, that while the Hebrew Bible contains a lot about politics, it isn't really interested in politics. Rather, it presents us with a radical anti-politics.

Since God is sovereign, caesar is secondary. The prophets, for example, are poets of social justice and the most important form of public speech in Israel, but they're not political activists with any program. With their emphasis on divine intention as opposed to human wisdom, the prophets exemplify the Hebrew Bible's "radical denial of the doctrine of self-help." The prophets "disdain" politics, Walzer argues. In contrast to Greek philosophers, "the Biblical writers never attach great value to politics as a way of life." Politics is simply "not recognized by the Biblical writers as a centrally important or humanly fulfilling activity."

In place of radically relativized politics, the Hebrew Bible commends an ethic or way of life, as in Micah 6:8: do justice, love kindness, walk humbly with your God. Protect the weak, feed the poor, free the slaves, and welcome the alien. The sovereign God calls each one of us to a larger community that's characterized by "fellow feeling." That is, we trust ourselves to God alone and are responsible for each other. [\[131\]](#)

### **The Most Dangerous Idol**

Political idolatry is bad enough, but the most powerful idol of all is religion itself. No one pounded away at this point more than the Swiss theologian Karl Barth (1886–1968). What at first seems like the greatest good, our human impulse to the divine, can become our worst enemy, precisely because we try to take possession of God, as it were. And so in his commentary on Romans, Barth insisted that “no human demeanor is more open to criticism, more doubtful, or more dangerous, than religious demeanor. No undertaking subjects men to so severe a judgment as the undertaking of religion.” [\[132\]](#)

A recurring theme in Richard Holloway’s history of religion is what he calls "the most important insight into God ever discovered by humans"—the prohibition against idolatry. “Do not turn to idols or

make metal gods for yourselves,” says Leviticus 19:4, “for I am the Lord your God.”[\[133\]](#)

There are four versions of the Ten Commandments—Exodus 20 and 34, Leviticus 19, and Deuteronomy 5. The telling of this ancient story is remarkable for its honesty. Despite the second "Word" not to make an idol of God, a few pages later that's exactly what the people did: "Come, make us gods who will go before us" (Exodus 32:1).

Before Moses ever descended Mount Sinai with the Ten Commandments, the Hebrews grew impatient. They begged Aaron for a golden calf. They built an altar so they could bow down to their "gods of gold." In this ancient story, so evocative with contemporary applications, the people worshiped a golden god, sacrificed to it, "indulged in revelry," and proclaimed national celebrations.

And so Holloway's rather Barthian claim: The "real target" of the ancient prohibitions against idolatry was *religion itself*. "And not just the kind that got people dancing around a golden calf. It was warning us that no religious system could capture or contain the mystery of God. Yet in history, that's exactly what many of them would go on to claim. The Second Commandment was an early warning that the organizations that claimed to speak for God would become God's

greatest rivals, the most dangerous idol of them all." The commandment about idolatry would thus save us from our besetting sin of religious presumption that leads directly to sacred violence: "You shall not misuse the name of the Lord."

To bestow a name, to use a name, or to know a name, is an "expression of control." When Adam and Eve named the animals in Genesis, they expressed their "dominion" over them. When conquering nations subdued an enemy, they often changed their names as a sign of subjugation (cf. the book of Daniel).[\[134\]](#)

Despite the casual confidence of our religious speech and practices, control or dominion over the name of God is precisely what no person can ever have. The thought itself is blasphemous. Coogan gives two examples.

When Jacob asks the divine messenger to tell him his name, the response is evasive, "Why do you ask my name?" Similarly, when Manoah asks the angel of the Lord, "What is your name?" the reply is similar: "Why do you ask my name? It is beyond understanding." These two examples echo God's famously evasive response to Moses, who had also asked about God's name: "I am who I am."

And so some Jews today still honor the mysterious, the inexpressible, and the inviolable name of "God" (YHWH) by not even pronouncing it. Instead, they substitute the word "adonay" or "Lord." Or sometimes an observant Jew might refer to God as *Hashem* — "The Name." That's as close as a mere mortal dare in claiming to name the divine.

The third commandment about the name of God warns us not only about our idolatrous presumptions that lead to the legitimation of violence on behalf of a God whom we think is uniquely on our side. It reminds us of the limits of human language when we speak about the Wholly Other Absolute. I noted in an earlier chapter how CS Lewis captures the practical implications of this in his *Footnote to All Prayers*.

He whom I bow to only knows to whom I bow  
When I attempt the ineffable Name, murmuring Thou,  
And dream of Pheidian fancies and embrace in heart  
Symbols (I know) which cannot be the thing Thou art.  
Thus always, taken at their word, all prayers blaspheme  
Worshiping with frail images a folk-lore dream,  
And all men in their praying, self-deceived, address  
The coinage of their own unquiet thoughts, unless

Thou in magnetic mercy to Thyself divert  
Our arrows, aimed unskillfully, beyond desert;  
And all men are idolaters, crying unheard  
To a deaf idol, if Thou take them at their word.  
Take not, O Lord, our literal sense. Lord, in thy great  
Unbroken speech our limping metaphor translate.

This isn't the last thing or the only thing we can say about the inexpressible Name of the infinite God, but it should be the first. Our inherent religiosity, along with our propensity to create God in our own image and even justify violence in his name, is so strong and dangerous that Barth called the gospel *revelation* the *Aufhebung* of human *religion* — its abolition, annulment, or invalidation. True, our religiosity contains much that is good, and not only what is evil. But Barth was repudiating Hitler, who claimed divine sanction, and his seminary professors, who supported Hitler's genocidal program, so his warning is well taken—divine revelation and human religion are not the same thing.

These limitations can be a liberation. I no longer have to pretend that I fully understand God. The mystery of prayer becomes something to

honor rather than to explain. I don't even need to be right, for in his "magnetic mercy" God will translate "my limping metaphors."

In order to avoid our self-serving and violent portrayals of God, some people go to an opposite extreme and affirm the divine in language that's so opaque that they've hardly said anything at all. The philosopher John Hick, for example, refused to use the word "God," and instead substituted "the Ultimately Real." Einstein referred to Cosmic Awe. Interestingly, some of the most vociferous *anti*-atheists invoke language for God that is barely even religious.

In his book *Reason, Faith and Revolution*, Terry Eagleton "recoils from the idolatrous appropriations" of God, whether they come from television evangelists or extremist mullahs. He's written one of the best (and most colorful) repudiations of atheists like Dawkins and Hitchens. But for Eagleton, God is not the "meddling reality of the Hebrew Bible," and certainly not the Father of the incarnate Son of God. Instead, he's more like "an aristocratic vapor," says James Wood, a "rarefied God whom no one, other than [people like] them, actually believes in."

Similarly, in his book *Saving God*, the philosopher Mark Johnston of Princeton rejects idolatrous notions of God as our personal patron. But

his definition of "the ideally non-idolatrous God" epitomizes an arcane academic formula: "The Highest One = the Outpouring of Existence Itself by way of its exemplification in ordinary existents for the sake of the self-disclosure of Existence Itself."[\[135\]](#)

This sort of religious speech has a firm belief in an innocuous divinity. It doesn't expect that God will speak or act in human affairs, intercede in your life, providentially guide human history, care for a loved one, heal the hurts we suffer, make something out of nothing, or do the impossible—all affirmations repeated throughout the Hebrew psalms.

Hick, Einstein, Eagleton, and Johnston avoid the presumptions of idolatry, but at a high price. Their arcane alternatives are far removed from the Jewish and Christian Scriptures, not to mention the everyday longings of ordinary people. In contrast, there's a consensual Christian tradition that affirms both the transcendence of God as Wholly Other and Truly Mysterious, and his immanence as a Loving Father who is near to each one of us. In both the Jewish and Christian Scriptures, God is both infinite and intimate.

### **God Infinite, God Intimate**

Among Western churches, both Protestant and Catholic, the first Sunday after Pentecost is Trinity Sunday. It's a day when Christians

confess the triune nature of the one true God.

Many liturgies on Trinity Sunday include the sixth-century Athanasian Creed, that "we worship one God in trinity, and trinity in unity; neither confounding the persons; nor dividing the essence." We don't know who wrote the Athanasian Creed, but it's careful to make both affirmations and denials. Christians affirm the unity and co-equality of the Godhead: we worship and glorify not only the Father, but also the Son and the Holy Spirit. We deny both tritheism — that we worship three gods, and subordinationism — that the Son or the Spirit are subordinate to the Father.

Whereas Protestants and Catholics affirm the Athanasian Creed, it has never enjoyed widespread use in Eastern Orthodoxy. This is strange, because Eastern theologians like the Cappadocian fathers of the fourth-century — Basil the Great of Caesarea, his brother Gregory of Nyssa, and their friend and bishop of Constantinople Gregory Nazianzus, made major contributions to the doctrine of the trinity.

When Eastern Orthodox believers celebrate the Trinity, they start in a different place than their western cousins. And it's a good place to start when worshipping God. Western theology can tend toward intellectual abstraction. Eastern theology emphasizes adoration of the

mystery. It has always been wary of the inadequacies of human language, the limitations of the human mind, our propensity to religious idolatry, and the infinity of God.

The desert father and intellectual Evagrius of Pontus (345–399), who spent the last sixteen years of his life among unlettered Coptic peasants in the harsh Egyptian desert, once observed: "God cannot be grasped by the mind. If he could be grasped he would not be God."

Similarly, the Syrian monk and bishop John of Damascus (676–749) wrote in his *Exposition of the Christian Faith* (I.4): "It is plain, then, that there is a God. But what he is in his essence and nature is absolutely incomprehensible and unknowable. God then is infinite and incomprehensible; and all that is comprehensible about him is his incomprehensibility."

Evagrius and John of Damascus emphasize the radical transcendence of the infinite God, in Barth's language, the Godness of God. Recall how Isaiah feared death when he saw the holy God "high and exalted." The seraphs covered their faces, earthquakes shook the foundations, and thick smoke filled the temple. "Woe to me! I am ruined! I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the Lord Almighty."

But God's radical transcendence is only part of what Christians celebrate on Trinity Sunday. God is surely infinite, but he's also intimate. He is master of the cosmos, so much so that we relate to him with a sense of “vertigo” befitting “two totally incommensurable being,” but he is also full of sweetness and tenderness toward all.[\[136\]](#)

Because God is “immeasurable,” spiritual, incomprehensible, and infinite, said the French reformer John Calvin, we “ought to be afraid to try to measure him by our own senses.” Instead, the infinite God condescends to our human finitude and “slight capacity” by using baby talk with us. He “lisps with us as nurses are wont to do with little children. Such modes of expression, therefore, do not so much express what kind of a being God is, as accommodate the knowledge of him to our feebleness. In doing so, he must, of course, stoop far below his proper height.”[\[137\]](#)

Two ancient Hebrew women remind us of this sweet immanence of a tender God.

Hagar, the Egyptian slave of Abraham and Sarah, once felt alone and abandoned. Sarah was barren, so she commanded Abraham to produce a child with Hagar. He consented, was successful, and Ishmael was born. But when “Sarah treated Hagar harshly,” the

powerless and pregnant maid fled. In the tenderness of God, “the angel of the Lord found her” in the desert by a spring of water, and promised her that God had heard her cries for help and given heed to her affliction. Her son's name would always remind her of this, for *Ishmael* means “God hears.” Hagar worshipped Yahweh, saying, “Thou art a God who sees me,” and named the well there *Beer Lahai Roi*, “the well of the Living One who sees me.”

God not only sees, he hears. The story of Hannah about the birth of Samuel echoes similar stories about barren women who gave birth to a special child late in life due to the special favor of God—Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel, Samson's unnamed mother, and Elizabeth in Luke's gospel. Hannah's Song exudes gratitude and thanks: "My heart rejoices in the Lord; / in the Lord my horn is lifted high." This might well be a literary model for Mary's Magnificat. God reversed Hannah's bad fortune. He remembered her "bitterness of soul... much weeping... deep troubles ... and great anguish." And so in 1 Samuel 1:20, Hannah named her baby Samuel, "Because I asked the Lord for him." The name *Samuel* means "God has heard."

In a shocking affirmation of God's tender care for every person and for all the world, Scripture compares him to a loving father. In writing to

the believers in Rome and Galatia, Paul contrasts two ways of relating to God. We don't relate to God as a slave who fears a master, but as a child who feels safe with a father: "*Abba*, Father" (Romans 8:15, Galatians 4:6). "*Abba*" is the Aramaic word used by Jesus that means something like "Papa." The word is used only three times in the New Testament, and conveys a shocking sense of human intimacy with the divine Infinite. It's a word that little children first learning to speak used for their father, and that Jesus himself used to speak to God in Mark 14:36.

Every person is included in this divine intimacy. In Ephesians, Paul makes a clever phonetic play on words to this effect. God, says Paul, is the *patera* of every *patria* — the "father (*patera*) from whom every family (*patria*) derives its name" (1:14–15). God isn't the God of Jews alone, or the private possession of Christians. Rather, he's the "father of all fatherhood," the "father of every family," or the "father of the whole human family." He's the God of Muslims, Buddhists, and atheists. In a marvelously mysterious phrase, Paul expands God's patrilineage even further; he says that God is the father of "every family *in heaven and on earth*." God's fatherly love isn't limited to the morally upright. Matthew says that God "makes his sun rise on the evil

and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous" (5:45). Truly, we are one human family with a single divine Father.

In her poem *Immersion*, Denise Levertov (1923–1997), explores this human intimacy with the divine infinite.

There is anger abroad in the world, a numb thunder,  
because of God's silence. But how naive,  
to keep wanting words we could speak ourselves,  
English, Urdu, Tagalog, the French of Tours, the French of Haiti.  
Yes, that was one way omnipotence chose  
to address us-Hebrew, Aramaic, or whatever the patriarchs  
chose in their turn to call what they heard. Moses  
demanded the word, spoken and written. But perfect freedom  
assured other ways of speech. God is surely  
patiently trying to immerse us in a different language,  
events of grace, horrifying scrolls of history  
and the unearned retrieval of blessings lost for ever,  
the poor grass returning after drought, timid, persistent.  
God's abstention is only from human dialects. The holy voice  
utters its woe and glory in myriad musics, in signs and portents.  
Our own words are for us to speak, a way to ask and to answer.

Sometimes it feels like the Wholly Other God abstains from our world in silence. But maybe that's because we expect him to conform to our own limited language. And sometimes God speaks directly and simply, like he did when he spoke to Moses "face to face." But God is also perfectly free, Levertov reminds us, and so he has "others ways of speech" and "myriad musics."

Bartholomew I, the Ecumenical Patriarch and spiritual leader over all the Eastern Orthodox churches, captures both God's transcendence and immanence in his book *Encountering the Mystery* (2008): "God as unknowable and yet as profoundly known; God as invisible and yet as personally accessible; God as distant and yet as intensely present. The infinite God thus becomes truly intimate in relating to the world."

We're challenged to hold together two complementary and perhaps contradictory truths in a paradox. On the one hand, we're encouraged to love and speak of God freely and fully, in our own limited ways, as little children to their loving father. But being human, we're also always aware of how far short we fall in that endeavor. We have here both our invitation and our impossibility.

And so Jesus taught us to pray to God as "our Father," but nonetheless a Father "who art in heaven," and not a mere earthly

divinity. And similarly, in the Apostles Creed, we confess our belief in “God, the Father Almighty.” He’s not exactly a safe God, said CS Lewis, but nonetheless he’s a perfectly good God. He’s a Holy God who is also the Heavenly Father of every human being. He’s a God who speaks and acts, who hears and loves, who, in the words of the psalmist, “is loving toward all he has made” (145:3).

### **In the Beginning**

In the Apostles’ Creed, Christians confess that God is the “maker of heaven and earth.” The later Nicene Creed is far more mysterious and interesting: “the creator of all things visible and invisible.” Both of these confessions echo the earlier language of Colossians 1:16, that in Christ “all things were created, things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things have been created through him and for him.”

The creation story in Genesis doesn't enlighten us about history or science as we understand those disciplines today. How could it? That's not the purpose of this poetry. For cosmology we go with gratitude to the physicists, although it's worth noting that when it comes to the ultimate origins of Something rather than Nothing, and why there's sentient Life rather than merely inanimate Matter,

scientists remain just as ignorant as theologians.[\[138\]](#) As Barth said tongue in cheek, “it doesn’t matter whether the serpent really spoke; all that matters is what the serpent *said*.”

Rather, the ancient creation poetry articulates beliefs that transcend science and that deconstruct our own modern myths — like the illusions that we are destined to violence or determined by biology; [\[139\]](#) Carl Sagan's grave intonation on his show *Cosmos* that the universe is all there ever has been, is, or ever will be; that the world is the random result of blind chance even though everywhere we look we discover anthropic design; or that it's a geocentric conceit to construe planet earth and human beings as somehow special in the order of things.[\[140\]](#)

Genesis affirms our common humanity in Adam, our common home on earth, and God’s promise to bless the entire world through the one man Abraham. The story begins with yet another profound subversion of what we might expect, and despite all the suffering and evil that we know and experience—fratricide, texts of terror, the pathologies of politics, and self-serving idolatries.

Despite all this, Genesis insists that just as God is inherently good, so is all that he created. Every person is his child, created in his image

and deserving of unqualified dignity. This likeness cannot be lost, no matter how much it is ignored or marred. Nothing good will ever be lost, and nothing evil will remain. Even if Christians have lost the thread of this bold narrative, how could it ever be otherwise?

One of the most important questions that a person can ask is whether the cosmos is a friendly place, whether they feel at home in God's world. The Gilgamesh epic describes evil and chaos as intrinsic to the nature of reality. Christians have often construed our world as hostile, alien, and evil, and taught our children to regard it with suspicion.

Pleasure, especially any form of sensual pleasure like sex, is deemed suspect. In such a scheme, only a future heaven saves us from the present evil world. [\[141\]](#)

Genesis speaks of sin, separation, and alienation—from God, from ourselves, from each other, and even from the earth. Adam and Eve shame and blame. Cain murders Abel. Lamech boasts of vengeance. Drunken Noah lays naked in his tent. God weeps for his creation that is “full of violence.” There's a catastrophic flood. Babel becomes a confusion of languages and a symbol of humanity's hubris. There are dreadful lies: “you shall not die.”

These negative notes are important themes that Christians rightly confess and should never ignore or deny. They inform part of the creation story. We experience them in our lives every day. For creation's "fall" from divine grace, pick up the daily newspaper, speak to a wise therapist, or contemplate our environmental catastrophes and genocides. Having lived through two world wars, the American pastor and theologian Reinhold Niebuhr (1892–1971) broke with the optimistic liberalism of his colleagues and instead insisted that human sin was a most empirically verifiable doctrine.

But prior to and more important than original sin is Original Goodness. Despite all the dark shadows, the essential goodness of all creation is the most conspicuous theme in this story. On the successive days of creation, Genesis repeats the same refrain seven times, that everything God created is good:

Light: "God saw that the light was good" (1:3).

Land and seas: "God saw that it was good" (1:10).

Vegetation: "God saw that it was good" (1:12).

Sun, moon, and stars: "God saw that it was good" (1:19).

Living creatures and birds: "God saw that it was good" (1:21).

Livestock and wild animals: "God saw that it was good" (1:25).

On the sixth day, "God saw all that he had made, and it was *very good*" (1:31).

Satisfied with his "vast array" of created goodness, on the seventh day "God rested from all his work." Chapter two of Genesis continues the refrain. In 2:9 the trees are "pleasing to the sight and good for food." In 2:12 we read that "the gold of that land is good." In this context it is conspicuous that it is "not good" for man to be alone, and so God blessed him with a co-equal mate.

To early Christians who abstained from marriage, sex, and certain foods, the apostle Paul was blunt: "Everything that God created is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving" (1 Timothy 4:4). The world-denying outlook that he discovered at Colossae, —"Do not handle! Do not taste! Do not touch!," received a similar rebuke (2:21).

Early believers also rejected the idea of "docetism" (from the Greek word "to seem") that claimed that Jesus' physical body was an illusion that only "seemed" real — a misguided effort to protect Jesus from an evil material creation. They also denounced Marcion's idea of two gods---an Old Testament creator of an evil world, and a New Testament loving God of Jesus.

## The Problem of Evil

So, how are we to construe all the evil and suffering that we read about in the Bible and experience in our lives? *Moral* evils caused by our own free choices, like the Holocaust and sadistic tyrants.

*Natural* evils like congenital birth defects, diseases, and natural disasters like earthquakes and hurricanes. Nature “red in tooth and claw,” as Tennyson put it.

In Romans 8, Paul says that the whole creation struggles — with “anxious longing,” “subjection to futility,” “slavery to corruption,” and the “groans of childbirth.” Christians have developed several interpretive strategies to make sense of so much evil in a fundamentally good world.

Christians remained so convinced of the essential goodness of creation that they borrowed a technical term from the non-Christian, neo-Platonic philosopher Plotinus (204-270) to define evil. Evil, they said, wouldn't exist without the prior good. Evil is a parasite on good — a *privatio boni*, that is, a lack, limitation or distortion of something inherently good. Blindness, for example, is a corruption of vision.

In the mystery of God's providence, evil can also be an *instrument of good*. This is the radical conclusion of the fratricidal Joseph story,

which takes up a third of the book of Genesis (chapters 37-50). After ninety-three years of exile from his family, including thirteen years of imprisonment and false accusations of rape, Joseph reassured his nervous brothers: "Don't be afraid. Am I in the place of God? You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good." Not once, but four times, he told his sibling rivals that "it was not you who sent me to Egypt, but God" (Genesis 45:5, 7, 8, 9). In the end, the perpetrators repented and the victim forgave. It's a subversive idea, that nothing I experience happens without divine design. And so the words of the song *Like a River Glorious* by Frances Ridley Havergal, "Every joy or sorrow / Falleth from above / Traced upon our dial / By the Sun of love."

This idea of evil as a divine means to a greater good has a long history. In Romans 5:20 Paul writes that "where sin increased, grace increased all the more." No matter how horrendous the sin, evil, and suffering, the divine grace is greater.

As early as Irenaeus, Christians interpreted Genesis 3:15 and the enmity between Eve and the serpent as prefiguring Christ's victory over Satan. "God judged it better to bring good out of evil," wrote Augustine, "than to allow no evil to exist."[\[142\]](#) By the fifth century the

church affirmed that the Fall was a “fortunate crime” (*felix culpa*). On the evening before the Easter day celebration, churches that used the Roman Missal would sing in the liturgy, “Oh fortunate crime, which merited such and so great a Redeemer.”

The instrumental view that sees evil as a divine means to a greater end found later expression in any number of thinkers. Julian of Norwich (1342–1414), an English mystic who lived her life in total solitude, once wrote that “sin will be no shame but an honor.” For Frederick Buechner, “sin itself can be a means of grace.”<sup>[143]</sup> Similarly, Anthony deMello writes that “repentance reaches fullness when you are brought to gratitude for your sins.” Then Augustine once again, “even from my sins God has drawn good.”<sup>[144]</sup>

This is dangerous territory. There's a thin and mysterious line between honoring God's providence and calling black white and evil good. We should also be wary of enabling or excusing bad behaviors instead of correcting them. Nor should we ever turn a blind eye to injustice, as if it didn't matter, or would be addressed in a heavenly future. Perhaps the instrumental view of evil as used in God's providence is something that one can claim for yourself, but should never presume for another.

Evil and suffering deserve their due, but they are also only *partial*. They are an important part of life, but hardly the only part. Some people even flip the script, that if evil is difficult for the Christian to explain, then an explanation for the good is just as problematic for the unbeliever. HE Fosdick (1878–1969) once remarked, “The mystery of evil is very difficult when we believe in a good God, but the problem of goodness seems to us impossible when we don’t.”

Finally, evil and suffering are *penultimate*. However powerful and painful, they are not the last word, but only the next-to-the-last word on life. Paul, who experienced his share of suffering and died a martyr's death, writes that although today the creation groans and suffers with pain “too deep for words,” these present sufferings cannot compare with the future glory to be revealed. The creation itself (and not just humanity), although now subject to futility and frustration, “will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God” (Romans 8:18–27). When God “makes all things new,” he will wipe every tear from every eye, and “there will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain” (Revelation 7:17, 21:4–5). That is the ultimate destiny of God’s good creation.

The creation story reminds us not to fall into the dualist thinking that the "spiritual" world is good and that the material world is evil. We should never deny sin, suffering, and evil, but we should remember that they are penultimate rather than ultimate realities. Brian Wren's poem *Good is the Flesh* captures these creation-affirming truths:

Good is the flesh that the Word has become,  
good is the birthing, the milk in the breast,  
good is the feeding, caressing and rest,  
good is the body for knowing the world,  
Good is the flesh that the Word has become.

Good is the body for knowing the world,  
sensing the sunlight, the tug of the ground,  
feeling, perceiving, within and around,  
good is the body, from cradle to grave,  
Good is the flesh that the Word has become.

Good is the body, from cradle to grave,  
growing and aging, arousing, impaired,  
happy in clothing, or lovingly bared,  
good is the pleasure of God in our flesh,  
Good is the flesh that the Word has become.

Good is the pleasure of God in our flesh,

longing in all, as in Jesus, to dwell,  
glad of embracing, and tasting, and smell,  
good is the body, for good and for God,  
Good is the flesh that the Word has become. [\[145\]](#)

As a divinely created entity that's distinct from God, our earth is sacred but not divine. Furthermore, our earth is dependent and contingent, and will not last forever, even if it lasts 4–5 billion more years as astrophysicists predict. That's a very long time, but it's not forever. In this long interim, planet earth is a good gift from God for us to cherish and protect. In Tolkien's memorable phrase, we're called to fight the long defeat as long as God gives us breath.

## **Creation Care**

Our responsibility for the preservation of our planet is as important as its original creation. Most remarkable of all, when God finished his creative activity, he "rested." He then turned to humankind created in his own image, as his stewards, and said, "here, now it is yours, to populate, steward, rule over, and manage, but not to plunder, neglect or exploit." Whereas creation was God's divine act, preservation is our distinctly human responsibility. It's up to us to care for the goodness of God's gift of creation.

The second encyclical by Pope Francis took its title from *The Canticle of the Creatures* by his namesake Francis of Assisi, who wrote, "*Laudato Si', mi' Signore*—Praise to you, my Lord, through our Sister, Mother Earth, who sustains and governs us, and who produces various fruit with colored flowers and herbs." But our sister now cries out to us because of the violence we have done to her, says Pope Francis, in our "irresponsible use and abuse of the goods with which God has endowed her."

The list is long and well known — climate change, depletion of non-renewable resources, the loss of biodiversity, and a growing gap between the minority rich who are addicted to "compulsive consumerism," and the poor who can't possibly consume like we do, even were it possible. Our current situation cannot be universalized or sustained.

We've succumbed to the "modern myth of unlimited material progress," says Pope Francis, to the alluring power of the "technocratic paradigm," the numbing of conscience, and an economic model that maximizes profits without any greater end in view.<sup>[146]</sup> But we now know, or we ought to know, that technological progress and economic growth do not guarantee human well-being.

What we need most is a change in our own selves. That begins, says Francis, with realizing that we are one human family living together on a common home. "It cannot be emphasized enough how everything is interconnected." We can no longer make choices or policies that defend the interests of only a few countries, or even the few within a single country. The earth is our "collective good." Indeed, "this sense of fraternity excludes nothing and no one."

Pope Francis addresses his encyclical to "all people of good will," but he has special counsel for Christians. What we need is an "ecological conversion," whereby "the effects of our encounter with Jesus Christ become evident in our relationship with the world around us. Living our vocation to be protectors of God's handiwork is essential to a life of virtue; *it is not an optional or a secondary aspect of our Christian experience.*"[\[147\]](#)

## **Israel for All**

In a superficial reading, the Genesis story seems to pivot sharply at 12:1, from the creation of the entire cosmos in chapters 1-11 to the formation of a single nation with the call of Abraham. But upon closer inspection, there's more continuity than discontinuity.

After the catastrophic flood, God gave a promise to Noah “for all generations to come,” that he would bless “every living creature” and “all life on earth.”[\[148\]](#) Note how this divine promise encompasses all time and space, and it’s repeated to Abraham, his descendants, and his nation. Yes, the promise brings privilege, but it most especially brings responsibility.

About 4,000 years ago, the obscure nomad Abraham started hearing voices. In time, he believed that those voices constituted a call from God, and so he dared to obey those voices. "Leave your country," God told Abraham. "Leave your people and your family. Leave all that you hold dear and familiar. Go to the land I will show you."

"So Abraham left, as the Lord had told him." He couldn't have known it at the time, but in leaving Haran, Abraham altered human history forever. God gave him a promise that was just as expansive as the one to Noah:

I will make you into a great nation

and I will bless you;

I will make your name great,

and you will be a blessing.

I will bless those who bless you,

and whoever curses you I will curse;  
And all peoples on earth  
will be blessed through you. (Genesis 12:2-3)

Fast forward two thousand years. In Romans 3:29 Paul, that “Hebrew of Hebrews,” asked a provocative question: is God the God of Jews only? Or is he not also the God of Gentiles? In contrast to every human attempt to claim God as ours, and ours alone, Paul said that in Abraham God intends to bless all of humanity equally.

And fast forward another two thousand years to today. In his book *My Promised Land* (2013), the Israeli journalist Ari Shavit argues that Israel’s long history is one of “core contradictions” and deep ambiguity. It is a nation of both triumph and tragedy.

The triumph is obvious. After three thousand years of history, after exodus from Egypt and exile to Babylon, annihilation and assimilation, the ancient Jews have a modern state. In his five-episode *Story of the Jews* (2014), the historian Simon Schama of Columbia University admits that this feels something like a “miracle.” About forty percent of the world's Jews live in Israel. Another forty percent live in the United States.

The tragedy is likewise obvious. Modern Israel was founded by the violent expulsion and subjugation of 700,000 Palestinians. Its ethical idealism struggles with the political realities of raw power. In the documentary film *The Gatekeepers* (2012), which interviews all six living former heads of Shin Bet, Israel's secretive security agency that's the rough equivalent of the CIA, one of them remarks, "We've become a cruel people." John Kerry once observed that Israel risks becoming an "apartheid state." Shavit himself describes his experience as a jailer for the IDF in a Gaza detention camp, guarding prisoners in barbed-wire cages.

The ancient Bible isn't a blueprint for modern politics. We shouldn't expect Genesis or Paul to prognosticate about contemporary Israel. But somehow we need to connect the ancient and modern horizons of the Abrahamic people.

Michael Walzer of Princeton notes that Israel began with two different but related covenants — one with Abraham based upon kinship, family, and birthright as a chosen people, and another with Moses, based upon a legal covenant, a nation, law, and a people who are chosen but who also must freely choose. [\[149\]](#)

In Romans 9–11, Paul considers what it means for the nation of Israel to be the people of God. In doing so, he redefines both the Abrahamic and Mosaic covenants.

As for Abrahamic lineage, he writes, "they are not all Israel who are descended from Israel, neither are they all children because they are Abraham's descendants" (9:6–7). And Paul was famous for his insistence that no person will be justified before God by keeping the Mosaic law.

To the Galatians and the Colossians Paul wrote that "there is neither Jew nor Gentile, for you are all one in Christ Jesus." To the Ephesians he wrote that Jesus "made the two groups [Jews and Gentiles] one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility."

Jesus said similar things. "Do not think you can say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham." Observant Jews complained that Jesus ignored the Mosaic law and welcomed ritually impure Gentiles. And the first and most divisive flash point for the first believers, who were a tiny sect of Judaism, was whether Gentile converts had to observe the Mosaic law.

Whatever its many theological and political ambiguities, ancient and modern, Paul insists that Israel's election as God's people is "irrevocable" (11:29). And their divine election came with a specific vocation—the inclusion of the world.

When God called Abraham to form a people for himself, he said that he would bless not only Israel, but "all peoples on earth" (Genesis 12:3, 22:18). When he repeated his covenant to Isaac, he reiterated verbatim his inclusive intentions for all the world: "in you, Isaac, all nations on earth will be blessed" (Genesis 26:5). And when Jacob used a rock for a pillow and dreamed a dream at Bethel, God again repeated verbatim: "In you, Jacob, all peoples on earth will be blessed" (28:14).

There's a simultaneous narrowing and expansion of God's action in history, a movement from the particular to the universal. God called a single individual, Abraham, formed of him one nation, and promised to bless all the world through him. There's a progressive expansion in God's promise. God vowed to make of Abraham a "great nation."

Paul described Abraham as a father of "many" nations (Romans 4:17 = Genesis 17:5). We then read that "all peoples on earth will be blessed through" Abraham (12:3). Paul describes Abraham as "the

father of us all" (Romans 4:16–17). So, through one particular person and nation God enacted his universal embrace of all humanity.

The most provocative point of Walzer's book, as we saw earlier, is that while the Hebrew Bible contains a lot about politics, it isn't really interested in politics. Rather, it presents us with a radical anti-politics. Since God is sovereign, caesar is secondary. The prophets, for example, were poets of social justice and the most important form of public speech in Israel, but they weren't political activists with any program. In contrast to Greek philosophers, says Walzer, "the Biblical writers never attach great value to politics as a way of life." Politics is simply "not recognized by the Biblical writers as a centrally important or humanly fulfilling activity."

In place of radically relativized politics, the people of God are called to a way of life, like Micah 6:8: do justice, love kindness, walk humbly with your God. Protect the weak, feed the poor, free the slaves, and welcome the alien. The sovereign God calls each one of us to a larger community that's characterized by what he calls "fellow feeling." That is, we trust ourselves to God alone and are responsible for each other.

For the Eucharist at my church, we gather around the altar. We begin by inviting the children to join us and singing a short song: "God

welcomes all, / strangers and friends. / His love is strong, / And it never ends."

That was Peter's lesson in Acts 10-11, that Abraham's God of the Jews "shows no favoritism." He "welcomes all." How radical is that divine inclusivity? It's so inclusive that even ritually impure Gentiles and pagan idolaters can become part of the Jewish people of God. And it's the vocation of Israel to reflect his character by welcoming all people everywhere.

Here again the Hebrew revelation subverts our natural inclinations to privilege our own identity group above all others by commending a radical role reversal. A recurring theme in Israel's history is the command not to oppress the stranger, the people outside your group. Why? Because you know what it's like to be oppressed as a stranger in a strange land (Exodus 22.21).

The Hebrew word *ger* (alien, immigrant) occurs 92 times in the Jewish Scriptures, along with similar words like *toshav* (migrant), *zar* (stranger or outsider), and *nocri* (foreigner). Don't oppress the stranger, have mercy on them, remember that you too were once aliens.

In his book *The Faith of the Outsider* (2005), Frank Spina shows how the Hebrew revelation often casts the insider-Jew in a negative light

and the outsider-foreigner as superior in faith or virtue. This inclusion of outsider stories, Spina argues, is "neither incidental nor haphazard in the biblical witness." His book explores seven stories where the outsider is mainlined and the insider is marginalized — Esau, Tamar, Rahab, Naaman, Jonah, Ruth, and the Samaritan woman at the well.

Similarly, in considering the "genius" or *esprit* of Judaism, Bernard-Henri Lévy focuses on the divine command to embrace the human Other. After surveying the "new guises" of anti-Semitism (Holocaust deniers, competitive victimhood, Israel as a problem), the contributions of Jews to French society, and the meaning of Jewish election or exceptionalism, the second half of his book considers the story of Jonah as a paradigm for Judaism. In Jonah, Levy sees "the secret universal." We must "stand in the shadow of Nineveh" (modern day Mosul!) and commit ourselves to the "other."[\[150\]](#)

For Jesus, the election of the Jews does not mean the exclusion of the Gentiles. Throughout the gospels, the Jewish Jesus embraced the unclean Gentiles — the Roman centurion, the Canaanite woman and her demon-possessed daughter, and Samaritans like the leper in Luke 17, the woman at the well in John 4, and the good Samaritan of Luke 10.

After his resurrection, Jesus told his followers to spread his good news "to all *nations* (Luke 24:48; cf. Matthew 28:19). Mark's parallel passage is even more emphatic — into "all *creation*" (Mark 16:15). And in Luke's sequel to his gospel, Jesus sends his people to "*the ends of the earth*." (Acts 1:8)—words that are redolent of the opening pages of Genesis and God's promise to bless all the world through Abraham.

As the King of the Jews, Jesus was the embodiment of Israel. As the son of Adam, and what Paul calls the "last" or second Adam (Romans 5), he encompasses our common humanity. As the descendant of Abraham, he fulfills God's promise to bless every family on earth. In the words of Paul, he will "reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven" (Colossians 1:20), and will recapitulate, *sum up*, or *bring together* "all things in heaven and on earth" (Ephesians 1:10).

What began in a garden in Genesis culminates in Revelation with the heavenly Jerusalem that descends to earth. It is a conspicuously international city: "The nations will walk by its light, and the kings of the earth will bring their splendor into it. The glory and honor of the nations will be brought into it" (21:24–26). Flowing through the city

center is a river, and on the banks of the river are "the tree of life," so evocative of that original tree of life in Eden, only this tree is not one of shame and guilt, for "the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations." (22:2).

The ancient promise to Abraham has become an empirical reality. Luke's Acts of the Apostles begins in Jerusalem, then expands geographically outward. Luke's final chapter ends with Paul imprisoned in the imperial city of Rome. Under house arrest, his last recorded prayer before martyrdom was a blessing for "all nations" (Romans 16:26).

### **For further reflection**

Henry Vaughan (1621-1695)

#### *The Revival*

Unfold! Unfold! Take in His light,  
Who makes thy cares more short than night.  
The joys which with His day-star rise  
He deals to all but drowsy eyes;  
And, what the men of this world miss  
Some drops and dews of future bliss.

Hark! How His winds have chang'd their note!

And with warm whispers call thee out;

The frosts are past, the storms are gone,

And backward life at last comes on.

The lofty groves in express joys

Reply unto the turtle's voice;

And here in dust and dirt, O here

The lilies of His love appear!

Henry Vaughan was a Welsh physician, poet, and translator. Around the age of thirty, Vaughan experienced a crisis and conversion, which he credited in part to the poetry of George Herbert. In the preface to the 1655 edition of his work *Silex Scintillans* he described Herbert as a “blessed man... whose holy *life* and *verse* gained many *Converts* (of whom I am the least).” Except for his studies in London and Oxford, Vaughan spent his entire life in rural Wales.

## Chapter Five Son of Adam

### The Irresistible Incomprehensible

Mary Gordon was once stuck in a taxi in New York City's rush hour traffic, and so forced to listen to the driver's Christian radio. An award-winning author and professor at Barnard College since 1988, Gordon has written fifteen novels, memoirs, and works of literary criticism. But listening to the radio that day filled her with "a clutch of anxiety and shame." She suddenly realized that she was almost sixty years old but had never read the four gospels straight through from Matthew to John.

Her memoir *Reading Jesus* (2009) is the result of that "disturbing and exhilarating enterprise." Gordon doesn't settle for a superficial reading. She questioned herself, asking, "do I really know what the Gospels are about, or have I invented a Jesus to fulfill my own wishes?"

She first describes what draws her to Jesus as the "irresistible incomprehensible." For example, the parable of the prodigal son emphasizes joy, but it also confronts us with a question: "are you envious because I am generous?" And so Jesus challenges us:

“perhaps everything we think in order to know ourselves as comfortable citizens of a predictable world is wrong.”

The second half of her book explores how Jesus offends as well as attracts. Although it's tempting to excise what you don't like from the Bible, Gordon is too honest for that. Miracles are a problem for post-Enlightenment moderns, but she would not delete them. Calls to asceticism and self-denial question her ideas about happiness and pleasure. The demand to "be perfect" sounds ideal but it's impossible. Apocalyptic language is violent, and encourages readers to see themselves as elect and their enemies as damned. John's anti-semitism and the divinity of Jesus complete her survey of problem passages. [\[151\]](#)

I live in a highly educated part of the world, but I would bet that Gordon isn't alone, and that many of my friends have never read the gospels. Other people have the opposite problem. They are overly familiar with the Jesus story. They struggle with pious cliches and sentimentality—the flannel graph Jesus of Sunday school, or the blond hair, blue-eyed Jesus in Warner Sallman's painting *The Head of Christ* (1940) that has been reproduced 500 million times the world over.

In this chapter I “read Jesus” with fresh eyes. At every step of the way, we encounter a Jesus who is the “irresistible incomprehensible.” What he signified, says the historian Garry Wills, “is always more challenging than we expect, more outrageous, more egregious.”<sup>[152]</sup> I begin with his two genealogies and three birth narratives.

### **Abraham and Adam<sup>[153]</sup>**

Jesus was a Jew. This is the most obvious and important thing to say about him, especially when we consider that for a while his movement was a purely Jewish sect, then for a long time now an entirely Gentile church, and one that has a sordid history of anti-semitism.

Nor was Jesus just any Jew. While Mark and John don’t include any birth narratives, for Matthew Jesus is “the king of the Jews.”<sup>[154]</sup> His story begins with the very first sentence of the New Testament and Matthew’s genealogy that calls Jesus “the son of Abraham.”

Matthew lists the names of forty-two men in three sets of fourteen generations, in ascending order from Abraham to Jesus. All nice and neat, religiously orthodox, and conveniently achieved by omitting four wicked kings in Israel’s history. Matthew burnishes Jesus's credentials for his Jewish readership by name-dropping Abraham and King David

—next to Moses, the two most important people in four thousand years of Jewish history. It's an ethnic lineage that's meant to impress.

But then we discover something subversive. Matthew includes five women in Jesus's family tree, all of whom have unusual stories.

*Tamar* was widowed twice, then became an incest survivor when her father-in-law Judah abused her as a prostitute. *Rahab* was a prostitute from enemy Jericho who protected the Hebrew spies by lying.

*Ruth* was a widow who married Boaz from the Moabites, who worshipped the god Chemosh, and whose story includes two other widows—her mother-in-law Naomi, and her sister-in-law Orpah.

*Bathsheba* was the object of David's adulterous passion and murderous cover-up. Then there's *Mary*, the mother of Jesus, unmarried and pregnant. [\[155\]](#)

If Jesus is the son of Abraham and the King of the Jews, why is Matthew including these salacious stories in his regal genealogy? A genealogy that at first seems religiously righteous includes social outcasts and the sexually suspicious. Their stories are about widows, second and third marriages, incest, prostitution, lying, murder, adultery, financial distress, foreign exclusion, geographic dislocation, and the pregnancy of an unwed teenager. Matthew repurposes these

stories so that they become part of God's revelation of love and redemption of the world. Jesus' family tree is rooted in the stories of these women, in family histories that look and feel like our own broken family stories.

Whereas for Matthew Jesus is the son of Abraham, the son of David, and the King of the Jews, Luke's genealogy does things much differently. Luke, who is the only Gentile author in the Bible, lists seventy-five names in descending order, from the most recent Joseph all the way back to God himself. His fourteen names from Abraham to David are identical to Matthew's list. The eighteen names from Heli to Zerubbabel are unknown to us except for this genealogy.

Luke traces Jesus' lineage back not just to the first patriarch Abraham, but to the first human being Adam. By the end of his genealogy, Jesus is ultimately "the son of Adam, the son of God." There is obvious and delightful word play in the original Hebrew text of the Genesis creation story. The first human *Adam* was created by God from the *adamah*, from the dust, dirt, earth, or ground.

Jesus is not only the King of the Jews, he's also the Son of Adam, or the son of all humanity. He's not born from or to a single nationality, or for a small group of religious insiders. Rather, his birth is good news

for every human being, starting with Adam and the beginning of time itself. His Jewish family history encompasses our entire common humanity.

Later, Paul will make an antithetical parallelism between Adam and Jesus as the representatives of all humanity. Just as sin, death, and suffering came to all humanity through the one man Adam, "*how much more* did God's grace and the gift that came by the grace of the one man, Jesus Christ, *overflow to the many!*" Just as Adam's one trespass brought condemnation to us all, the one act of righteousness by Jesus Christ "brings life for all people." Just as "in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive." Jesus is thus the "second Adam," "the last Adam," and "the second man," who reverses the dreadful human history that began with the first Adam. [\[156\]](#)

## **Birth Announcements**

The birth of Jesus was accompanied by disturbing dreams in Matthew, joyful songs in Luke, and a terrifying nightmare in Revelation.

There's a story about the baby Jesus that you'll never hear at Christmas. It disabuses us of all sentimentality. This birth narrative in the last book of the New Testament takes place in heaven rather than on earth. Instead of a bucolic story about a baby in a barn, this

apocalyptic vision explodes with horrifying images from a cosmic perspective. It's a young mother's worst nightmare. [\[157\]](#)

In John's book of Revelation, he describes "a great and wondrous sign in heaven." A pregnant woman is screaming in labor pains as she gives birth. Lurking in front of her spread legs is an enormous red dragon "with seven heads and ten horns and seven crowns on his head." He's positioned himself perfectly, "so that he might devour the child the moment it was born." Nonetheless, the woman does give birth. And not just to any baby. Her newborn baby is "a son, a male child, who will rule all the nations with an iron scepter."

Nor is this just any dragon. John identifies him as "that ancient serpent called the devil or Satan, who leads the whole world astray." He's the one who "accuses us before God day and night."

Having failed to devour the baby at birth, the dragon stalked his mother, who had flown on wings to the safety of the desert. In the desert, the dragon vomited a river of water "to overtake the woman and sweep her away with the torrent." That too failed, when the parched earth swallowed the waters and saved the mother. The enraged dragon then left her in order to "make war against the rest of her offspring," namely, those who "hold to the testimony of Jesus"—a

clear reference to Rome's persecution of the church at the end of the first century. [\[158\]](#)

John's apocalyptic vision of a satanic struggle feels far removed from the birth stories in Bethlehem. But upon closer inspection, and despite their obvious differences, there are disturbing similarities between John's cosmic story of a persecuted Messiah and church, Matthew's disturbing dreams, and Luke's provocative songs.

Matthew's story of the birth and infancy of Jesus includes five dreams. [\[159\]](#) Four of these dreams warn of king Herod's efforts to kill the baby Jesus, just as John's dragon was poised to devour the baby the moment he was born.

Why this clash between a Roman governor Herod and a peasant baby boy? What's so bad about the Eternal City of Rome? Didn't Rome give us roads that you can still walk on, a language, the rule of law, spectacular architecture that still stands, and the Pax Romana? Yes, but as we have already seen, Rome also martyred Christians (cf. Nero). Consider, too, the claims that were made for caesar in Matthew's day. Roman emperors assumed divine titles like "son of God", "lord" and even "god."

Matthew acknowledges that Herod is "the king of the Jews," but he also calls Jesus "the king of the Jews." He contrasts two rival kings who rule not only over one people (the Jews), but over all the world. One king must give way. Imperial Rome would have considered that rival claim of an alternate king an act of political sedition.

Herod "the Great" (73 BC–4 BC) had been given the title "King of the Jews" in 40 BC, and after consolidating his power he ruled over Judea for 33 years. Infamous for his brutality, the last thing he would allow was a rival over his Judean domain. He was so suspicious and insecure that he called a secret meeting of religious leaders and extracted information from them about the exact time and place of the birth of the rival king Jesus, knowledge that would later prove lethal.

[\[160\]](#)

There are actually five Herods in the New Testament, and every one of them persecuted the nascent Jesus movement. In addition to Herod the Great, there's his older son Archelaus born of his wife Malthace, who reigned only a few years and was deposed in 6 AD. Then there's Herod's younger son by Malthace, Herod the tetrarch, who is famous for murdering John the Baptist on a dinner party dare because John denounced his affair with his brother's wife, and for his encounter with Jesus at his trial. Fourth, there's Herod King Agrippa, the grandson of

Herod the Great, who murdered James and tried to murder Peter.

Finally, there's King Agrippa's son, also named Agrippa, who bantered with Paul amidst great pomp, and joked that Paul was trying to convert him. [\[161\]](#)

All these Herods tried to subjugate the subversive kingdom of Jesus to the power of the Roman state. That was their job. And all these Herods, whether ancient or modern, are right about one thing—if Jesus is Lord, then caesar is decidedly not lord. As Marcus Borg never tired of writing, Herod, and by extension Rome, represented “all domination systems organized around power, wealth, seduction, intimidation, and violence. In whatever historical form it takes, ancient or modern, empire is the opposite of the kingdom of God as disclosed in Jesus.” [\[162\]](#)

And then comes another subversion from the thoroughly Hebraic Matthew. The first people to honor the King of the Jews were pagan *magi* from the east. Upon seeing Jesus and Mary, the *magi* “bowed down and worshipped Him,” offering him gifts of gold, incense, and myrrh. Herod tells his confidants that he too wants to worship Jesus, but that's a lie. Matthew says that when king Herod heard the news of another king he responded in fear, paranoia, and then infanticide.

The historical obscurity of the *magi* has encouraged speculation.

[163] Matthew doesn't say that there were three of them. The Greek historian Herodotus (5th century BC) referred to *magi* as a caste of priests from Persia. Others trace them to the Kurds of two millennia ago, which would be remarkably ironic in our contemporary geopolitical context.

By the third century, some people interpreted the *magi* as three kings, a reading which provokes yet another clash of kingdoms. Whereas the pagan kings from the east bow down to the newborn Jewish king, Rome's king Herod tried to murder him. After all, the historian Josephus tells us that Herod murdered his own sons. We don't normally associate the birth of a baby with the demise of political power, but Matthew does. His political parody is transparent. And at least we can give credit where it's due; Herod sensed a threat to his power and took brutal action against it.

After worshipping Jesus, the *magi* set out to return to their country. But God warned them in a dream not to return to Herod, who had demanded that they serve as his informants. They disobeyed Herod, and returned home "by another route." When he learned that the *magi* had tricked him, Herod erupted in a furious rage and murdered

all the male children two years old and younger who lived in Bethlehem and its vicinity.

The early church eventually commemorated a most unlikely feast day —"the slaughter of the innocents," to honor the children of Bethlehem as the first martyrs of the gospel. By the late fifth century the "slaughter of the innocents" was the subject of church liturgy, art, and literature. When we consider the political and physical violence against so many children in our world today, when we see their lifeless bodies wash ashore on Lampedusa and Lesbos, this gruesome "slaughter of the innocents" reminds us just how contemporary the ancient gospel can be, and how in its brutality is the antithesis of Hallmark sentimentality.

Meanwhile, the holy family fled to pagan Egypt, where they found asylum. The political ironies in the flight to Egypt are dramatic. The infant Son of God fled as a displaced refugee to a foreign country, Egypt, Israel's sworn and symbolic enemy that had oppressed the Hebrews for 430 years. The place where Pharaoh had unleashed his own infanticide against the firstborn Hebrew children became a refuge for the King of the Jews.

In the end, and just as with the Egyptian Pharaoh, it was king Herod the Great who died, about 4 BC. And just as in that older story it was the baby Moses who survived an infanticide, so too did the baby Jesus. Matthew concludes his infancy narrative by describing how God told Joseph in a dream to return to Israel. That's what he and Mary did, but Joseph was afraid to go to Judea when he heard that Herod's son Archelaus was ruling there, and so he settled in the town of Nazareth in the district of Galilee.

From John's cosmic vision and Matthew's disturbing dreams, we turn to the politically provocative songs in Luke. He begins his narration of the birth of Jesus with four hymns that we know today by the first words of their Latin translations. There's the *Benedictus* by Zacharias, the father of John the Baptist, the *Gloria in Excelsis Deo* sung by "a great company of the heavenly host," the *Nunc Dimittis* of the aged Simeon in the temple, and then Mary's *Magnificat*.[\[164\]](#)

When I was in Oxford many years ago, every evening I attended the Evensong services at Magdalen College. One part of Evensong surprised me—every single night we sang Mary's *Magnificat*. I later learned that reciting or singing the *Magnificat* is part of the *daily* liturgy

not only in the Anglican Church, but also in the Catholic and Lutheran vesper services.

Mary's *Magnificat* echoes Hannah's Song in 1 Samuel 2, and similar Biblical stories about barren women who gave birth to unique children due to the special favor of God—Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel, and Samson's unnamed mother.

My soul glorifies the Lord

and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,

for he has been mindful

of the humble state of his servant.

From now on all generations will call me blessed,

for the Mighty One has done great things for me—

holy is his name.

His mercy extends to those who fear him,

from generation to generation.

He has performed mighty deeds with his arm;

he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts.

He has brought down rulers from their thrones

but has lifted up the humble.

He has filled the hungry with good things

but has sent the rich away empty.

He has helped his servant Israel,  
remembering to be merciful  
to Abraham and his descendants forever,  
even as he said to our fathers.

Why does the daily liturgy assign such prominence to Mary? Why was she considered so important? You could argue that no woman has influenced western history and culture more than Mary.

Mary was a young woman of exemplary faith. She was a peasant girl from a working class neighborhood in Nazareth, a village so insignificant that it's not mentioned in the Old Testament, in the historian Josephus (c. 37–100), or in the Jewish Talmud. "Can anything good come from Nazareth?" asked Nathanael.<sup>[165]</sup> Her angelic encounter took place in an unknown, ordinary house, not in the temple. When the angel Gabriel foretold the birth of her son, Mary responded in words of faith that have echoed through the centuries: "I am the Lord's servant, may it be to me as you have said." Her bold belief startled her pregnant cousin Elizabeth, who exclaimed in a loud voice, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you

will bear! Blessed is she who has believed that what the Lord has said to her will be accomplished!"[\[166\]](#)

There's another "Marian" truth that's easy to overlook but nevertheless stupendous. In some mysterious way, the incarnation resulted not only from the work of God the Father, but also from the will of the Mother Mary—from her active cooperation in the history of salvation. Human redemption depended upon the consent of the pregnant teenager Mary. She didn't ask to bear the Son of God, nor was she compelled to do so. She might have said no, or like Zechariah responded to Gabriel's staggering annunciation in disbelief. But she didn't shrink from God's call on her life, and instead enriched all of humanity by her willing participation and obedient submission.

Mary was also a woman of prophetic pronouncement. Her *Magnificat* moves from the deeply personal to the explicitly political. This peasant girl, who a few months later would bear the Son of God, praises God the Mighty One because He has "brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble. He has filled the hungry with good things but has sent the rich away empty." I wonder what Herod thought when he heard her words. The incarnation of the Son of God, Mary announced, meant the reversal of conventional

wisdom. Dethroning political power, plundering rich people, and redistributing food supplies signaled a new age and a different kind of kingdom. [\[167\]](#)

Eastern Orthodox believers emphasize that because the son of Mary was the Son of God, God made flesh, we honor her with the technical term *theotokos*—"bearer of God." This term *theotokos* bestowed upon Mary since the third century acknowledges her special role in redemption. She is nothing less than the "Mother of God." When the term gained official status at the third ecumenical council of Ephesus in 431, the intent was to emphasize the full divinity of the son more than the privileged status of his mother. Mary did not give birth to a mere man (*christotokos*), as the Nestorians taught; she bore a child who was fully divine (*theotokos*).

Mary played a unique role in the mystery of salvation, in which God humbled himself to be born as the baby of a peasant teenager in order to reconcile the cosmos to himself. We can only stand in awe of this woman who was faithful to God's call to such an improbable role in redemption. It's no wonder that Mary has become the subject of so much art, and such a cultural force throughout the world. John Donne

(1572–1631) plumbs the depths of this profound mystery, as only poetry might, in his sonnet *Annunciation*:

Salvation to all that will is nigh;  
That All, which always is all everywhere,  
Which cannot sin, and yet all sins must bear,  
Which cannot die, yet cannot choose but die,  
Lo, faithful virgin, yields Himself to lie  
In prison, in thy womb; and though He there  
Can take no sin, nor thou give, yet He will wear,  
Taken from thence, flesh, which death's force may try.  
Ere by the spheres time was created, thou  
Wast in His mind, who is thy Son and Brother;  
Whom thou conceivst, conceived; yea thou art now  
Thy Maker's maker, and thy Father's mother;  
Thou hast light in dark, and shutst in little room,  
Immensity cloistered in thy dear womb.

An ancient Christian hymn put it even more succinctly: "He whom the entire universe could not contain was contained within your womb, O Theotokos."[\[168\]](#)

As told by John, Matthew, and Luke, the birth of Jesus is the antidote to every form of cheap comfort. Rather, the events surrounding his birth remind us how the savior of the world "shared in our humanity" and was "made like us in every respect." Because he himself suffered our every pain and sorrow, beginning with an infanticide at his birth and lasting until his death as a criminal, "he is able to help those who suffer."[\[169\]](#)

When Jesus entered our world to show us the human face of God, he did so in weakness and in vulnerability, experiencing in his own earthly life the violence and brokenness that plague our world. It's a story not about sentimentality but of suffering. In language that the gospel writers adopted from the Jewish prophet Isaiah, he was the Suffering Servant.

Jesus' family history and birth stories connect with our own world in which 60 million people have been forcibly displaced from their homes. In which Syria bombs its own hospitals. His story embraces everyone. It began with the first Adam made from the earth. It grew from our Jewish forebears, and included Persian astrologers and enemy Egypt. "No outcasts were cast out far enough in Jesus' world to

make him shun them," writes Garry Wills, "not Roman collaborators, not lepers, not prostitutes, not the crazed, not the possessed."[\[170\]](#)

## **Obscurity**

More surprises. After the genealogies and birth stories of Jesus, it's fascinating to ask a question that we can't answer: what did Jesus look like? The earliest frescoes from the third and fourth centuries picture Jesus with short hair and clean-shaven; only later images portray him with a beard and long hair.[\[171\]](#) Jesus, it turns out, remains far more elusive than we might wish.

We not only don't know what Jesus looked like. We don't know anything about him before he began his public ministry around the age of thirty. It's only an inference that he followed his father Joseph as a carpenter. Scholars speculate whether he went to school, or was even literate. He left not a single scrap of writing, but still managed to infuriate the scribal elites.[\[172\]](#) As we noted earlier, Mark and John don't even include birth narratives, but begin with Jesus as an adult.

Still, it's hard not to speculate, especially when you consider that Mary assuredly told stories about her son. In the centuries after Jesus, a genre of popular "infancy narratives" emerged to embellish the "missing" or "hidden" years of Jesus with fanciful legends. In the

*Infancy Gospel of Matthew*, animals speak at Jesus's nativity. In the *Infancy Gospel of Thomas*, which the novelist Anne Rice utilized in her fictional *Christ the Lord* (2005) that's narrated by a seven-year-old Jesus, Jesus curses a playground bully, who consequently dies, then raises him to life with a spontaneous wish-prayer. He turns clay pots into flying birds. In the *Arabic Infancy Gospel*, Jesus's diaper heals people, and his sweat cures leprosy. Other fables claim that when Jesus was twelve he sailed to England with Joseph of Arimathea and built a church near Glastonbury to honor his mother Mary, or that between the ages of twelve to thirty he studied in India, Persia, or Tibet.[\[173\]](#)

Most of the early church rejected these “crudely sensational”[\[174\]](#) stories about Jesus as spurious. Instead, they followed the canonical gospel writers by contenting itself with ignorance and silence about Jesus's early years. Their reticence and restraint about the hidden years of Jesus are instructive. They remind us that the early believers weren't gullible or naive when it came to sensationalist exaggerations about miracle stories.

There's one exception to our total ignorance about the first thirty years of Jesus's life. Luke records the only canonical story we have about

the years between Jesus's birth and the beginning of his public ministry. It's the story of Jesus in the Jerusalem temple.

Luke writes that every year Joseph and Mary made the 150-mile round trip from Nazareth to Jerusalem in order to celebrate the Feast of Passover. When he was twelve years old, about twenty miles into the return trip back home to Nazareth, his parents discovered that Jesus was missing from their caravan of family and friends. Any parent can imagine the terror that they must have felt when they couldn't find their son. After a second day to return to Jerusalem, on the third day they found the boy Jesus in the temple, "sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions."

When Mary rebuked him, it became apparent that Jesus wasn't accidentally lost, but that he had deliberately stayed behind: "Didn't you know that I had to be in my Father's house?" Mary and Joseph didn't understand this mysterious response. After their safe return to Nazareth, Luke says that Jesus "was obedient to them... [He] grew in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and man."[\[175\]](#)

Luke suggests that Jesus was a normal boy who experienced genuine human development—physically, mentally, morally, and spiritually. His

authentic humanity is precisely what the legendary "infancy narratives" obscure and deny.

The boyhood story also hints at the emerging tension between Jesus' filial identity with God the Father and his willing obedience to his earthly parents. Eventually his obedience gave way to a radical disruption, for by the time of his public ministry his own family tried to apprehend him as deranged, the entire village of Nazareth tried to kill him as a crackpot, and his own brothers didn't believe in him. [\[176\]](#)

But that's all. These two points do nothing to fill in the thirty years of silence about the hidden years of Jesus. I like to imagine that his early life was so insignificant, so prosaic, and so secluded in obscure Nazareth that there was nothing relevant to report.

If we let these silent years stand at face value instead of filling them in with some ostensibly deep meaning, they speak powerfully in our media-saturated world of celebrity culture, self-promotion, and endless noise. When I consider how thoroughly invisible Jesus was for 90% of his short life, leaving no trace of who he was or what he did or said during those years, I'm attracted to a spirituality of obscurity, seclusion, and hiddenness. The mysterious paradox is that the hidden years of Jesus, no matter how completely lost to history, were not lost

or hidden to God. Nor is Liberia, Congo, or Darfur, nor my own life. Jesus himself will later say that his heavenly Father “sees what is done in secret,” as if we were in an empty room with the door shut. [\[177\]](#)

### **Jordan River and Judean Desert**

After living in anonymity and obscurity for thirty years, Jesus broke with his family and burst onto the public scene by joining the movement of his eccentric cousin John. Perhaps Jesus submitted himself to John as a disciple to a mentor. John might have been part of the apocalyptic Jewish sect of Essenes who opposed the temple in Jerusalem. [\[178\]](#)

By any measure, John the Baptizer was a prophet of radical dissent; his detractors said that he had a demon. [\[179\]](#) Whereas John's father had been part of the religious establishment as a priest in the Jerusalem temple, John fled the comforts and corruptions of the city for the loneliness of the desert, where he dressed in animal skins and ate insects and wild honey. Living on the margins of society, both literally and figuratively, he preached "a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins."

John's preaching in the Judean desert and baptizing in the Jordan River confronted both the religious and the political powers of his day. King Herod beheaded him on a dinner party dare, after John had rebuked him for sleeping with his brother's wife.<sup>[180]</sup> The temple establishment in Jerusalem, which claimed a gatekeeper monopoly on mediating God's forgiveness to people, didn't like him preaching from the periphery either. John castigated these religious authorities as a "brood of vipers" (in one translation, "snake bastards"). When the religious experts spurned John's call to baptismal repentance, Jesus said that they had "rejected God's purpose for themselves."<sup>[181]</sup>

Instead of cooperation, accommodation, or resignation, John challenged these religious and political powers with his anti-establishment message of protest and renewal. By joining John the Baptizer's fringe movement, Jesus did likewise. And contrary to what we might have expected from such an ascetic man and an austere message, the people flocked to John. Even twenty years later in far away Ephesus, a thousand miles by land, people still submitted to the baptism of John.<sup>[182]</sup>

Then another shock—Jesus asked to be baptized by John. This was a dramatic role reversal. John had predicted that Jesus would baptize

us with a figurative "baptism of fire." And then Jesus asked John for a literal baptism by water.

With important stylistic differences, all four gospels include Jesus's baptism by John: "When all the people were being baptized, Jesus was baptized too. And as he was praying, heaven was opened and the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven: 'You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.'" [\[183\]](#)

Why did Jesus the greater submit to baptism "for the forgiveness of sin" by John the lesser? Did he need to repent of his own sins?

The earliest witnesses of his baptism wondered about this question, because in Matthew's gospel John tried to dissuade Jesus: "Why do you come to me? I need to be baptized by you!" Jesus' baptism seems to have embarrassed his followers. Even a hundred years later, his baptism troubled some Christians. In the non-canonical *Gospel of the Hebrews* (c. 80–150 AD), Jesus explicitly denies any need to repent, and seems to get baptized to please his mother.

Jesus's baptism inaugurated his public ministry by identifying with "the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem." He identified himself with the faults and failures, the pains and problems,

of all the broken people who had flocked to the Jordan River. By wading into the waters, he sided with us. Not long into his public mission, the sanctimonious religious leaders derided Jesus as a "friend of gluttons and sinners." They were right about that.

But none of this comes close to the biggest bombshell of the baptismal story—the stupendous claim of a trinitarian confession.

Jesus's baptismal solidarity with broken people was confirmed by God's affirmation and empowerment. Still wet with water after John had plunged him beneath the Jordan River, Jesus heard a voice and saw a vision—the declaration of God the Father that Jesus was his beloved son, and the descent of God the Spirit in the form of a dove. The vision and the voice punctuated the baptismal event. They signaled the meaning, the message, and the mission of Jesus as he went public after thirty years of invisibility— that by the power of the Spirit, the Son of God embodied his Father's unconditional love for all people everywhere.

After his baptism in the Jordan River, Jesus was tempted in the Judean desert: “At once the Spirit sent him into the desert, and he was in the desert forty days, being tempted by Satan. He was with the wild animals, and angels attended him.”<sup>[184]</sup> The Spirit of God descended

upon Jesus in baptism, and then the Spirit of God drove him into the desert to be tempted and tried.

In *The Last Temptation of Christ* (1988), a film based upon the novel by Nikos Kazantzakis, director Martin Scorsese portrays a very human Jesus. He confesses his sins, he fears insanity, he wonders if he's merely a man, and he anguishes over the people that he didn't heal.

In his "last" or ultimate temptation, during his execution Jesus battles a hallucination sent by Satan. He wonders what his life might have been like if he had chosen the path of an ordinary person. He imagines marrying Mary Magdalene, growing old, and having kids. But then his disciples reproach him for abandoning his special mission, and through their reproach he returns to consciousness to accomplish his final suffering, death, and resurrection.

Many Christians were outraged by Scorsese's film and considered it blasphemous. Blockbuster Video even refused to carry it. What bothered many Christians was the suggestion that Jesus was fully and truly human, that he was a person who experienced trials and temptations like we do—torment, doubt, loneliness, questions, fantasies, confusion, despair, erotic dreams, and, in his final hours, feelings of abandonment by God.

This impulse to airbrush the humanity of Jesus has a long history. The second-century docetics (from the Greek *dokeo*, "to seem or appear"), as we saw earlier, argued that Jesus only "seemed" human, that the physical world is evil and the spiritual world is good. Surely he couldn't have been contaminated by our material existence! But in trying to "protect" Jesus from a genuine human nature, we do the exact opposite of what he himself does in his baptism and temptation. Instead of insulating himself from us, he fully participates with us.

His temptation by satan emphasizes this point. The parallel passages in Matthew and Luke specify three temptations: turning stones to bread, throwing himself down from the temple, and accepting the glories of earthly kingdoms. Interpreters have variously categorized these three temptations. Precisely interpreting the three temptations doesn't really matter, though, for we know that these were not Jesus's only temptations.

In Luke's version, at the end of the forty day trial, satan left Jesus only "until an opportune time." He came back again and again those next three years. Like us, there was never a time in his life when he didn't experience trial and temptations. His ultimate temptation, and the

ultimate despair anyone can experience, was his sense of feeling forsaken by God in Gethsemane.

That Jesus was tempted not only in the desert but throughout his entire earthly life is a source of tremendous encouragement: "For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet was without sin. Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in our time of need."[\[185\]](#)

Born on the run, hidden in obscurity, baptized and tempted, Jesus is the friend of sinners, not their enemy. One of the more remarkable slanders of Jesus in the gospels is that he was "a friend of tax collectors and sinners." Social and moral outcasts flocked to Jesus, much to the disapproval of the religiously righteous. They felt safe with Jesus, accepted, embraced, and welcomed by him. As the friend of sinners who suffered trials and temptations, "he is able to help those who are being tempted."[\[186\]](#) He is for us, not against us: "I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners," said Jesus. Indeed, "this man welcomes sinners and eats with them."[\[187\]](#)

## **Signs and Wonders**

Immediately after Jesus's genealogy, birth, baptism, and temptation, Luke records the first spoken words of his public life. They're a manifesto for his ministry, and a declaration of his identity. Jesus wasn't just a rebel rabbi or a teacher of prudential morality. Rather, in his first public appearance, Jesus the Jew makes a claim of prophetic fulfillment, namely, that he substituted his own self for all that Jewish history and theology held dear. He is the new Torah, the new Adam or Moses, the new Temple, the new Sabbath, the new Israel. [\[188\]](#)

After the descent of the Spirit at the Jordan River, and after the Spirit drove him into the desert, Luke writes that Jesus returned to Galilee "in the power of the Spirit." News about him spread like wildfire. It was his custom to teach in their synagogues (plural), says Luke. Everyone praised him.

One sabbath he entered a synagogue in his hometown of Nazareth. When he was invited to speak, he unrolled a scroll and read from the poetry of Isaiah.

The Spirit of the Sovereign Lord is on me,  
because the Lord has anointed me  
to preach good news to the poor.  
He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted,

to proclaim freedom for the captives  
and release for the prisoners,  
And recovery of sight for the blind,  
To release the oppressed,  
To proclaim the year of the Lord's favor. [\[189\]](#)

When he finished, Jesus rolled up the scroll, handed it back to the attendant, and sat down. With "the eyes of everyone in the synagogue fastened on him," Jesus then dropped a bombshell: "Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing." That is, his own life and ministry fulfilled these ancient words of Isaiah.

This reading in the synagogue was a provocative act of performance art. Jesus expanded the breadth of God's "favor" far beyond the redistribution of wealth and the demise of political power that we saw in Mary's *Magnificat*. In particular, the reading from Isaiah brings us to the meaning of miracles in the life of Jesus. Representative of these miracles is his giving "recovery of sight to the blind."

There are about thirty healing stories in the gospels, and another half dozen that display his power over nature and demons. Three distinct stories tell how Jesus healed a blind person. In Matthew 9, Jesus

healed two blind men by touching their eyes. “Have mercy on us, Son of David,” they begged Jesus.

In Mark 8 and John 9, Jesus healed a man at Bethsaida by spitting and making mud that he applied to the man's eyes. In John's version, the physical healing provoked a long and acrimonious discourse with the Pharisees about spiritual blindness—an important reminder that Jesus's miracles were what John called “signs” that pointed beyond themselves to something more important.

We never learn the names of the people who were healed in these thirty miracle stories. The most we learn is something once removed like "Jairus's daughter." These people had names, of course, but we never learn them. It's strange. Their anonymity suggests that, as we saw in the apocryphal infancy narratives, the writers avoided spectacle. The miracles pointed beyond themselves to the more profound and mysterious identity of Jesus himself.

The third story of healing a blind person is a rare exception; it's one of only two miracles in which we learn the name of the person who was healed. [\[190\]](#) Lazarus is the other exception. And what a name.

“Bartimaeus” is a name about which scholars have spilled gallons of

ink, and for good reasons. Mark uses some apparent wordplay that points beyond the miracle to the meaning of Jesus.

“Bar-Timaeus” is a linguistic hybrid that's half Aramaic and half Greek. Mark knows that he has flummoxed his Gentile readers, and so he employs a favorite technique that he uses eight other times in his gospel. [\[191\]](#) He gives a parenthetical explanatory translation: "that is, the Son of Timaeus." But what does *that* mean? Literally and simply, Mark 10:46 reads, "son of Timaeus (that is, the Son of Timaeus)."

If "Timaeus" sounds vaguely familiar, you might be channeling your college philosophy class. “Timaeus” is the title of Plato's most famous dialogue and the name of its narrator. In the *Timaeus* and elsewhere, Plato famously contrasted "seeing" the mere physical world while being "blind" to far more important Eternal Truths. And so Bartimaeus begs Jesus, "Rabbi, I want to see!" In his book *Philo of Alexandria and the Timaeus of Plato* (1983), the classicist David Runia argued that "the *Timaeus* was the only Greek prose work that up to the third century A.D. that every educated man could be presumed to have read."

Did that include Mark? Is Mark contrasting Greek philosophy with the Jewish Jesus for his Gentile audience? It's such a tantalizing

suggestion. But as the British like to say, it's too clever by half. This interpretation is at best a "definite maybe."

The name Bartimaeus suggests other linguistic possibilities. In simplest terms, the name combines the Aramaic *bar* (son) with the Greek *timaios* (honorable). So, Bartimaeus is a family name. He's simply the son of his father Timaeus. More subtly and figuratively, he's the "son of honor" or an honored person, perhaps "a good son." Still others point to the Aramaic or Hebrew word for "unclean" (*br tm'*), suggesting that Bartimaeus is the "son of the unclean."

I like to combine these ideas. Both Mark and Luke call Bartimaeus a "blind beggar." He might be dishonored and marginalized by Greeks as a social nuisance, he might be unclean or dirty to ritually pure Jews, but in Mark's telling he's a person we should honor. And there's a good reason why Mark honors this dishonored man.

Whereas "many people rebuked him and told him to be quiet," trying to put him in his proper social place, the blind beggar Bartimaeus was insistent. Not once, but twice, he cried out in words that are identical to those of the two blind men in Matthew 9, "Son of David, have mercy on me!" Begging for help and healing, the Son of Timaeus confesses

the Son of David. Here we have hit the theological pay dirt of a healing miracle.

The title "Son of David" is a loaded phrase that occurs seventeen times in the gospels. It hearkens back to the very first sentence of the New Testament, where in Matthew 1:1 we saw that Jesus is the "son of David, son of Abraham." The title "Son of David" points to more than a genealogical connection. It's a theological identification that makes a miraculous healing pale by comparison. Jesus is greater than Abraham. He's more than Moses or King David. He surpasses the justly famous Plato. He's the longed-for Jewish Messiah mentioned in 2 Sam 7:12-13 and fulfilled in his reading from Isaiah 61 at the synagogue in Nazareth.

John says that Jesus did "many miraculous signs in the presence of his disciples." He also says that he didn't include most of them in his gospel. In fact, John limits himself to seven "signs" that Jesus did. The overwhelming majority of people who encountered Jesus never saw or experienced a miracle, however much they wanted one. Three dozen miracles across three years is not a lot. But people heard the rumors. What did they make of them?

John recorded the "many miraculous signs" of Jesus in order to encourage faith in those who had only heard about but not seen them: "These are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name." But we also know that rumors of miracles, some true and others false, led to crude superstition, to people becoming gawkers at spectacles, and to still others like those described by John who simply didn't believe the miracles or the miracle-maker. [\[192\]](#)

When some people asked Jesus to perform a miracle to prove his authority, he rebuked them for even asking. He said that if they really wanted to believe there was more than enough evidence. A few pages after the miracle of wine at the wedding in Cana, Jesus responded brusquely to a Gentile military officer who begged Jesus to heal his sick son: "unless you people see miraculous signs and wonders you will never believe." Then he healed the boy anyhow. Even false prophets, Jesus warned, performed miracles.

From those earliest apostolic days until now, the miracles of Jesus have always been contested. They provoked controversy, division, disbelief, and sometimes authentic faith. This has been true among believers as well as unbelievers. For some Christians, the miracles of

Jesus are historical events, while for others they are first century fables. Most Christians acknowledge that they are by definition rare, despite books like *The Prayer of Jabez* (nine million copies sold) by Bruce Wilkinson that promises his readers “a front row seat in a life of miracles” (a cruel heresy if ever there was one).

As we have noted, the early believers weren't gullible about miracle stories. They rejected many of the miracle stories as spurious, like those in the *Infancy Gospel of Thomas* (c. 140–170), where Jesus curses a playground bully who consequently dies, then raises him to life with a spontaneous wish-prayer, and turns clay pots into flying birds. They exercised reticence and restraint.

About a generation after Luke, Christians started wondering about miracles. Where were God's mighty acts of power that had characterized those days of Jesus? What happened to all the signs and wonders? The prevalence and intensity of dreams, signs, wonders, and miracles gradually waned in the decades after the apostles. And conversely, as "apocalyptic vision became less vivid, the church's polity became more rigid" (Pelikan). Was this what God wanted—the institutionalization of a miraculous movement? Or maybe the cessation of miracles was a consequence of the church becoming

more bureaucratic? Wasn't it an embarrassment that the manifestations of the Spirit seemed less frequent?

Around the year 150 AD in Asia Minor, the prophet Montanus taught that the decline in the Spirit's manifestations resulted from the church's moral laxity in matters like divorce and fasting. He claimed to have direct revelations from the Spirit. The sect named after him, Montanism, was characterized by fanatical zeal, rigorous asceticism, and a preoccupation with miraculous manifestations of the Spirit. Two women, Priscilla and Maximilla, accompanied Montanus and similarly claimed direct communications from God.

The most famous Montanist was the African theologian Tertullian in Carthage (modern Tunisia). He once complained about "the church of a lot of bishops." Writing in the early third century, Tertullian gives us a snapshot of the Montanist movement: "We have among us now a sister who has been granted gifts of revelations, which she experiences in church during the Sunday services through ecstatic vision in the Spirit. And after the people have been dismissed at the end of the service it is her custom to relate to us what she has seen."

Montanism made mainstream church authorities nervous. They responded in two ways, says Jaroslav Pelikan—derision and denial.

The historian Eusebius of the fourth century derided those who "rave in a kind of ecstatic trance." He dismissed their "bastard utterances" as the "demented, absurd and irresponsible sayings" of a "presumptuous spirit." The Montanists, he said, "babble in a jargon" that is "contrary to the custom of the church which had been handed down by tradition from the earliest times."

Hippolytus, a contemporary of Tertullian who was martyred in Rome in 235, taught that miraculous visions and direct communications from the Spirit ended with the Revelation of John around 100 AD. He said that the Spirit worked differently now than in the apostolic days. God speaks clearly, sufficiently, and reliably through three means, he said—the canon of Scripture, the creeds, and the clergy of the church. For Hippolytus, the work of the Spirit was now "a difference not only of degree but also fundamentally of kind."

We need not make a binary opposition between God's miraculous intervention and the church institution. Montanism always had its detractors and defenders. And the institutionalization of the church was both inevitable and necessary. "The history of the church has never been altogether without the spontaneous gifts of the Holy Spirit," writes Pelikan, "even when the authority of the apostolic norms has

been most incontestable. In the experiences of monks and friars, of mystics and seers, as well as in the underground religion of many believers, the Montanist heresy has carried on a sort of unofficial existence.”[\[193\]](#)

## **Rhetorical Excess**

Jesus wasn’t a magician. He was more than a miraculous healer. He was also a teacher “powerful in word.”[\[194\]](#) Matthew says that Jesus told the people “many things in parables.” He even says that he “did not say anything to them without using a parable.”[\[195\]](#)

There are about fifty parables in the three synoptic gospels, and as many as seventy depending on your definition. There are no parables at all in the gospel of John.

These parables include numerous literary forms—an enigmatic saying, a metaphor, a figurative saying, an expanded story, an allegory, a moral story meant to provoke us to decision, and even parabolic actions like cleansing the temple or cursing the fig tree. In using parables, Jesus followed a long history of rabbinic tradition that included over a thousand known parables.[\[196\]](#)

The parables aren’t “earthly stories with a heavenly message,” allegories with a hidden meaning, or moralistic tales. The parables are

meant to shock us. Jesus praises an unrighteous steward. A father throws a party for a vagrant son. Jesus used them to elucidate the radical implications that in him "the kingdom of God is at hand." We shouldn't be shocked by a parable that shocks. "The parables of Christ," said Daniel Berrigan, "even the innocent, pastoral, tender, innocuous-seeming ones, conceal just below the surface a whiplash, a shock, a charge of dynamite. The stories set conventional expectations, whether concerning God, religion, politics, vocation, status and class, utterly off kilter."

The parables are characterized by exaggerated language that describes the generosity of God, life in God's kingdom, and our human responses to God's generosity. The British literary critic Frank Kermode of Cambridge University called this phenomenon a "rhetoric of excess." Matthew in particular has what he calls a "quite unusual intensity" of rhetorical excess. Matthew describes a log in your eye, a camel going through the eye of a needle, and straining a gnat while swallowing a camel. [\[197\]](#)

"Our righteousness must be produced to excess," observes Kermode, it must exceed that of the Pharisees. We must love not only our neighbors but also our enemies. We should give in secret, so that our

left hand doesn't know what our right hand is doing — that is, hidden even from our own selves. Wise people leave their dead unburied. Foolish people build houses on sand and walk through wide gates. Kermode suggests an awkward but literal translation of the original Greek in Matthew 5:47: "If ye greet only your brethren, what excess do ye?" He thus writes, "Excess is constantly demanded. Everything must be in excess."

A classic example of rhetorical excess for Kermode is the parable of the workers in the vineyard. It's a story about a business owner with outrageous ideas about a fair wage. The punch line of the story shocked the listeners with a radical reversal that subverted conventional wisdom. And to make his point clear, Jesus repeats the punch line verbatim three times.

In God's kingdom, the first will be last and the last will be first.

The parable is preceded by a story about a rich man. When Jesus challenged the man to sell his possessions and give his money to the poor, "he went away sad, because he had great wealth." Peter then responded, "Lord, we have left everything to follow you. What then will there be for us?" The rich man kept all that he had; the disciples left all

that they had. Jesus reassured them: "At the renewal of all things, many who are first will be last, and many who are last will be first."

Jesus then tells the parable about a foreman who hired some laborers early in the morning, then additional workers at the third, sixth, ninth, and eleventh hours. That evening, he paid the workers, "beginning with the last ones hired and going on to the first."

Whereas the first workers hired had endured "the burden of the work and the heat of the day" for twelve hours, the last workers hired at the eleventh hour worked just one hour. In fact, they had "stood there all day long doing nothing." Nonetheless, the last people hired received twelve hours of pay for one hour of work. The laborers who had worked twelve hours "grumbled against the landowner." Of course they grumbled. It wasn't fair. But God's excessive generosity is different than getting what you earned. And so for the third time Jesus says, "the last will be first, and the first will be last." Jesus concludes with a sharp question to those who grumbled about God's excess: "Are you envious because I am generous?"

This "rhetoric of excess" isn't limited to Matthew, which was Kermode's focus, or even to the parables. It's everywhere in the teachings of Jesus.

Jesus told us to forgive a person 490 times — "seventy times seven." Divine forgiveness, given and received, is beyond calculation or comprehension. Forgiveness on that scale is wildly disproportionate to the sincerity of the penitent or the seriousness of their offense.

Some disciples quit their jobs. Others left their families, like the rich women who traveled with Jesus and supported him. In the book of Acts, people sold property and distributed the proceeds to the Jesus movement. One woman anointed Jesus with a bottle of perfume worth a year's wages. Why wasn't that money given to the poor, the disciples complained?

Luke compares God to a shepherd who abandons a flock of ninety-nine sheep in order to find one stray. In the parable of the prodigal son he's like an indulgent father who welcomes back his indigent son with the best party that money could buy, despite the anger of the older, rule-keeping son at such excessive generosity.

John compares God's kingdom to a wedding party with an outrageous excess of fine wine. He says that the whole world couldn't contain enough books to describe the deeds of Jesus.

A tiny seed grows into a giant tree. A poor woman spends her last penny on an expensive pearl. The nets of fishermen break because

they are so full. Gentile foreigners are praised as paragons of faith. The religiously scrupulous are rejected. The egregiously immoral are welcomed. The whole Mosaic law—by one rabbinic tradition 631 commandments, is fulfilled in a single word: love your neighbor as yourself.

And so the extravagance and excess of life in God's kingdom. As Joachim Jeremias writes, "The strong man is disarmed, the powers of evil have to yield, the physician has come to the sick, the lepers are cleansed, the heavy burden of guilt is removed, the lost sheep is brought home, the door of the Father's house is opened, the poor and the beggars are summoned to the banquet, a master whose kindness is undeserved pays wages in full, a great joy fills all hearts. God's acceptable year has come. For there has appeared the one whose veiled majesty shines through every word and every parable—the Saviour."<sup>[198]</sup> And note: Kermode's "rhetorical excess" isn't a spiritual or literary exaggeration. Rather, it's what life is like when we accept the love of the Father that's revealed in his Son.

### **No Friend of Caesar**

The German theologian Martin Kähler once described Mark's gospel as a "passion narrative with an extended introduction."<sup>[199]</sup> Mark

devotes a disproportionate amount of space to Jesus's final week—about forty percent of his entire gospel, beginning with his chapter 11. In fact, Mark time stamps each of the last seven days in the life of Jesus. [\[200\]](#)

After thirty years of total obscurity, and then three years of preaching, teaching, and healing that focused on the poor, the imprisoned, the blind, and the oppressed, Jesus's family declared him insane. The religious establishment hated him. The political authorities had had enough. To say that Jesus had become a controversial figure would be a gross understatement.

Toward the end of his three year ministry, Luke 9:51 describes how Jesus “resolutely set his face toward Jerusalem.” When he entered that ancient and holy city for the last time, knowing that betrayal, persecution and death awaited him, it's easy to imagine that he was greeted by his largest and most boisterous crowd. His so-called “triumphal entry” on Palm Sunday triggered the beginning of the end for Jesus.

What began on Sunday with a religious procession ended on Friday with a public execution. Excited children waving palm branches were quickly forgotten when violent mobs shouted death threats. The

adulation of the crowds evaporated into abandonment by his closest friends, and worse, according to his own cries of dereliction, the abandonment of God himself.

By Good Friday, Jesus's disciples argued among themselves about who was the greatest. Judas betrayed him. Peter denied even knowing him. All his disciples fled, except for the women. And Rome deployed all the brutal means at its disposal to crush an insurgent movement — rendition, interrogation, torture, mockery, humiliation, and then a sadistic execution designed as a "calculated social deterrent" (Borg) to any other trouble makers who might challenge imperial authority and disturb the *Pax Romana*.

Jesus's triumphal entry into the clogged streets of Jerusalem on Good Friday wasn't a spontaneous event. It was a deeply ironic, highly symbolic, and deliberately provocative act. It was an enacted parable or street theater that dramatized his subversive mission and message. He didn't ride a donkey because he was too tired to walk or because he wanted a good view of the crowds. The Oxford scholar George Caird characterized Jesus's triumphal entry as more of a "planned political demonstration" than the religious celebration that we sentimentalize today.

In a sermon at Cornell University in 1969, the attorney William Stringfellow observed that we often say that Jesus was an innocent victim. No, says Stringfellow, Jesus was justly accused as a guilty criminal. He was "not a mere nonconformist, not just a protester, more than a militant, not only a dissident, not simply a dissenter, but a criminal." Even more, "the most dangerous and reprehensible sort of criminal." Why? Because "he threatened the nation in a revolutionary way."[\[201\]](#)

This is exactly what Luke describes.

Jesus was executed for three reasons, says Luke: "We found this fellow subverting the nation, opposing payment of taxes to Caesar, and saying that He Himself is Christ, a King." In John's gospel, the angry mob warned Pilate, "If you let this man go, you are no friend of Caesar. Anyone who claims to be a king opposes Caesar." They were right.

Because the Roman state always made a show of military force during the Jewish Passover when pilgrims thronged to Jerusalem to celebrate their political liberation from Egypt many centuries earlier, Borg and Crossan imagine not one but two political processions entering Jerusalem that Good Friday morning in the spring of AD 30.

In a bold parody of imperial politics, king Jesus descended the Mount of Olives into Jerusalem from the east in fulfillment of Zechariah's ancient prophecy: "Look, your king is coming to you, gentle and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey" (Matthew 21:5 = Zechariah 9:9). From the west, the Roman governor Pilate entered Jerusalem with all the pomp of state power.

Pilate's brigades showcased Rome's military might, power and glory. Jesus's triumphal entry, by stark contrast, was an anti-imperial and anti-triumphal "counter-procession" of peasants that proclaimed an alternative and subversive community of "the kingdom of God."

In the year 26 AD, the Roman emperor Tiberius appointed Pilate the *praefectus* or governor over Judea. He ruled with an iron fist over every aspect of the province—the military, the courts, the economy, and even the Jewish Temple (pilfering its funds to build an aqueduct).

The Jewish historian Philo of Alexandria (20 BC–40 AD) painted a dark picture of a ruthless overlord: "by nature rigid and stubbornly harsh... of spiteful disposition and an exceeding wrathful man... the bribes, the acts of violence, the outrages, the cases of spiteful treatment, the constant murders without trial, the ceaseless and most grievous brutality."

Although some people doubted if Pilate even existed, in 1961 archaeologists discovered a block of granite at a theater in Caesarea containing four lines of Latin which read, "Pontius Pilate, Prefect of Judea." The inscription was part of a building dedication that Pilate had made to Tiberius.

Pilate became a key actor in one of the most important pivot points in all of Western history. He stood "between two unique and extraordinary stories: that of the Roman Empire at the peak of its power and that of the Christian faith at the time of its beginnings."

Although Pilate's interaction with Jesus lasted only a few hours, the consequences of that encounter have reverberated throughout history. In this clash between Christian memory and imperial history, it was Pilate who made a fateful decision of "incalculable magnitude." It was Pilate who determined the destiny of the prisoner Jesus. For the Jews, Jesus was a sacrilegious blasphemer, and for the Romans a dangerous fomenter of disorder who threatened social stability. Between the two stood Pilate. [\[202\]](#)

Pilate met the angry mob outside the *praetorium*, then grilled Jesus alone back inside.

"Are you the king of the Jews?"

"My kingdom is not of this world," Jesus replied. "My kingdom is from another place."

"You are a king, then!" mocked Pilate.

"Yes, you are right in saying that I am a king."

Pilate went back outside, declared that Jesus was innocent, then had his soldiers beat, flog, and humiliate him with purple robes and a crown of thorns befitting a man whom he judged was a political poser: "Hail, O king of the Jews!"

Back outside, the mob hounded Pilate: "If you let this man go, you are no friend of Caesar. Anyone who claims to be a king opposes Caesar." Pilate thus found himself sandwiched between angering the mob and betraying his emperor.

He caved in: "Here is your king. Shall I crucify your king?"

"We have no king but Caesar!"

When Pilate crucified Jesus, he insulted the Jews one last time by fastening a notice to the cross, written in Aramaic, Latin, and Greek, that he knew they would find repugnant: "Jesus of Nazareth, King of

the Jews." They objected, of course: "Don't write 'The king of the Jews,' but that this man *claimed* to be king of the Jews."

It was too late: "What I have written, I have written," said Pilate. To be sure, with his mockery of the Jews he wrote much more than he ever could have known or imagined. About four years after he sentenced Jesus to death, according to the fourth-century Eusebius, Pilate, "wearied with misfortunes," committed suicide. [\[203\]](#)

The Yale historian Jaroslav Pelikan thus notes a profound paradox: "One of the many historical ironies of the Christian message is that of all the famous ancient Romans—Julius Caesar or Cicero or Vergil—none has achieved even nearly the universal name recognition of an otherwise obscure provincial gauleiter named Pontius Pilate, who has the distinction—which he shares with, of all people, the Blessed Virgin Mary, and with no other human creature—of having his name recited every day all over the world in the Nicene Creed (as well as in the Apostles' Creed): 'crucified on our behalf under Pontius Pilate.'"

### **Our Women Amazed Us**

What happened next remains the most contested part of a most contested story. No amount of argumentation will ever produce a decisive conclusion. We today are in the same ambiguous position as

the overwhelming majority of people back then who never saw the events but only heard the rumors. They enjoyed little advantage of time and place over us, and we today suffer no comparative disadvantage.

In the rather cheesy movie *Risen* (2016), an agnostic Roman centurion named Clavius is tasked by Pontius Pilate with debunking the rumors that a crucified criminal named Yeshua had risen from the dead. In one important respect, I liked *Risen*—it helped me to imagine that in real history *something* like the story about Clavius happened after the death of Jesus. Rumors and denials. Fear and confusion. Doubt and incredulity. And that's exactly what we read in the gospels.

Disbelief in the resurrection didn't begin with the Enlightenment, nor were first century people characterized by credulity. We aren't the first people to know that corpses don't rise from the dead. Many people doubted the rumors of resurrection. The first doubters to disbelieve were those who were closest to Jesus.

When the women told the eleven disciples that they had seen the risen Lord, "they did not believe it" (Mark 16:11). Luke is more blunt: "They did not believe the women, because their words seemed to them like nonsense" (Luke 24:11).

Later, two witnesses reported their encounter with Jesus to the eleven, "but they did not believe them either," and even Jesus himself "rebuked them for their lack of faith and their stubborn refusal to believe" (Mark 16:13–14). Thomas became the most famous Doubter (John 20:24–25), and in what might have been Jesus's last resurrection appearance there were still "some who doubted" (Matthew 28:17).

At some point, though, their disbelief turned into deep-seated conviction. There emerged a consensual tradition of "first importance" that Paul said he had received, preached, and passed on to others — that Christ died, was buried, raised on the third day, and that he appeared publicly to many people. "This is what we preach, and this is what you believed," Paul wrote to the Corinthians.

Luke says that Jesus "showed himself to these men and gave many convincing proofs that he was alive" (Acts 1:3). The panic of these "unschooled and ordinary men" (Acts 4:13) gave way to their bold proclamation: "God has raised this Jesus to life, and we are all witnesses of the fact" (Acts 2:32). When commanded by the religious authorities to stop preaching, Peter and John replied, "We cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard" (Acts 4:20).

They claimed they had eaten with the resurrected Jesus (Acts 10:41), and that many witnesses could attest to his public appearances (1 Corinthians 15:5–8). So, "with great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus" (Acts 4:33).

Their bravado would have abruptly ended if someone had produced Jesus's body, but the absence of his body and the presence of the empty tomb pointed toward something far more perplexing than a mere spiritual or figurative resurrection.

Others mocked and scoffed. The religious authorities were "greatly disturbed because the apostles were teaching the people and proclaiming in Jesus the resurrection of the dead" (Acts 4:2). When some Athenians heard about the resurrection, "they sneered" (Acts 17:32). Porcius Festus, the Roman governor of Judea under Nero, confessed that he was "at a loss" to know what to do with the prisoner Paul: "They did not charge him with any of the crimes I had expected. Instead, they had some points of dispute with him about their own religion and about a dead man named Jesus who Paul claimed was alive."

The next day, as Paul gave his legal defense, Festus screamed, "You are out of your mind, Paul! Your great learning is driving you mad"

(Acts 25:19–20; 26:24). Peter denied the charge that he propagated a "cleverly invented tale " (2 Peter 1:16), while Paul rebutted some Corinthians who said that "there is no resurrection of the dead" for anyone at all (1 Corinthians 15:12).

Maybe the first believers were "deceived or deceivers," as Pascal put it (*Pensees* 322, 310) — either badly deluded and wrong, or blatant liars and immoral. Neither of those explanations has the ring of truth to me. The only thing they stood to gain for their beliefs were political persecution and social marginalization.

Paul insisted that no person should *believe* a lie about the resurrection, and that they certainly shouldn't *preach* a lie (1 Corinthians 15:12–19); if Jesus is not raised, then Christian proclamation is not only a silly fiction but also a cruel hoax.

But so what? Marcus Borg liked to ask, what difference would it make in your life if Jesus was *not* raised from the dead? That always seemed like a strange question to me. I think Borg let himself off the hook too easily. In contrast to Borg's belief that the resurrection was a spiritual myth or metaphor, consider the push back in the poem by John Updike (1932–2009). It's called *Seven Stanzas at Easter*.

Make no mistake: if He rose at all

it was as His body;  
if the cells' dissolution did not reverse, the molecules  
reknit, the amino acids rekindle,  
the Church will fall.

It was not as the flowers,  
each soft Spring recurrent;  
it was not as His Spirit in the mouths and fuddled  
eyes of the eleven apostles;  
it was as His flesh: ours.

The same hinged thumbs and toes,  
the same valved heart  
that-pierced-died, withered, paused, and then  
regathered out of enduring Might  
new strength to enclose.

Let us not mock God with metaphor,  
analogy, sidestepping, transcendence;  
making of the event a parable, a sign painted in the  
faded credulity of earlier ages:  
let us walk through the door.

The stone is rolled back, not papier-mâché,

not a stone in a story,  
but the vast rock of materiality that in the slow  
grinding of time will eclipse for each of us  
the wide light of day.

And if we will have an angel at the tomb,  
make it a real angel,  
weighty with Max Planck's quanta, vivid with hair,  
opaque in the dawn light, robed in real linen  
spun on a definite loom.

Let us not seek to make it less monstrous,  
for our own convenience, our own sense of beauty,  
lest, awakened in one unthinkable hour, we are  
embarrassed by the miracle,  
And crushed by remontrance.

Whereas Borg is too spiritual, Updike might be too literal. A literal  
resurrection is strange, but perhaps not strange enough for what we  
read in the gospels. There's mystery and complexity that both Borg  
and Updike miss.

Those who were closest to Jesus didn't even recognize him after his  
resurrection. Mary mistook him for the gardener. Two disciples walked

with him on the road to Emmaus but didn't know who he was. On the shores of the Sea of Tiberias, seven of the disciples didn't recognize Jesus when he called to them. On the one hand, Jesus ate meat to satisfy their curiosity, and offered Thomas his body to touch, but he also seemed to pass through walls and locked doors, appearing out of nowhere.

The literalism of Updike challenges the spiritualism of Borg. There is something more to the resurrection than Plato's immortality of an immaterial soul, but also something more perplexing than the resuscitation of an identical physical body. As Matthew Sitman has suggested, we need something between the literalism that is uncomfortable with the paradox of the gospel accounts, and the reductionism of the resurrection to an embarrassing myth that merely inspires us with some vague hope.<sup>[204]</sup> When asked about the exact nature of the resurrection body in 1 Corinthians 15, Paul seems to be deliberately ambiguous.

For Paul, the resurrection is partly personal. God "will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body." (Philippians 3:21). And to the Corinthians (15:53): "For the perishable must clothe itself with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality. When the

perishable has been clothed with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality, then the saying that is written will come true: 'Death has been swallowed up in victory.'

'Where, O death, is your victory?

Where, O death, is your sting?'"

Jesus "destroyed death" (2 Timothy 1:10), our "last enemy" (1 Corinthians 15:26). He "disarmed the powers and authorities, and made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross" (Colossians 2:15). Jesus "tasted death for everyone," and "through death he rendered powerless him who had the power of death, that is, the devil" (Hebrews 2:9,14). And so the paradox, that by death Jesus conquered death.

More importantly, the resurrection is also cosmic. Paul says that God in Christ will "reconcile to himself *all things*, having made peace through the blood of his cross, whether things on earth or things in heaven" (Colossians 1:20). He will "sum up" or "bring together" "*all things* in heaven and on earth" (Ephesians 1:10). "The *whole creation*," says Paul, "will be liberated from its bondage to decay and be brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God." (Romans 8:21).

The Yale historian Jaroslav Pelikan pushes the boundaries: "If Christ is raised from the dead, nothing else matters. If he is not raised from the dead, nothing else matters." The poet John Betjeman called it "the most tremendous tale of all," that "God was man in Palestine / And lives today in Bread and Wine." For C.S. Lewis the resurrection was the "deeper magic before the dawn of time." Rowan Williams, former Archbishop of Canterbury, appealed to science. At Easter, he says, "we are really standing in the middle of a second 'Big Bang,' a tumultuous surge of divine energy as fiery and intense as the very beginning of the universe."

Evidence and argument only go so far. You can't prove the resurrection. On the one hand, the first witnesses insisted that their message was "true and reasonable," for the events they described were "not done in a corner" (Acts 26:25–26). They were public in nature. The story could be corroborated or refuted by people like Clavius, at least at some level and for a few years.

On the other hand, Luke acknowledges that the resurrected Jesus "was not seen by all the people, but by witnesses whom God had already chosen — by us who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead" (Acts 10:41). We're left with their witness, which

amounted to what Pelikan called "public evidence for a mystery." In the end, in language that Kierkegaard would later adopt for the title of one of his discourses, Peter challenges us: "judge for yourselves" (Acts 4:19).

### **For further reflection**

Daniel Berrigan (1921-2016)

#### *Credo*

I can only tell you what I believe; I believe:

I cannot be saved by foreign policies.

I cannot be saved by the sexual revolution.

I cannot be saved by the gross national product.

I cannot be saved by nuclear deterrents.

I cannot be saved by aldermen, priests, artists,

plumbers, city planners, social engineers,

nor by the Vatican,

nor by the World Buddhist Association,

nor by Hitler, nor by Joan of Arc,

nor by angels and archangels,

nor by powers and dominions,

I can be saved only by Jesus Christ.

Daniel Berrigan was a Jesuit priest, poet (15 volumes), playwright, author of fifty books, university professor, and peace activist. In 1968, he and eight other activists stole 378 draft files of young men who were about to be sent to Vietnam, dumped them into two garbage cans, poured homemade napalm on them, and burned them in the parking lot of the Catonsville, Maryland, draft board. In 1980, he trespassed into General Electric's nuclear missile plant in King of Prussia, Pennsylvania, poured blood on some warhead nose cones, then hammered away to punctuate his prophetic point. For these and similar activities, he and his brother Philip spent time on the FBI's Ten Most Wanted list, not to mention significant time in prison. When asked by Nora Gallagher how many times he had been imprisoned for the gospel, he replied, "not enough." See John Dear, editor, *Daniel Berrigan: Essential Writings* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2009).

## Chapter Six Breath of Life

### Ruach Elohim

When I was in seminary, I took two years of Greek and one year of Hebrew for my Masters of Divinity degree (the standard degree for ordination). Hebrew was especially hard, with its exotic alphabet and text that read from right to left. I've mostly forgotten my Hebrew, except for one phrase from the second verse in the Bible that I couldn't forget now even if I tried.

Genesis 1:2 reads that the primordial soup of pre-creation was *tohu wa-bohu*. That was fun to say out loud as a student — it rhymed, it was five simple syllables, and it was one of the few things that I could pronounce without mangling the language. It also made you feel like you enjoyed some mystical knowledge about creation.

*Tohu wa-bohu*. The stuff of creation was a formless or unformed waste. A shapeless, futile, and empty void. Darkness and desolation covered the watery deep. Things were chaotic.

But then a "great wind," the *ruach elohim*, blew over the waters. The simplest way to read this is a "strong and stormy wind," but interpreters have never been able to resist translating the *ruach elohim* as the wind, breath, or Spirit of the living God. The literal Breath of all Life.

Like a tender mother, God's Spirit lovingly hovers, broods, or "flutters" over the watery chaos. The verb *rachaph* is used only two other times in the Hebrew Old Testament. In Deuteronomy 32:11, God says that when he found his people in a "howling wasteland," he shielded, protected, or guarded them — "like an eagle that stirs up its nest and hovers over its young." Similarly, in the Greek New Testament, the Spirit is called the *paraclete*, an advocate or counselor who is called alongside to help, protect, encourage, and comfort us.

This Hebrew creation tradition that was adopted by the earliest Christians has always been radically monist, in contrast to the least hint of dualism — nothing ever has or could exist outside the original protective and motherly love of the Spirit of God. And so the ancient psalmist asks:

Where can I go from your Spirit?

Where can I flee from your presence?

If I go up to the heavens, you are there;  
if I make my bed in the depths, you are there.

If I rise on the wings of the dawn,  
if I settle on the far side of the sea,  
even there your hand will guide me,  
your right hand will hold me fast.

If I say, "Surely the darkness will hide me  
and the light become night around me,"  
even the darkness will not be dark to you;  
the night will shine like the day,  
for darkness is as light to you. [\[205\]](#)

A person can exist "outside" the church. We all suffer in darkness and struggle in weakness. Doubt and despair are part of life. But no one is ever bereft of the Spirit of creation. All that God originally created he continually sustains and will ultimately redeem through his Spirit.

God's Spirit lovingly broods and blows over our own lives, and over all creation and history. As with the original creation of the whole cosmos, so now with the recreation of our own lives. The Spirit of God forms the formless. He breathes spirit into matter. He creates purpose, order, and meaning out of the chaos. He fills the empty void with

beauty and goodness. He turns darkness into light, night into day, the evening into morning. He calls those things that don't exist into existence. The Comforter has come — everywhere, always, for all.

And so with the Nicene Creed, Christians confess their faith in “the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life, who proceeds from the Father and the Son, and who with the Father and the Son is worshiped and glorified.”

## **Pentecost**

Since about the second century, Christians have celebrated the feast of Pentecost to commemorate the descent of the Spirit and the birth of the church. After Christmas and Easter, Pentecost is the most important celebration in the liturgical calendar. The term comes from the Greek word *pentekostos*, meaning fiftieth, from which one of the most important feasts in the Jewish calendar derives its name. Fifty days after Passover, Jews celebrated the "Feast of Harvest" (Exodus 23:16) or "Feast of Weeks" (Leviticus 23:15–21).

Centuries later, after their exile to Babylon, Pentecost became one of the great pilgrimage feasts of Judaism, when Diaspora Jews returned to Jerusalem to worship. That's what we read about in Acts 2, where

Luke writes that on the first "Christian" Pentecost, "God-fearing Jews from every nation under heaven" clogged the streets of Jerusalem.

On the day of Pentecost, the Spirit of God descended upon the first followers of Jesus. Luke compares it to "the blowing of a violent wind," a conspicuously near equivalent of the *ruach elohim*, and to "tongues of fire," which echoes the story of Babel in Genesis 11. By the end of the day, and despite the mockery of critics, three thousand people had joined the Jesus movement. But compared to what happened in the coming years, that was small beer, only the beginning of what became the world's first fully globalized institution.

In his Acts of the Apostles, Luke repeatedly summarizes the numeric growth and geographic expansion of the newborn church. The movement burgeoned to over 5,000 "men" (Acts 4:4). In Acts 6:7 he describes how "the Word of God spread. The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly, and a large number of priests became obedient to the faith." A few pages later he says that "the church throughout Judea, Galilee and Samaria enjoyed a time of peace. It was strengthened; and encouraged by the Holy Spirit, it grew in numbers, living in the fear of the Lord" (9:31). As Paul and Barnabas

ministered in Antioch, "the word of the Lord spread through the whole region" (13:49).

The book of Acts ends with the apostle Paul imprisoned in Rome, where tradition says he was martyred — but not before he had trekked 10,000 miles across Asia Minor spreading the good news that God was in Christ reconciling the cosmos to himself. In those first decades, the early church fulfilled what Jesus had promised, that the presence of the Spirit meant witnessing with power “to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8). Paul’s very last words in his letter to the Romans was a prayer for “all nations” (16:26). Today, about a third of the world identifies itself as Christian, and no religion can claim more adherents.

But exactly what is this church, this community that is “called out” (*ek-klesia*)? What *should* it be? There are many ways to think about the presence of the Spirit in all the world. Three in particular have their narrative roots in the original creation story of Genesis and the *ruach elohim*.

### **Descent of the Dove: Peace**

Christians have always been people of the Book who worshiped the Word. It took a while, but Christians also became people of images,

and in those images they expressed their faith as much as they did in words.

Art and architecture flourished in classical Greece and Rome, of course, but "the Christians were slow to express their religious beliefs pictorially, and no churches, decorated tombs, nor indeed Christian works of art of any kind datable before the third century are known."

[\[206\]](#) This might have been because the earliest Christians were a persecuted and illicit sect comprised largely of people from lower socio-economic classes. They also inherited Judaism's ambivalence toward art that was rooted in the prohibition against graven images in Exodus 20:4.

Nonetheless, around the year 200, genuinely Christian art began to appear. The sixty catacombs in and around Rome that I mentioned in an earlier chapter, along with the discovery of a house church at Dura Europos in Syria dated to 240 AD, show how the earliest Christian art was not merely decorative but devotional; its purpose was not "objective beauty" but an "expression of faith." In the first decades of the third century, genuine Christian art appears on seal rings, tombs, clay lamps, engraved gems, and in one instance a marble statuette. A hundred years after that, Christian art adorns belt buckles and Bible

covers, plates and coins, intricate mosaics and ornate crosses. And before long, the church was one of the greatest patrons of the arts.

Just as Christians portrayed Jesus as a shepherd, fish, anchor, or a lamb, they also represented the Holy Spirit as a dove. The symbolism comes from the story when Noah sent a dove out from the ark to see if the flood waters had receded. When the dove returned, "there in its beak was a freshly plucked olive leaf" (Genesis 8:11). At long last, there was peace and safety for all humanity.

In perhaps the earliest *textual* reference to Christian art, Clement of Alexandria (150–215) writes that Christians could borrow pagan symbols as long as they were appropriate. Swords and bows would be inappropriate, he said, because they signaled war and violence, but a dove was suitable, said Clement, "since we follow peace."

As we saw in the last chapter, in all three synoptic gospels, when John baptized Jesus, the Spirit descended upon him as a dove (Matthew 3:16 = Mark 1:10 = Luke 3:22). The illuminated Syriac Rabbula Gospel from the sixth century, like thousands of similar images thereafter, reminds us that Pentecost celebrates the descent of the dove and the peace of the Spirit into our own lives today. Truly "pentecostal" believers are people of peace who repudiate every

manifestation of the violence that we have previously considered, whether sacred or secular.

"Seek peace and pursue it," wrote the ancient psalmist (Psalm 34:14). "Make every effort to live in peace with all people," says Hebrews 12:14. "Make every effort to do what leads to peace," wrote Paul in Romans 14:19. As followers of the Prince of Peace (Isaiah 9:6) and the "Lord of peace," we wish every person "peace at all times and in every way" (1 Thessalonians 3:16). "Blessed are the peacemakers," said Jesus (Matthew 5:9).

In 2016 when my wife and I walked the 350-mile *La Via di Francesco* from Florence to Assisi to Rome, and walked through those catacombs with their frescoes, every morning before we set off we recited the so-called Peace Prayer of Saint Francis of Assisi (1182–1226).

Lord, make me an instrument of your peace.

Where there is hatred, let me sow love;

Where there is error, truth;

Where there is injury, pardon;

Where there is doubt, faith;

Where there is despair, hope;

Where there is darkness, light;  
And where there is sadness, joy.  
O Divine Master, grant that I may not so much seek  
To be consoled as to console;  
To be understood as to understand;  
To be loved as to love.  
For it is in giving that we receive;  
It is in pardoning that we are pardoned;  
It is in self-forgetting that we find;  
And it is in dying to ourselves that we are born to eternal life.  
Amen.

We don't know the real author of this famous prayer, and it was not until the 1920s that it was even ascribed to Saint Francis. By one account the prayer was found in 1915 in Normandy, written on the back of a card of Saint Francis. Whatever its provenance, it certainly expresses the Spirit of Peace who was portrayed as a dove in both words and images by the first believers.

### **Noah's Ark: Baptismal Protection**

The Genesis flood produced another metaphor to describe the post-Pentecost church. In 1 Peter 3, the author compares church baptism

to Noah's ark:

"For Christ also died for sins once for all, the just for the unjust, so that he might bring us to God, having been put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit; in which also he went and made proclamation to the spirits now in prison, who once were disobedient, when the patience of God kept waiting in the days of Noah, during the construction of the ark, in which a few, that is, eight persons, were brought safely through the water. Corresponding to that, baptism now saves you — not the removal of dirt from the flesh, but an appeal to God for a good conscience — through the resurrection of Jesus Christ."

Scholars debate every detail of these complicated verses — the punctuation, the pronouns, the verb tenses, the meaning of every word. The references to Noah, the flood, and his ark have provoked the best and worst from Christians.

You can visit full-size replicas of Noah's ark in Holland and Hong Kong. Bogus pseudo-science explains the flood. Since the third century, explorers have tried to find the archaeological remains of the ark. There's also the cruel theology of the church fathers that just as

there was no salvation outside of Noah's ark, there's no salvation outside the Christian church.

But Noah's story has also inspired our better angels, like the artistic expressions of Noah's ark and the dove we have just considered, in catacomb frescoes, illuminated manuscripts, massive church doors, mosaics, tapestries, and more. Hugh of St. Victor (d. 1141) wrote three treatises based upon Noah's ark.

Beyond its inherent complications, 1 Peter 3 makes a simple but profound point when it compares church baptism to Noah's ark — the church should be a place of refuge, safety, and salvation. It is a life boat. A shelter from the raging storms of life. In the only other occurrence of this Hebrew word *teba* (ark), Moses is similarly saved from the waters of the Nile River when he is placed in the safety of a basket, chest, or miniature ark (Exodus 2:3).

Traditional church architecture has expressed this “theology” of Noah's ark as a place of God's protection. The main part of the church where the congregation sits is called the nave. The word "nave" comes from the Latin word *navis*, meaning ship (a collection of ships is a "navy"). The church nave symbolizes a ship with its vaulted ceiling

looking like an inverted keel. And so the church is a safe place in a storm.

In his book *Whistling in the Dark: A Doubter's Dictionary* (1988), Frederick Buechner comments on the church as Noah's ark:

“In one as in the other, just about everything imaginable is aboard, the clean and the unclean both. They are all piled in together helter-skelter, the predators and the prey, the wild and the tame, the sleek and beautiful ones and the ones that are ugly as sin. There are sly young foxes and impossible old cows. There are the catty and the piggish and the peacock-proud. There are hawks and there are doves. Some are wise as owls, some silly as geese; some meek as lambs and others fire-breathing dragons. There are times when they all cackle and grunt and roar and sing together, and there are times when you could hear a pin drop. Most of them have no clear idea just where they're supposed to be heading or how they're supposed to get there or what they'll find if and when they finally do, but they figure the people in charge must know and in the meanwhile sit back on their haunches and try to enjoy the ride.

It's not all enjoyable. There's backbiting just like everywhere else. There's a pecking order. There's jostling at the trough. There's

growling and grouching, bitching and whining. There are dogs in the manger and old goats and black widows. It's a regular menagerie in there, and sometimes it smells to high Heaven like one.

But even at its worst, there's at least one thing that makes it bearable within, and that is the storm without — the wild winds and terrible waves and in all the watery waste no help in sight.

And at its best there is, if never clear sailing, shelter from the blast, a sense of somehow heading in the right direction in spite of everything, a ship to keep afloat, and, like a beacon in the dark, the hope of finding safe harbor at last."

Thus, the Spirit of the dove, the rainbow, the ark, and Jesus's baptism effected a great reversal. Whereas the waters of the Flood brought death and destruction, the waters of baptism and the safety of the church bring new life, protection from danger, and a shelter in the storm.

At my church, when we celebrate Christian baptism, the priest pours water on the baby three times, and then makes the sign of the cross on the baby's forehead. As he does so, he recites those beautiful and powerful words: "You have been sealed with the Holy Spirit and marked with the cross of Christ. You belong to God."

The baptismal party then processes down the center aisle of our church. Leading the way is a person who holds high a red banner with the words of Isaiah 43:1: "I have called you by name, you are mine." At the end of the group, the father asperges the congregation to remind us of our own baptisms.

In the outward ritual of baptism we enact an inward spiritual reality — that every person has a name, and that God knows every name. The oily cross on the baby's brow will wear off, but not the unconditional promise that she belongs to God. Forever. Full stop. Nothing can ever change that.

Although baptism is a ritual of the church, it's also a sign to the world. What's true for that baby is true for me, for you, and for every person. We belong to God. He knows our names, and he's calling every one of us to himself.

In his own baptism, Jesus received a new name — he was beloved by God. Writing in the *Huffington Post* about the baptism of Jesus, Vicki Flippin of The Church of the Village in New York City says, "I tell folks that baptism is the church declaring what has always been true, that each of us belongs to God and only to God. The child is claimed by God above all other claims."

Many malignant forces try to name and claim us. Baptism reminds us that first and foremost, above and beyond all other claims — however legitimate or oppressive — we belong to God. He knows and calls us by name.

We don't belong to our boss or the bank. We don't belong to an abusive spouse or our addictive impulses. We're not defined by sickness, success or failure. We don't belong to the political propagandists or the advertising industry. We're not the sum total of our poor choices, painful memories, or bad dreams. "Even though it might feel like, look like, smell like, hurt like you belong to all these other things," says Flippin, "as sure as water is wet and God is good, I heard a voice out of the heavens say it: 'You belong to God.' Our baptism can remind us that no one determines our worth in this world or in the next other than God."

God created each one of us. He cares for every person like a brooding mother. And in baptism he calls us by a new name: "you are my beloved."

In real life, we know that for many people the church has not been a welcoming and reliably safe place. Quite the opposite---it has been a place of fear, shame, and guilt. In his book *What's So Amazing About*

*Grace?*, Philip Yancey tells the story of a prostitute who, when she was encouraged to go to church for help, responded, “Church! Why would I ever go there? I already feel terrible about myself. They would just make me feel worse.”

Despite our many historical failures, we do have positive examples to encourage us. When Jean Vanier founded his communities for people with disabilities to live safely in our violent world, he needed a name. His friend Jacqueline d’Halluin suggested the French word *L’Arche*—an ark or shelter.

The symbolism was perfect, and the name stuck. The story of an ark of salvation for all humanity occurs in the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures, the Quran, the Hindu and Baha’i scriptures, as well as in the mythology of other early cultures. It’s a place of safety and protection in the raging storm.

Back in 1987, I taught for three weeks at the Bangui Evangelical School of Theology in the Central African Republic. The seminary was closed in 2014 due to the chaos that engulfed the country for two years. Ban Ki-moon described the C.A.R. as in “free fall.” France and the UN warned of genocide. Leaders of the African Union worried that

the country could slip “into the abyss.” One quarter of the population had been displaced.

But in the midst of all that chaos and violence, the seminary campus became a shelter for 1500 refugees, including Muslim families. And that’s precisely what Pentecost calls our churches to be—places of refuge, safety, belonging, and protection.

### **Babel: Diversity Unified**

In an earlier chapter I mentioned the linguist Richard Pittman, who in 1951 produced a mimeographed list of the 46 known languages of the world. He called it his “ethnologue.” Today’s massive 20th edition documents 7,099 known “living languages.”

Language is fascinating, but it can also be lethal. Throughout history it has been yet another cause for violence and exclusion. In Judges 12, the Gileadites slaughtered 42,000 Ephraimites when the latter were exposed as the “enemy” because they incorrectly pronounced the word “Shibboleth” as “Sibboleth.” The orphan Moses learned the Egyptian language and customs, while the Babylonian exiles Daniel and his three friends were not only “re-educated” in a new language and literature, but also given new names.

In the former Soviet Union, a country composed of hundreds of ethnolinguistic groups that spanned eleven time zones, the government stripped people of their ethnic identities by forcing them to speak Russian. When the Soviet Union imploded in 1991, the oppressed became the new oppressors, and the ethnic Russians who lived in the former republics were often forced to speak languages like Lithuanian or Latvian. A hotel worker in Helsinki once boasted to me how although Sweden had dominated Finland for 700 years (1150–1809), "they never could take our language."

Among Christians, language has been a cause for division. Early on, strife emerged between Greek-speaking Jews who complained that the Aramaic-speakers overlooked their widows in the distribution of food (Acts 6). The Latin-speaking Catholic west based in Rome and the Greek-speaking Orthodox east based in Constantinople divided in the Great Schism of 1054. During the Protestant Reformation, the Catholic Church banned translations of the Bible into the everyday vernacular of the common laity: "Bibles were publicly and ceremonially burned, like heretics...As a result [of the 1596 Roman Index ban], between 1567 and 1773 [200 years!], not a single edition of an Italian-language Bible was printed anywhere in the Italian peninsula."

[\[207\]](#) Luther famously translated the entire Bible into the common vernacular of ordinary Germans.

How subversive, then, that with the descent of the Holy Spirit and the birth of the church God featured human language—one of the most divisive characteristics of human nature—as a sign and symbol of his new community.

Luke describes how at Pentecost diasporate Jews “from every nation of the world” converged upon Jerusalem. He specifies at least fifteen ethno-linguistic groups. Then, in a miracle of speaking, hearing, and understanding, the Holy Spirit descended upon the first believers, and they “began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them....Each one heard them speaking in his own language...How is it that each of us hears them in his own native language? We hear them declaring the wonders of God in our own tongues!” Whatever “speaking in tongues” might mean, at least here it involved known languages.

When some people in the crowd ridiculed the believers as drunk, Peter explained that a momentous time had arrived in salvation history, a time when God was now calling not only Jews but

"*all people*" (Acts 2:17) to a life of the Spirit in his community called the church.

Acts 2 clearly echoes Genesis 11 and the story of the Tower of Babel. As I mentioned in a previous chapter, Genesis 12:1 marks a sharp turn in Scripture where God begins his formation of the one nation Israel through the single man Abraham. Which is to say that Genesis 11 is the last chapter about the whole world and all peoples.

At Babel, God *confused* "the same language and the same words" (literally, "one lip") that were used by all humanity, and that characterized their hubris to make a name for themselves "lest we be scattered." God also *scattered* humanity "over the face of whole earth." There was a specific reason why God confused and scattered the people: "so that they may not understand one another's speech."[\[208\]](#)

Pentecost reversed this curse. At Pentecost, God *clarified* the confusion of languages and *gathered* the people who were scattered. He united those who were separated by the misunderstandings of different languages. At Babel, language was a cause for confusion, division, and separation. At Pentecost, language became an occasion for gathering, uniting, and understanding. Instead of being a curse, at

Pentecost diverse languages became a blessing of God's grace and a sign of his kingdom. Understanding and clarity replaced confusion and division.

In another sense, God didn't exactly "reverse" Babel and the multiplication of languages. There's no return to a time and place of a single language used by humanity to relate to God and each other. Rather, instead of the uniformity of one language, God blessed and perfected humanity's linguistic diversity and made it a sign of his new community. All languages and peoples were welcomed in all their glorious diversity.

There is here a unity in diversity. In contrast to the cacophony of language, the hubris of humanity, and the scattering of a divisive humanity in Genesis 11, in Acts 2 the Pentecost community celebrates, incorporates, and then transcends barriers of race, social stratification, economics, ethnicity, language, and gender. Diversity without division, and unity without uniformity, become the signs of God's people.

And so Debie Thomas asks: "Was God saying that his Church, from its very inception, needed to honor the boundless variety and creativity of human voices? That he was calling it to proclaim the great deeds of

God in every tongue — not merely because multiculturalism is progressive and fashionable, or because the church is a ‘politically correct’ institution — but because God's deeds themselves demand such diverse tellings? Could it be that there is no single language on earth that can capture the deeds of God?” The newly born church at Pentecost became a place of “deep and implicit belonging” not just for one people but for all humanity. And that is the sign of the kingdom today: a message of divine welcome that every person can hear with clarity, as if it was in their own mother tongue. [\[209\]](#)

At the end of the Bible, in John's book of Revelation, the reality inaugurated at Pentecost culminates in a linguistic extravaganza that pictures heaven as populated by "a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people, and language." (Revelation 7:9). Pentecost and the birth of the unified-but-diverse church thus reverses the scattering and confusion of Babel, and blesses humanity's vast diversity that gathers everyone into a welcoming community.

### **Church, Kingdom, and Succession**

Jesus promised a kingdom, goes the joke, but what we got was the church. The church that began at Pentecost eventually became

bureaucratized, in ways both small and large. What began as a radical movement of the Spirit has in some ways become a sclerotic human institution. It's obvious that the kingdom of God and the institution of the church are related but different. But identifying the genuine successors of the original Pentecost event is a murky business.

It's easy to criticize the church as a flawed organization, but the institutionalization of the Pentecost movement was inevitable. It was also necessary. Nothing happens without Spirit-inspired people, but nothing lasts without bureaucratic institutions. There were many legitimate and complex questions, both back then and today.

How do you organize 5,000 new converts? What is the message? What constitutes proper worship and why? Could Gentiles join this Jewish sect, and if they did, must they observe the Mosaic traditions? Who can lead and why? How broad or narrow are the boundaries of church? What are reasonable protocols for feeding widows, collecting money for famine relief, sending out missionaries like Paul and Barnabas, or adjudicating disputes? In short, where is the Spirit of God blowing, where is his fire burning, and how can you be sure? These and many other questions required that the movement of the Spirit become an ecclesiastical organization.

From those first tongues of fire described by Luke until today, from small beginnings as a vibrant movement to enormous institutions that two billion Christians call home, that has been the perennial challenge—how do you bottle the lightning? How do you facilitate the Spirit's fire without shattering the bottle or extinguishing the flame?[\[210\]](#) Where is the wheat, and what is mere chaff?

Virtually every institutional expression of Christianity has claimed to be the true and sole successor of Pentecost. The Catholic and Orthodox denominations make this claim explicitly, as do the churches of the Protestant Reformation that distinguish between the “true” and “false” church. Others, like the Seventh Day Adventist and the Mormon churches, make the claim more implicitly, seeing themselves as a faithful remnant of an otherwise corrupt and merely human institution.

There are also what David Barrett calls “neo-apostolic” movements. Distinct from traditional Protestants, Catholics, or Orthodox Christians, and numbering about 400 million Christians in 20,000 “movements,” neo-apostolic believers “reject historical denominationalism and restrictive or overbearing central authority.” In Barrett's estimate they will constitute 581 million members by the year 2025, *120 million more than all Protestant movements*. In two decades these sectarian

movements will outnumber Orthodox and Protestant Christians and be almost half the size of worldwide Catholicism.[\[211\]](#)

There have been different suggestions about the marks, signs or sacraments of the true church. The Council of Nicea in 381 said the church was one, holy, catholic or universal, and apostolic. For Catholics, there are seven sacraments or means of grace: baptism, confirmation or chrismation, eucharist, penance, anointing of the sick, holy orders, and marriage. The Protestant Reformers typically reduced the sacraments to two: baptism and the Lord's Supper. The Reformed traditions also refer to two marks of the "true" church— the "pure" preaching of the Word, and the "right" administration of the sacraments, with church discipline sometimes mentioned as a third mark.

Catholics have likewise commended the seven *corporal* works of mercy that Christians are expected to practice — feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, clothe the naked, welcome the stranger (or shelter the homeless), heal the sick, visit the imprisoned, and bury the dead; and the seven *spiritual* works of mercy — counsel the doubtful, instruct the ignorant, admonish sinners, comfort the afflicted, forgive

offenses willingly, bear wrongs patiently, and pray for the living and the dead. [\[212\]](#)

In three of his letters the apostle Paul identifies the gifts or *charismata* of the church. When you consolidate the three lists, there are roughly twenty “gifts” of the Spirit for the edification of the church—exhortation, leadership, giving, mercy, service, teaching, discernment, and so on. It’s not clear what some of these gifts meant back then, or what they might mean today. It does seem clear that we should not read these as a definitive or official list of the only *charismata* of the church. [\[213\]](#)

An unfortunate but perhaps unavoidable tradition evolved regarding the primary responsibility for practicing the gifts of the Spirit. Most churches have commissioned a separate class of people—missionaries, monastics, and clergy, to carry out the sacraments, signs, and works of mercy (corporate and spiritual). Other churches today are experimenting with new ways to think about our sacred callings in the so-called secular world, or, our secular callings in God’s sacred world.

At Central Presbyterian Church on Park Avenue in New York City, pastor Jason Harris commissions some of his congregants to their

sacred vocations of secular work — finance people, lawyers, artists, and health care providers. He wants to bridge the gap between sacred and secular callings. In this view, virtually all callings are sacred.

Similarly, pastor Ryan Beattie of Bellevue Presbyterian Church in Washington has done four such commissioning services. In the backyards of Microsoft and Amazon, he blesses his parishioners and has them stand to explain what they do and why they do it. It's an effort to connect worship on Sunday with work on Monday.

Pastor Jon Tyson of Trinity Grace Church in New York describes how Steve Garber of the Washington Institute for Faith, Vocation & Culture challenged him: “There are people who labor all week long, and you bring missionaries up front and you pray for them, and you commission and send them out. Wouldn't it be an amazing thing if you could take the people and send them into the city that you love so much, so that they felt like missionaries to their industries?”

Since that challenge from Garber, Tyson has started a new practice. Before he preaches, he has a parishioner from a specific vocational sector come forward, then he has people in the congregation who work in that same field to stand up. They are then blessed to fulfill their commission. After one such service, a teacher remarked to

Tyson, "That was the most powerful moment in my entire life in church. Thank you."[\[214\]](#)

I have a friend in my church who's a corporate attorney. After reading the book *Lean In; Women, Work, and the Will to Lead* by Sheryl Sandberg, she joked that she wanted to write a Christian and counter-cultural response called *Lean Out*. It wasn't that she so much disagreed with Sandberg's message, but rather that at her age and stage, and in a world that defines work and success in narrow ways, she was more interested in directly "spiritual" aspects of life like care for the poor and her pro bono work.

But recently this friend took a new job at a new firm, where she leads the pro bono and women's initiatives programs. So, once again, she's "leaning in," by choice, and being a presence of God's kingdom in her work-a-day world. And let's not forget all those who work inside the home instead of outside, more often than not without pay, more often than not women rather than men, some by choice and others by necessity. They, too, have a sacred calling.

Every spiritual gift, every call to love the world, and every vocation is uniquely personal, deeply sacred, and essential for the church of Pentecost to be very much in the world, even as it is not of the world.

This was one of the enduring legacies of the Reformation, that every believer is a priest with a sacred calling, and not just a special class of clerics. This “priesthood of all believers” has found its most radical or consistent expression in groups like the Quakers or the Plymouth Brethren that reject the idea of ordination for anyone at all, or official titles like “reverend.”[\[215\]](#)

We can simplify by returning to the original Pentecost question that the people asked: “what does this mean?” (Acts 2:12). Luke answers his own question: “They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer” (Acts 2:42). Paul likewise simplifies and clarifies even further with two telling phrases.

### **The Only Thing They Asked**

If the Spirit of God hovers over all creation like a tender mother, if the Spirit is the breath of all life and the one called alongside to help and to encourage us (*paraclete*), and if the descent of the Spirit means peace, protection and inclusion for all people, then it comes as no surprise that the Pentecost community cared for the poor.

"All the believers were together," writes Luke, "and had everything in common. Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone

as he had need" (Acts 2:44–45). Later he describes how "no one claimed that any of his possessions was his own, but they shared everything they had. There were no needy persons among them. From time to time those who owned lands or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales and put it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to anyone as he had need." Barnabas "sold a field he owned and brought the money and put it at the apostles' feet" (Acts 4:32–37).

A few pages later, Luke describes the "daily distribution of food" to widows (Acts 6). And after that, we read about a church in Antioch, three hundred miles north of Jerusalem, where the disciples "were first called *Christianoi*" (perhaps in derision), taking a collection for famine relief and sending it back to the mother church with Saul and Barnabas (11:29).

Care for the poor had its roots in the Hebrew Scriptures (cf. the prophet Amos or Psalm 146) and in the mission and message of Jesus. In perhaps the hardest of all his hard sayings, Jesus told the rich young ruler, "if you would be perfect, go, sell what you possess and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come,

follow me." Jesus connected the material care for the poor in this life with spiritual treasure in the next life.

He also said that our judgment before God in the next life will be based on how we treat the poor in this life: "I was hungry and you gave me something to eat," said Jesus, "I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me." (Matthew 25:31–46). To follow Jesus, to feel the breath of his Spirit, to reflect the character of a fatherly God, means to care for the poor.

"True and undefiled religion," writes James, is to care for widows and orphans.

Paul's example is especially instructive. Unknown to the leaders in Jerusalem, except for his ferocious reputation for persecuting the church, he needed their imprimatur for his own missionary efforts. When he met with the leaders in Jerusalem, he says that "the only thing they asked us to do was to remember the poor, the very thing I was eager to do" (Galatians 2:10). For ten years and 10,000 miles, Paul traveled among groups of new believers, and at each stop he

encouraged churches to contribute financially for the care of the poor, most notably, for example, in 1 Corinthians 8 and 2 Corinthians 8.

Pentecost started a long tradition of the Christian care for the poor that flourishes even in our own day. A hundred years after Pentecost, Tertullian wrote how God had a "peculiar respect" for the lowly, and that caring for the poor was the "distinctive sign" of believers. The pagan emperor Julian the Apostate (361–363), who vehemently opposed Christians and stripped them of their rights and privileges, acknowledged the Christian preferential option for the poor: "The godless Galileans feed not only their poor but ours."

Caring for the poor reflects the character of God. In 1971, Gustavo Gutiérrez (b. 1928) published a book called *A Theology of Liberation*, which established his reputation as the "father of liberation theology," and made famous the notion of a "preferential option for the poor." Gutiérrez is a Dominican priest and theologian who splits his time between his parish in Lima, Peru, where for fifty years he lived and worked among the poor, and teaching at Notre Dame University.

When people like Gutiérrez who minister in the poorest parts of the world coined the term "preferential option for the poor" forty years ago, they said something not only about our human choices, but also about

an essential aspect of God's character that demands a response. In their view, God is biased, even prejudiced. Far from being neutral or impartial, they argued that God plays favorites by bestowing special favor on the dispossessed. And he asks us to do the same. [\[216\]](#)

Caring for the poor is also to care for your own soul. The Catholic tradition construes the care for the poor in a way that makes Protestants uncomfortable, but which nonetheless claims biblical roots like those above about the rich young ruler and the last judgment, where Jesus himself connects the poor in this life with reward or loss in the next life.

Care for the poor isn't just a utilitarian act of social justice (Bill Gates does that), an altruistic act with no element of self-interest or expectation of reward (per Kant), and not even merely a sign of a believer's personal faith (per the Protestant Reformers). Rather, in the Catholic tradition, care for the poor is "the privileged way to serve God."

We care for the poor not out of guilt, ascetic renunciation (although God calls some people to that path), social solidarity, some communistic ideal that loathes private property, because the poor are virtuous, or even compassion. Rather, in serving the poor we care for

our own souls by imitating the character of God. Only in heaven, said Mother Teresa, will we understand how much we owe the poor for helping us to love God like we should.

For Catholics, across the centuries, alms giving became a "purely expiatory action" for the atonement of sin, "to heal and protect one's soul." The connection between our current earthly life and our later heavenly life is human agency: care for the poor.<sup>[217]</sup> In the words of James Forbes, the former pastor of Riverside Church in New York City, "Nobody gets to heaven without a letter of reference from the poor."

For almost four centuries, this care for the poor was the normal work of everyday Christians. In his two monumental books, Peter Brown rejects "the great myth of the primal poverty of the early Christians." Nor did Constantine usher in a time of new wealth for the church. That did not happen for another generation, says Brown, until the year 370 or so.

Until then, he credits the down-market "mediocres" or "in-betweeners" with being the church's biggest supporters — the "middling people" between the super rich and the oppressed poor, artisans, small farmers, small town clerics, tradesmen, and minor officials. These

people who "knew their place" were "the solid keel of the Christian congregations through the fifth century." Their giving represented not merely random expressions of compassion for the poor, but also pious acts to transfer wealth on earth to treasure in heaven.

The late fourth century marked a turning point, when significant money entered what until then had been a church of no significant wealth, populated by those "mediocres," and devoid of social status. What followed was "an explosion of writing" on the subject of wealth by luminaries like Ambrose, Augustine, and Jerome. Only with the final fall of the Roman empire in the late fifth century did powerful bishops fill the void created by the collapse of the imperial aristocracy.

There are no easy answers here to the hard sayings of Jesus about wealth, about reflecting the character of God by helping the weak, and caring for your soul by caring for the bodies of others. Brown documents the many and various ways that the social imaginations of believers of this limited time and place grappled with the challenge, from radical renunciation by the super rich, the "anti-wealth" of the ascetics, care of the poor, the everyday generosity of ordinary believers, and, finally, the clerical stewardship of massive wealth as God's providential gift.

Care for the poor is one of the things that the church has done well, and that has no counterpart even remotely similar in scale and scope among our atheist friends.[\[218\]](#) There are far too many examples one could give, but consider just these four.

In 2012, the Missionaries of Charity founded by Mother Teresa had over 4,500 nuns serving the poorest of the poor in 133 countries.

[\[219\]](#) The Catholic Worker Movement founded by Dorothy Day and Peter Maurin in 1933 has over 185 communities that are committed to nonviolence, voluntary poverty, prayer, and hospitality for the homeless, exiled, hungry, and forsaken.[\[220\]](#) In 1950, the Baptist minister Bob Pierce (1914–1978) founded World Vision with the words, "Let my heart be broken with the things that break the heart of God." Today World Vision is a billion dollar a year relief agency.

[\[221\]](#) Millard Fuller (1935–2009) was a self-made millionaire by age twenty-nine who renounced his wealth to follow Jesus. He joined an interracial community in Georgia called Koinonia Farms, and out of that context founded Habitat for Humanity that builds housing for the poor all over the world.[\[222\]](#)

Care for the poor is a mark of Pentecost. Paul says that it was “the only thing” that the leaders in Jerusalem asked of him, and that it was

“the very thing I was eager to do.”

## **The Only Thing That Matters**

At Pentecost the believers “devoted themselves” to each other and to caring for the poor. In the language of Paul to the Ephesians, they “lived a life of love.” Like caring for the poor, faith expressing itself in love “is the only thing that matters.” (Galatians 5:6).

By one count there are 613 *mizvot* or "commandments" in the five books of Moses. The purity laws of Leviticus chapters 11–26 encompass nearly every aspect of human life —birth, death, sex, gender, health, economics, agriculture, jurisprudence, social relations, hygiene, marriage, behavior, and even ethnicity (Gentiles were automatically considered impure).

It’s not clear how much or little ordinary first-century Jews concerned themselves with maintaining "ritual purity" by obeying the holiness code in Leviticus, but the Pharisees about whom we read so much in the gospels certainly did. And so in Matthew 22 a Pharisee who is described as an "expert" in the law "tested" Jesus with a question: “Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?” (Matthew 22:36). It’s a good question when you consider the obligation to follow over 600 commandments.

Maybe this was a trick question designed to trap Jesus. If he privileged a single commandment, didn't that mean he neglected others? How dare he imply that we can wink at some of God's laws! Or if he suggested that all the commandments were equally weighty, didn't that contradict common sense? Surely a tattoo (Leviticus 19:28) isn't as morally weighty as child sacrifice (Leviticus 18:21). Or maybe the expert was posing an honest inquiry: "Lord, so many commands! How should we understand them all? Are some more important than others?"

Buried deep in the holiness code was one, single command, Leviticus 19:18, that Jesus said was more important than the 612 others. Jesus responded to the "expert" that the most important commandment is this: "'Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength' [Deuteronomy 6:4]. The second is this: 'Love your neighbor as yourself' [Leviticus 19:18]. There is no commandment greater than these." The questioner liked Jesus's answer and affirmed that these two commands were "more important than all burnt offerings and sacrifices."

With that deft response Jesus linked our love for God with love for our neighbor. You cannot separate the two. To have one is to have the other, and to neglect one is to lose them both.

In John 13, Jesus gave his disciples what he called a “new” commandment: “Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. All people will know that you are my disciples if you love one another.” God's redemption of the world is thus mediated through the love of his people.

It's not obvious in what sense Jesus's commandment is "new." It's an ancient commandment that goes back 3000 years to the founding of the Hebrew community: "Love your neighbor as yourself," says Leviticus 19:18. But that interesting technical question shouldn't distract us from the call of Jesus to love the world without qualification or exception.

In his commentary on Galatians 6:10, the church father Jerome describes how John the evangelist, author of the gospel and book of Revelation, preached at Ephesus into his nineties. Christian tradition holds that he died around the year 100.

At that age, John was so feeble that he had to be carried into the church at Ephesus on a stretcher. Then, when he could no longer

preach a normal sermon, he would lean up on one elbow. The only thing he said was, "Little children, love one another." People would then carry him back out of the church.

This continued for weeks, says Jerome. And every week he repeated his one-sentence sermon: "Little children, love one another."

Weary of the repetition, the congregation finally asked, "Master, why do you always say this?"

"Because," John replied, "it is the Lord's command, and if this only is done, it is enough."

In Romans 13, Paul compares love to a debt that we can never fully repay. It's one of six texts that link our claim to love God with evidence that we love our neighbor.

Paul writes: "Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another, for he who loves his neighbor has fulfilled the law." The entire Old Testament law, says Paul, "may be summed up in this one rule: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'"

Writing to the Galatians, he said, "The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself in love. The entire law is summed up in a single command: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'"

James 2:8 repeats this message almost verbatim: "If you really keep the royal law found in Scripture, 'Love your neighbor as yourself,' you are doing right."

And then there's John: "If anyone says, 'I love God,' yet hates his brother, he is a liar. For anyone who does not love his brother, whom he has seen, cannot love God, whom he has not seen. And he has given us this command: Whoever loves God must also love his brother" (1 John 4:20–21).

Love, said Paul in 1 Corinthians 13, is the greatest gift, without which I'm just whistling in the dark.

As the chaplain at Yale University, William Sloan Coffin (1924–2006), pushed back against intellectual idolatry. He observed how students at Yale "thought *cogito ergo sum* (I think, therefore I am) was what it was all about, and Yale was encouraging them to think that." Coffin suggested a subversive counter-proposal: "I felt very deeply that it's *amo ergo sum* (I love, therefore I am)." [\[223\]](#)

This Latin phrase, which is actually the title of a 2002 book by the German Christina Kessler, can be translated slightly differently to make the point more radical: "I am because I love." Or as Wendell Berry put it, I only live to the extent that I love. In his book of poetry

called *Leavings* (2012), Berry points the way for us in a short poem-prayer:

"I know that I have life  
only insofar as I have love.

I have no love  
except it come from Thee.

Help me, please, to carry  
This candle against the wind."

Saint Maximos the Confessor (580–662) put it his way: "Blessed is the person who can love all people equally ... always thinking good of everyone."

### **Coming Back for More**

My grandmother Hildred Esterly was fourteen years old when her father became the pastor of the First Presbyterian Church in Columbiana, Ohio. That was in 1917. She stayed in that church for seventy-nine years, and was buried there in 1996 at the age of ninety-three. That's a long life in one church.

My father had a different experience. When I was in high school, he quit church. He never went back, and he never said why. I don't know

this to be true, but I like to think that he lost his faith in the church as an institution, but not his faith in God or the gospel.

There are many reasons to quit church, some of them good ones. We have already considered those. Some people long for a return to the "golden age" of the earliest believers. The Pentecost story disabuses us of that romantic fallacy. There were arguments about food distribution. Paul had such a sharp disagreement with Barnabas over the reliability of the young John Mark that they parted ways.

Paul taught at Corinth for eighteen months (Acts 18:11). He knew those people well. In his letters to the Corinthians Paul addressed numerous ugly issues — sectarian divisions in which all sides claimed to be more spiritual than the other, boasting about incest ("and of a kind that does not occur even among pagans"), lawsuits between Christians, eating food that had been sacrificed to pagan idols, disarray in worship services, and predatory pseudo-preachers who masqueraded as super-apostles.

The earliest churches were as troubled as our own churches today. If you find the perfect church, goes the joke, don't join it because you'll ruin it. Despite its many faults, and despite the futility of finding a pure

or perfect church of any time or place, I keep coming back for more church week after week. That merits some explanation.

First, I lower my expectations and expand my horizons. God's kingdom is not identical with the institutional church. At its best, the church mediates and points to God's kingdom, but God often works beyond and in spite of the church. Jesus compared God's kingdom to a fish net that catches both the good and the bad, or to wheat and weeds that grow together. The inner circle of Jesus's followers included the traitor Judas and the betrayer Peter. "There are many sheep without," wrote Augustine, "and many wolves within." The church is like your family, says a friend of mine: you know what you can and cannot get from it.

Furthermore, when I go to church I experience much good — couples working to hold their marriages together, parishioners serving the civic good of public schools, generosity to the poor, hospital visitation of the sick, efforts at building community in an individualistic society, adoption of orphans, outreach to victims of HIV and AIDS, care for unwed teenage mothers, building schools and hospitals in places that would otherwise never have them, and so on.

Focusing only on its faults distorts the true nature of the church. For all of the barbarities of Spanish colonization, there's a Bartolome de las Casas (1484–1566), a Dominican priest who defended Native Americans for fifty years. For every impulse of greed, there's the selfless compassion of a Mother Teresa, whether known or unknown. For every craven acquiescence to political power, there's a Thomas More (1478–1535) who spoke truth to those powers.

Even though God's kingdom is broader than the church, in some mysterious manner the church is still God's ordained human institution where he has chosen to work. The most famous (and controversial) expression of this truth comes from Cyprian (200–258), bishop of Carthage in North Africa. In his treatise *On the Unity of the Church*, he wrote that "outside of the church there is no salvation," and that "you cannot have God for your Father unless you have the Church for your Mother." Protestants cringe at these words, but both Calvin and Luther quoted them almost verbatim. Luther would also say, as only Luther could, that "yes, the church is a whore, but she's still my mother."

So, however imperfect, I want to situate myself where God has said he is present. Flannery O'Connor said that she sat at her writing desk every morning so that she would be ready if and when an idea came

to her. Likewise, in her memoir *Ordinary Time*, Nancy Mairs writes that she moved beyond her lapsed Catholic faith and returned to church, even though she still had many questions, so that she could "prepare a space into which belief could flood." Sometimes authentic faith results from rather than precedes fidelity to the church.

Further, we can hope, pray, and work for change in the church. It's not true that the church never changes, or that it cannot change. That's the question that Garry Wills explores in his book *The Future of the Catholic Church with Pope Francis* (2015). Wills is both a fierce critic and a devoted son of the church. He studied for the priesthood before becoming a historian. Although there are reasons to be pessimistic, his book offers an optimistic prognosis by one of America's most distinguished intellectuals. To say that the church will never change, writes Wills, "it helps not to know much history."

It's believing a fiction to say that the church has had an immutable past, "that the church was always what it has become." That's patently false. The church didn't always have priests (a "failed tradition") and popes. For thirteen hundred years it didn't teach transubstantiation, and for almost nineteen hundred years there was no such thing as papal infallibility.

In ways both large and small, for good and for ill, the church has always changed. Change is the "respiration" of the church, "its way of breathing in and breathing out." And just as it's a fiction to say that the church has had an immutable past, so too is the idea that its future is a foregone conclusion. Wills considers five ways that the Catholic Church has changed across the centuries.

For a thousand years, Latin reigned as the common language of a universal church. This despite the fact that almost no one understood it. Latin as Catholicism's "eternal" language expressed itself most powerfully in the liturgy — with the priest's back turned to the congregation, and in Jerome's fourth-century translation of the Bible, which "Vulgate" became "the definitive edition of the most influential text in Western European society." Nonetheless, Latin faded away after Vatican II, "proof that the church could change in the right direction after so many centuries of harmful change."

The church's relationship to the state has constantly changed in different times and places. At first, the state ignored the church as an insignificant sect. Then it persecuted the church. And if Constantine later took over the church, Wills observes, in the high Middle Ages it's just as true that the church took over the sword of the state with its

"crusades, inquisitions, interdictions, in the christening and excommunicating of kings." More recently, liberation theology has opposed the state in defense of the poor, the Confessing Church in Nazi Germany opposed Hitler, and in South Africa the church opposed state apartheid.

Then there's the "tragic absurdity" of Christian anti-Semitism. At first, Jewish believers welcomed pagan Gentiles into the church. Later, Gentile believers denounced Jews as Christ-killers and satan worshippers. But even on this painful subject there's been genuine progress, including the acknowledgment that the New Testament documents themselves contain anti-Semitic elements. Anti-Semitism is by no means gone, Wills admits, "but it is now ashamed to show its face in decent surroundings."

In his discussion of natural law, Wills explores changing views of contraception, patriarchy, and abortion. By the 1990s, so few Catholics agreed with papal teaching on contraception that those who did were "statistically non-existent." It was a good example of how sometimes church authorities don't exactly retract their positions, "they just accept the fact that the People of God have moved on."

Radical change has even come to one of the sacraments — penance and confession. Recalling his own childhood experiences, Wills remembers how "there used to be long lines at confessionals on a Saturday before a penitent could go to communion on Sunday. Yet now the confessional boxes are being removed, or used by church janitors to store their equipment."

One of the most radical changes in the church is described by Luke not long after Pentecost. It's the story of the Jewish apostle Peter and the Gentile soldier Cornelius. There are many layers to this story, but notice the obvious — that the real convert here, the person who really needed a radical change of mind and heart, was not the pagan Cornelius but the Jewish believer Peter. And so he repents and confesses, "God has shown me that I should not call any person impure or unclean."

"Nothing in our sinful world is perfect," Wills reminds us, not the church and not the state. Only after the harvest, at the End of this Age, do we enter an ideal community in heaven. Until then, living between the heavenly city of God and earthly city of Man, between the Already and Not Yet of the kingdom of God, we do the best we can in an imperfect "third city" here and now.

In Wills's view, Pope Francis knows that the church is not changeless, permanent, or predictable. Indeed, Francis has surprised people with his words and deeds. He listens to the laity (the *sensus fidelium*). He refuses to condemn — when asked about gay people, he said, "Who am I to judge them?" Most surprising of all, says Wills, is Francis's admission of "how bad a Jesuit provincial he had been. How often have we heard any pope tell us how wrong he was?" A pope who admits that he's been wrong, and who believes in a God of surprises, "bodes well for the future of the Catholic Church."

As a Protestant, I'm thankful for the many changes wrought by the Reformation. I wouldn't want a church or broader society that had not reformed our medieval inheritance. Recall that eastern Orthodox Christianity and greater Islam have not had any similar reformation. In some ways, our own American experiment is a product of the Protestant Reformation.

But I'm also painfully aware of the carnage, the fragmentation, and the institutionalization of the gospel that followed in its wake. So, I like the dictum that emerged among some early Reformed communities: *ecclesia reformata sed semper reformanda*, "the church reformed, but always needing to be reformed." The Baptist theologian A.J. Conyers

called this "correcting the correction." The work of genuine reformation, whether of the institutional church or of an individual life, is never finished.

Finally, I also go to church out of a sense of my own needs. Being a Christian is one of the things in life that you can't do alone.

During the Protestant Reformation, the Renaissance humanist Erasmus (1466–1536) locked horns with Luther over their contrasting views of human nature. Erasmus rejected Luther's pessimistic views of the human will and natural reason, so he stayed put in his deeply troubled Catholic church. "Therefore I will put up with this Church until I see a better one," wrote Erasmus; "and it will have to put up with me, until I become better." I'm thankful for an imperfect church that has welcomed my imperfect self with my imperfect faith; otherwise, it is a tremendous burden trying to be perfect.

We should never ignore the church's faults and failures. We should name them, own them, repent of them, and do what we can to correct them. Change is possible. We aren't fated to a pre-determined destiny. Losing our illusions about church (dis-illusionment) is necessary and good. Thus did Luther, angry about the troubles of medieval Catholicism, offer what Diarmaid MacCulloch calls a

"spectacularly disloyal form of loyalty to the church" when he demanded radical reform.

One of our earliest Christian creeds is the Old Roman Creed from the late second century. One of the fragments that predates it reads, "I believe in God the Father Almighty, and in Jesus Christ His only Son, our Lord. And in the Holy Spirit, the holy Church, the resurrection of the flesh."

Such early creeds served as baptismal confessions, as the basic instructional material for teaching, as a summary of our faith, and as affirmations used in public worship. The centrality of the church as the locus of the *ruach elohim* in such a succinct expression of faith serves as an important reminder. And so with the Benedictine nun Joan Chittister, I count myself "a loyal member of a dysfunctional family."  
[\[224\]](#)

### **For further reflection**

Hildegard of Bingen (1098–1179)

O comforting fire of Spirit,  
Life, within the very Life of all Creation.  
Holy you are in giving life to All.

Holy you are in anointing  
those who are not whole;  
Holy you are in cleansing  
a festering wound.

O sacred breath,  
O fire of love,  
O sweetest taste in my breast  
which fills my heart  
with a fine aroma of virtues.

O most pure fountain  
through whom it is known  
that God has united strangers  
and inquired after the lost.

O breastplate of life  
and hope of uniting  
all members as One,  
O sword-belt of honor,  
enfold those who offer blessing.

Care for those  
who are imprisoned by the enemy

and dissolve the bonds of those  
whom Divinity wishes to save.

O mightiest path which penetrates All,  
from the height to every Earthly abyss,  
you compose All, you unite All.

Through you clouds stream, ether flies,  
stones gain moisture,  
waters become streams,  
and the earth exudes Life.

You always draw out knowledge,  
bringing joy through Wisdom's inspiration.

Therefore, praise be to you  
who are the sound of praise  
and the greatest prize of Life,  
who are hope and richest honor  
bequeathing the reward of Light.

In an age when life expectancy was about forty, Hildegard of Bingen lived a remarkably long and productive life. The Benedictine abbess founded two convents, conducted four preaching tours, penned at

least 400 letters, wrote music and a morality play, supervised illuminated manuscripts, cared for her fellow sisters, and wrote three major theological treatises based upon her famous visions. All this despite her pronounced feelings of self-doubt, the lack of formal schooling, chronic illnesses that probably included depression and migraine headaches, and the subservient roles assigned to women by a male-dominated church and culture. Hildegard was born the youngest of ten children to an aristocratic family that lived near Mainz. She started having what she later concluded were divine visions as early as age three. When she was eight her parents dedicated her to the religious life, and at age fourteen she entered the St. Disibod Abbey at Disibodenberg. Until her death almost seventy years later, she devoted herself to the life of a Benedictine nun.

## Epilogue

### The Renewal of All Things

In her book *Heaven: Our Enduring Fascination with the Afterlife* (2010), Lisa Miller, the religion editor for *Newsweek* magazine, explores humanity's universal longing for life after death. Not every religion describes the afterlife in the same way, of course. And as Miller shows, belief in the afterlife has led to both selfless service and mass murder.

The end of the earth and the entire cosmos is a scientific certitude (see below). It's also central to Christian confession. Every Sunday in my church the priest invites our congregation to "proclaim the mystery of faith," to which we respond, "Christ has died. Christ has risen. Christ will come again." Ironically, for all the "conflict" between science and religion, whether real or imagined, they agree on this point: cosmic life as we know it has a definitive end.

Not only nut job fanatics, but most thoughtful people wonder what happens at the end of history. We wonder about what came "before"

the Big Bang, and what will happen "after" the Cosmic Crunch. The best of our writers, poets, filmmakers and artists have given eloquent expressions to these deeply human longings.

Both Matthew 17:11 and Acts 3:21 refer to the restoration (*apokatastasis*) of "all things." Matthew 19:28 also speaks of the renewal, regeneration or rebirth (*palingenesis*) of "all things," using the same word for the rebirth of an individual person that's used by Paul in Titus 3:5.

I've come to think about the End in five broad ways —personal, civilizational, biological, global, and cosmic.

On a personal level, many people have observed the existential power of the poem "Aubade" by Philip Larkin (1922–1985). The French word "aubade" is a poem or piece of music that's appropriate for the morning. Larkin began working on his poem in 1974; it was first published in the *Times Literary Supplement* on December 23, 1977. The critic A.N. Wilson has called it a poem of "unquestionable greatness." It's about "a special way of being afraid" because of "the sure extinction we travel to."

I work all day, and get half-drunk at night.

Waking at four to soundless dark, I stare.

In time the curtain-edges will grow light.  
Till then I see what's really always there:  
Unresting death, a whole day nearer now,  
Making all thought impossible but how  
And where and when I shall myself die.  
Arid interrogation: yet the dread  
Of dying, and being dead,  
Flashes afresh to hold and horrify.  
The mind blanks at the glare. Not in remorse  
— The good not done, the love not given, time  
Torn off unused — nor wretchedly because  
An only life can take so long to climb  
Clear of its wrong beginnings, and may never;  
But at the total emptiness for ever,  
The sure extinction that we travel to  
And shall be lost in always. Not to be here,  
Not to be anywhere,  
And soon; nothing more terrible, nothing more true.

This is a special way of being afraid  
No trick dispels. Religion used to try,  
That vast, moth-eaten musical brocade

Created to pretend we never die,  
And specious stuff that says No rational being  
Can fear a thing it will not feel, not seeing  
That this is what we fear — no sight, no sound,  
No touch or taste or smell, nothing to think with,  
Nothing to love or link with,  
The anesthetic from which none come round.

And so it stays just on the edge of vision,  
A small, unfocused blur, a standing chill  
That slows each impulse down to indecision.  
Most things may never happen: this one will,  
And realisation of it rages out  
In furnace-fear when we are caught without  
People or drink. Courage is no good:  
It means not scaring others. Being brave  
Lets no one off the grave.  
Death is no different whined at than withstood.

Slowly light strengthens, and the room takes shape.  
It stands plain as a wardrobe, what we know,  
Have always known, know that we can't escape,

Yet can't accept. One side will have to go.

Meanwhile telephones crouch, getting ready to ring

In locked-up offices, and all the uncaring

Intricate rented world begins to rouse.

The sky is white as clay, with no sun.

Work has to be done.

Postmen like doctors go from house to house.

This "great death-poem," says the atheist Julian Barnes, isn't a nihilist rant or the product of Larkin's morbid melancholy. Rather, his fear is a "rational and clear-eyed" consequence of remembering death. And the atheist Chris Hitchens, on his veritable death bed, described "Aubade" as a "reproof to Hume and Lucretius for their stoicism. Fair enough in one way: atheists ought not to be offering consolation either."

On a personal level, the earliest believers interpreted the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus in different ways — as substitute and sacrifice, ransom and reconciliation, adoption and example. But pride of place goes to what's called "Christus Victor," another ancient view that was reinvigorated by the modern Swedish theologian Gustav Aulén (d. 1977) — that Jesus conquered the powers of sin, death, and evil that enslave us.

The apostle Paul says that Jesus "destroyed death" (2 Timothy 1:10), our "last enemy" (1 Corinthians 15:26). He "disarmed the powers and authorities, and made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross" (Colossians 2:15). Jesus "tasted death for everyone," and "through death he rendered powerless him who had the power of death, that is, the devil" (Hebrews 2:9,14). And so the paradox, that by death Jesus conquered death.

Archaeological ruins like the huge and haunting moai statues on Easter Island in the South Pacific remind us that entire cultures have collapsed. Environmental experts like Jared Diamond speak of civilizational or cultural death. His book of twenty case studies show how some of history's most advanced civilizations have vanished.

[\[225\]](#) Think about it: can you even fathom what New York City might look like a mere thousand years from now? Civilizational end has numerous precedents, which ought to be a somber reminder to humanity in our age of environmental crises and the proliferation of nuclear weapons.

There is also biological death on a mass scale, so-called "extinction events" that wiped out entire species. For example, scientists are drilling 5,000 feet below the surface of the Chicxulub Crater in Mexico

in order to obtain a core sample. About 65 million years ago, a giant asteroid slammed into the Yucatan Peninsula, leaving a 125-mile-wide crater. That mass extinction event wiped out the world's non-avian dinosaurs.

Elizabeth Kolbert has explored the "Big Five" mass extinctions in the history of the earth, when an abnormally high number of species died in a short period of time. The causes of these mass extinctions have been varied and debated — glaciation, ocean chemistry, volcanic eruptions, asteroids like the one that hit Mexico, etc. In the Permian extinction 250 million years ago, the greatest extinction event ever, 96% of species died out. Kolbert explains why many scientists believe that we have already entered a sixth mass extinction event, one with two ominous distinctions. First, the rate of extinction is significantly faster than the normal "background" rate. Second, human activity is the cause.

Kolbert hedges her bet, saying that "it's still too early to say whether it will reach the proportions of the Big Five." Each of her thirteen chapters tracks the fate of a single species that she construes as "emblematic" of the sixth extinction. She reports from places as varied as rain forests in Brazil, coral reefs in Australia, bat caves in the

northeastern United States, and a zoo in Cincinnati — home of one of the last Sumatran rhinos and one of many "captive breeding programs." If humanity is the agent of the Sixth Extinction — with our pollution, invasive species, fossil fuels, habitat destruction, over-harvesting, population growth, climate change, etc., the ominous question at the end of her book is whether humanity will also be one of its victims. [\[226\]](#)

We can also speak with scientific certitude about the end of the planet earth. This will take a very long time, but it is nonetheless certain. My friend and solar physicist Charles says that in about 5 billion years the sun will expand into a red giant 10,000,000 times its present volume, at which time it will incinerate and eventually swallow the Earth. If the sun is about 4.6 billion years old, as many scientists estimate, we're already about halfway to the end of the earth. "It is as sure as can be," writes the particle physicist and Anglican priest John Polkinghorne, "that humanity, and all forms of carbon-based life, will prove a transient episode in the history of the cosmos." Yes, these are big numbers, but they are finite numbers.

The end of the earth is cosmically insignificant compared to the end of the entire universe. Physicists are divided about the future of the

entire cosmos, but equally bleak. If the expansion of the Big Bang continues to propel everything outward, our galaxies will fly apart forever, although individual galaxies will collapse into black holes. But if the forces of gravity prevail, the expanding universe will eventually reverse its expansion and collapse into a Big Crunch. So, the entire cosmos has a life and death of its own.

These are our "ends" — personal, civilizational, biological, global, and cosmic. But then what? What comes after these ends?

No one knows, or even can know. Any position you take constitutes an act of faith. In his review of *The God Delusion* by Richard Dawkins, Jim Holt thus observes that "short of a miraculous occurrence, the only thing that might resolve the matter is an experience beyond the grave—what theologians used to call, rather pompously, 'eschatological verification.' If the after-death options are either a beatific vision (God) or oblivion (no God), then it is poignant to think that believers will never discover that they are wrong, whereas Dawkins and fellow atheists will never discover that they are right."

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Christians propose a sixth alternative. Christian "eschatology" (from the Greek *eschaton*, last things) believes that humanity's earthly end

is not the ultimate cosmic end. The God who created the cosmos will consummate its redemption. What began in the ancient Garden of Eden will end in the future City of Jerusalem.

### **Paul's Eager Expectation**

To the believers in Thessaloniki, Paul wrote that because we trust God for the final future, we need not fret about loved ones who've died, like those "who have no hope." Jesus's parable of the "talents" points us away from theological speculation and toward personal stewardship, from eschatology to ethics. My personal end will come with a provocative question: what did I do with my life?

Following the Hebrew prophets, Jesus, and Paul, Christians have confessed this "blessed hope" (Titus 2:13) down through the centuries. In the small Presbyterian church where I grew up, every Sunday we confessed the Apostles' Creed, one line of which reads, "from whence he shall come to judge the quick and the dead." We would also recite the Nicene Creed that Jesus shall "come again in glory to judge the living and the dead." In the *Lord's Prayer* we prayed for God's kingdom to come "on earth as it is in heaven."

How will this happen? I have no idea. I like CS Lewis's analogy of actors in a real life drama. We don't know everything about the play,

whether we're in the first or last act, or even which characters play the minor and major roles. In our ignorance, we have no idea when the end of the play ought to come. But the plot will find fulfillment, even if our limited understanding right now obscures it. Perhaps the Author will fill us in after it's over, but for now, says Lewis, "playing it well is what matters infinitely."

The eastern Orthodox tradition reminds us that Jesus is the *pantocrator* — the lord not just of people but of all things seen and unseen. Paul combines candor and hope to describe the ambiguous historical trajectory of all creation. On the one hand, he acknowledges cosmic suffering. Our sufferings provoke a sense of frustration, futility, weakness, and subjugation. We remain "in bondage to decay," says Paul. Like a woman in childbirth, the entire creation groans inwardly and outwardly. The pain can feel unbearable. Paul is thus brutally realistic about our human condition.

But he also exudes confident hope. Believers should live in what he calls "eager expectation," because our future glory will far eclipse our present suffering. The ultimate destiny of all creation is liberation and freedom, adoption and redemption. The scale and scope of this future

hope includes not only each person and every nation but "the whole creation" (Romans 8:12–25; 1 John 2:2).

As we have seen in previous chapters, for Paul there's an expansive logic to the Christian good news. God "*created* all things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities" (Colossians 1:16). He seeks the *worship* of all "things in heaven, and things in earth, and things under the earth" (Philippians 2:9–11). He will "*reconcile* to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven" (Colossians 1:20). He will *sum up* or *bring together* "all things in heaven and on earth" (Ephesians 1:10). God delights in bestowing his fatherly favor on "the whole human family in heaven and on earth" (Ephesians 3:15). On earth, under the earth, and in heaven, things visible and invisible: God was in Christ "*reconciling the cosmos* to himself" (2 Corinthians 5:19).

The redemption of the entire cosmos is a scandalous idea that faces significant objections. It shocks our sense of justice — doesn't Hitler deserve punishment? It seems to undermine ethics — don't our moral choices have eternal consequences? Universalism has had its adherents, but it's always been a minority position in the church. Most

important of all, there are texts that speak of hell and judgment, although it's not clear just what those texts mean.

For these reasons, some people see universalism as a pious hope rather than a dogmatic certainty. You have to be crazy to teach it but impious not to believe it. On the one hand, the most presumptuous thing we can do is claim to know the mysteries of God. Judgment is his alone. Still, the psalmist rejects the dualist notion that anything exists outside the scope of the omnipresent God of infinite grace and perfect love. Which is to say that we rightly long for the day when death will be destroyed and God will be all in all (1 Cor. 15:28). Nothing good will be lost. Nothing evil will remain.

### **John's Final Revelation**

There are sixty-six books in the Christian Bible, none of which has provoked more controversy, esoteric speculation, or misunderstanding than the last one — Revelation. In the fourth century, notable scholars like Chrysostom and Eusebius even hesitated to include Revelation in the canon. The Protestant reformer Martin Luther described it as "neither apostolic nor prophetic. My spirit cannot accommodate itself to this book. I stick to the books which present Christ to me clearly and purely." John Calvin wrote commentaries on every book in the New

Testament except Revelation. Today, among Eastern Orthodox believers, Revelation is the only book that isn't read in their public liturgy.

"Apocalyptic literature" like Revelation is difficult to decipher. As a genre of writing that flourished from about 200 BC to 200 AD among both Jews (cf. Daniel 7–12) and Christians (cf. Mark 13), apocalyptic literature is characterized by visions, symbols, numerology, surreal beasts, and sea monsters. Even a biblically illiterate person knows that "666" (13:18) portends something ominous. But what does a gigantic red dragon with seven heads, ten horns, and seven crowns mean (12:3), or all of Revelation's cosmic calamities?

Others complain that Revelation is too negative about the present, earthly world, and too focused on a future, heavenly world. But you might think differently if Roman emperors like Nero or Domitian had slaughtered your family, or if Janjaweed militia (literally, "devils on horseback") in Darfur had raped your women, strafed your village with jets, then burned it to the ground. For people in Darfur, Congo or Haiti, a literal hell has come to earth. And therein, I think, lies one key to making sense of Revelation.

In contrast to rich, white Christians in the west, poor Christians in the “majority world” know all too well about corrupt dictators, mass displacements, starvation from forced famines, ethnic wars, political repression, crushing debt, and grinding poverty. They read the apocalyptic themes of a book like Revelation as directly relevant to their daily lives. Divine intervention, healing, liberation, dreams, visions, miracles, and prophecies are lived realities rather than deconstructed myths for these Christians. Whether in ancient Rome or in modern Zimbabwe, the book of Revelation articulates the longing of people for God to intervene in human history and to make right all the wrongs: "How long, O Lord, until you judge the inhabitants of the earth and avenge our blood?" (6:10).

In Revelation, as we noted earlier, the Roman empire embodies and epitomizes all the forces of social violence, political oppression, religious persecution, economic exploitation, and cultural hubris that wreak so much devastation in history. It's not clear which emperor ruled when John wrote from his banishment to the rocky island of Patmos in the Aegean Sea (1:9), but he nevertheless excoriates Rome as "Babylon the Great and the mother of prostitutes" (17:5), and as the "city of power" (18:10). John sees Rome as the stage where the human drama unfolds among "the kings of the earth, the princes, the

generals, the rich, the mighty, and every slave and every free man" (6:15).

Because of her horrific crimes against humanity, Revelation predicts divine judgment for Rome:

Woe! Woe, O great city,  
dressed in fine linen, purple, and scarlet,  
and glittering with gold, precious stones and pearls!  
In one hour such great wealth has been brought to ruin!

Woe! Woe, O great city,  
where all who had ships on the sea  
became rich through her wealth!

In one hour she has been brought to ruin!

Rejoice over her, O heaven!

Rejoice, saints and apostles and prophets!

God has judged her for the way she treated you (18:16–20).

Furthermore, in Revelation, Rome is not only the literal, ancient empire; by extension and comparison it also represents "all domination systems organized around power, wealth, seduction, intimidation, and violence. In *whatever* historical form it takes, empire is the opposite of the kingdom of God as disclosed in Jesus" (Borg).

We thus rightly ask not only why ancient Rome incurred God's judgment, but also what places and powers today constitute imperial "Rome" and face a similar fate.

Revelation thus warns about a dramatic reversal in human history because of divine justice. In a Biblical version of "what goes around comes around," God will give back to Rome as she has given. He will "pay her back double for what she has done. Mix her a double portion from her own cup" (18:6).

Revelation also anticipates a comprehensive restoration rooted in divine mercy. In this regard it echoes Paul's remarks about the redemption of the entire *cosmos* by a God who is the "Father of every family, in heaven and on earth" (Ephesians 1:14–15; Romans 8:19–22). The Biblical story that began in Genesis with a fall in a garden ends in Revelation with a restoration in a city. The narrative progresses from Ancient Eden to the New Jerusalem.

On the last page of the Bible, Revelation describes this plot fulfillment as "the healing of the nations." John envisions nations from around the world streaming to the holy city (21:24, 22:2). Divine mercy in the New Jerusalem heals all the human degradations of old Rome.

Never again will they hunger;

never again will they thirst.

The sun will not beat upon them,

nor any scorching heat.

And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes (7:16–17).

In the New Jerusalem where all the nations gather there will be no death, no mourning, no crying, or any pain (21:4).

Although in a few places John refers to the large but limited number of 144,000 Jews, 12,000 from each of the 12 tribes of Israel (7:1), he ultimately expands the scale and scope of the cosmic consummation to include "a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language" (7:9). This notion of a limitless ethno-linguistic inclusion is sounded several times (5:9, 11:9, 13:7, and 14:6). Every tribe, every tear, and no exceptions. [\[228\]](#)

## **No Other Gospel**

If you held a contest for "Most Offensive Passage in the Bible," one good candidate would be Paul's fiery rhetoric to the Galatians. He writes:

"I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you to live in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel

— which is really no gospel at all. Evidently some people are throwing you into confusion and are trying to pervert the gospel of Christ. But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you, let them be under God's curse! As we have already said, so now I say again: If anybody is preaching to you a gospel other than what you accepted, let them be under God's curse!"

In the book of Acts, Peter preached that "there's no other name." In Galatians, Paul writes that "there's no other gospel."

The earliest believers acknowledged that Jesus was a prophet without honor and a crucified criminal. He's a rock that makes us stumble, a stone rejected by builders. To the Jews he's a scandal and to Greeks he's foolishness. Paul tells the Galatians that if he wanted to earn human approval, he wouldn't be preaching Jesus.

But exactly what was so offensive about Paul's gospel? And, conversely, what was the "different gospel," the "no gospel at all," and the "other gospel" that Paul calls a perversion and confusion of his message? What, precisely, did Paul anathematize? What was he defending and denying?

For the church at Galatia, the answer to these questions is simple, clear, and shocking.

In Galatians, Paul addresses a very specific question: must Gentile converts follow the Jewish law?

This question was also the subject of Peter's dramatic conversion in Acts 10–11, where he learned that "God does not show favoritism" but welcomes all people equally — even a Gentile like Cornelius. This inclusive and expansive message subverted all that a conscientious Jew like Peter held dear out of his sense of fidelity to God.

After his "Cornelius conversion" that repudiated all forms of exclusion, Peter the Jew did the unthinkable: he ate with the unclean Gentiles. But in Galatians we learn that he later regressed into gross hypocrisy.

Paul says that "certain men came from James" — that is, Jewish leaders of the Jerusalem church, teaching that Gentile converts had to obey the Jewish law. Peter succumbed to their demands and "began to separate himself from the Gentiles." There was also a domino effect when other believers followed Peter's hypocrisy, including the beloved Barnabas.

Paul used the harshest language to repudiate those who had *narrowed* the gospel down to a Jewish sect. His gospel was about

*expanding* the message to include Gentiles and all the world. And so, Paul writes, "when Peter came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face."  
"We didn't give in for a moment."

This is why Paul said that in serving God he didn't seek human approval. If you want human approval, you privilege your Own group over every Other group. You limit God's love to your own tribe, and claim to be the sole inheritor of the divine promise. But when you insist that God loves people who are outside of your in group just like they are — and the "dirty" Gentiles were, by definition, "unclean" for ritually pure Jews, then you incur human wrath, for you've betrayed the cause and transgressed the carefully drawn boundaries.

It took a while, and even today we relapse into hypocrisy like Peter, but Paul eventually won this argument. Henceforth, no longer would the good news of God's love be limited to an exclusive few. Rather, it became an inclusive message for all the world, and so, instead of remaining a Jewish sect, "Christianity" became a global religion.

The "perverted gospel" that Paul anathematizes in Galatians is one that restricts, narrows, or limits the love of God to an exclusive few — in his time and place, those believers who wanted to force Gentiles to live like Jews.

The "true gospel" that Paul defends is one that expands the love of God in Christ to all people without exception and subverts our spiritual hierarchies. In Galatians, Paul says that his gospel bursts our normal boundaries of exclusion, like race, religion, gender, and class — "There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ."

And so Paul's prayer for the Ephesians, that they might discover the radicality of God's love: "how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge."[\[229\]](#)

Through the one particular man Jesus, the love of God embraces all the world. As Karen Armstrong observes in her book *St. Paul* (2015), for many people Paul has been "the apostle we love to hate," as if by our modern sensibilities he's a horrible bigot. But in fact, we see his universal expansion of the gospel to all the world, and even the entire cosmos, over and over again in his epistles.

Paul compares the "first man" Adam with the "last man" Jesus in Romans 5. Just as sin, death, and suffering came to all humanity through the one man Adam, "*how much more* did God's grace and the gift that came by the grace of the one man, Jesus Christ, *overflow to the many!*" Just as Adam's one trespass brought condemnation to us

all, the one act of righteousness by Jesus Christ "brings life for all people."

When God chose Abraham to form one, particular nation, his election of Israel did not mean his exclusion of Gentiles. In fact, quite the opposite. God said that he would bless not only Abraham's progeny, but "all peoples on earth" (Genesis 12:3, 22:18). When God repeated his covenant with Isaac, he reiterated his intentions for all the world: "in you, Isaac, all nations on earth will be blessed." (Genesis 26:5). And when Isaac's son Jacob used a rock for a pillow and dreamed a dream at Bethel, God repeated verbatim: "In you, Jacob, all peoples on earth will be blessed." (28:14).

Even an ancient poem like Psalm 96 addresses not just the one nation Israel, but "all the earth," "all peoples," all the "families of nations," the entire creation, "and all that is in it" — the heavens, the earth, the sea, the fields, and the trees.

Every person is created by God. Each one of us bears his image. We all belong to one human family. We all breathe the same air and drink the same water. Every person, says Paul, is God's "offspring" (Acts 17:28). For John, Jesus is the atoning sacrifice not just for a privileged few but "for the entire cosmos" (1 John 2:2).

And so, the ultimate destiny of all creation is liberation and freedom, adoption and redemption. The scale and scope of this future hope includes not only each person and every nation, but "the whole creation" (Romans 8:12–25). Peter calls it the "universal restoration of all things" (Acts 3:21). Anything less is the perversion of restriction and exclusion. Paul anathematizes such limits on the love of God as "a different gospel."

### **The Last Word**

The very last sentence of the Bible reads, "The grace of the Lord Jesus be with all." (NASB, Revelation 22:21).

That's the Bible's branding, and it ought to be ours, too. Not a narrow political ideology whether left or right, not a specious theory rooted in junk science, nor judgmentalism of others that is eager to exclude people unlike ourselves. We could even reduce our branding from one sentence to one word: grace.

Some variants in the original Greek propose a different reading for Revelation 22:21 that narrows the appeal for grace to "God's people" (NIV) or "the saints" (ASV, NRSV). I prefer the reading of the New American Standard Bible, which retains the expansive nature of God's

grace by translating the Greek in a strictly literal if awkward way: "The grace of the Lord Jesus be with all."

Psalm 97 has as its purview "all the earth" (97:1,5,9), "the world" (97:4), and "all the peoples" (97:6), which is rather remarkable for an ancient liturgical text written for "the villages of Judah" (97:8).

God's lavish love, without conditions or limits, for all people; that's our branding. The apostle Paul also pushes the parameters of divine grace, not only beyond "the saints" but even beyond humanity. He says that God was in Christ reconciling the whole *creation* and the entire *cosmos* to himself (2 Corinthians 5:19).

The God whom Jesus revealed isn't mean or scary or capricious, and if we reflect his image people need not fear his followers. Rather, said Jesus, he's a God who throws a party for a kid who wasted the family fortune, who refuses to condemn a woman caught in the act of adultery, who breaks taboos of ethnicity and gender to encourage a woman who had been married five times, who welcomes a criminal into his kingdom as the man gasped for his last breaths while being executed, and who embraces his closest disciples even though they abandoned him and denied even knowing him.

And so the last page of the Bible welcomes everyone without exception: "Let him who hears say, 'Come!' Whoever is thirsty let him come; and whoever wishes, let him take the free gift of the water of life." (Revelation 22:17).

### **For further reflection**

Gerard Manley Hopkins (1844–1889)

*The Leaden Echo and The Golden Echo*

#### THE LEADEN ECHO

HOW to kéeep—is there ány any, is there none such, nowhere known  
some, bow or brooch or braid or brace, láce, latch or catch or key to  
keep

Back beauty, keep it, beauty, beauty, beauty, ... from vanishing away?

Ó is there no frowning of these wrinkles, rankéd wrinkles deep,

Dówn? no waving off of these most mournful messengers, still  
messengers, sad and stealing messengers of grey?

No there 's none, there 's none, O no there 's none,

Nor can you long be, what you now are, called fair,

Do what you may do, what, do what you may,

And wisdom is early to despair:

Be beginning; since, no, nothing can be done  
To keep at bay  
Age and age's evils, hoar hair,  
Ruck and wrinkle, drooping, dying, death's worst, winding sheets,  
tombs and worms and tumbling to decay;  
So be beginning, be beginning to despair.  
O there 's none; no no no there 's none:  
Be beginning to despair, to despair,  
Despair, despair, despair, despair.

## THE GOLDEN ECHO

Spare!

There ís one, yes I have one (Hush there!);  
Only not within seeing of the sun,  
Not within the singeing of the strong sun,  
Tall sun's tingeing, or treacherous the tainting of the earth's air,  
Somewhere elsewhere there is ah well where! one,  
Oné. Yes I can tell such a key, I do know such a place,  
Where whatever's prized and passes of us, everything that 's fresh  
and fast flying of us, seems to us sweet of us and swiftly away with,  
done away with, undone,

Undone, done with, soon done with, and yet dearly and dangerously  
sweet

Of us, the wimpled-water-dimpled, not-by-morning-matched face,  
The flower of beauty, fleece of beauty, too too apt to, ah! to fleet,  
Never fleets móre, fastened with the tenderest truth

To its own best being and its loveliness of youth: it is an  
everlastingness of, O it is an all youth!

Come then, your ways and airs and looks, locks, maiden gear,  
gallantry and gaiety and grace,

Winning ways, airs innocent, maiden manners, sweet looks, loose  
locks, long locks, lovelocks, gaygear, going gallant, girlgrace—  
Resign them, sign them, seal them, send them, motion them with  
breath,

And with sighs soaring, soaring síghs deliver

Them; beauty-in-the-ghost, deliver it, early now, long before death

Give beauty back, beauty, beauty, beauty, back to God, beauty's self  
and beauty's giver.

See; not a hair is, not an eyelash, not the least lash lost; every hair

Is, hair of the head, numbered.

Nay, what we had lighthanded left in surly the mere mould

Will have waked and have waxed and have walked with the wind what  
while we slept,

This side, that side hurling a heavyheaded hundredfold

What while we, while we slumbered.

O then, weary then why

When the thing we freely fórfeit is kept with fonder a care,

Fonder a care kept than we could have kept it, kept

Far with fonder a care (and we, we should have lost it) finer, fonder

A care kept. — Where kept? Do but tell us where kept, where. —

Yonder. — What high as that! We follow, now we follow. — Yonder,

yes yonder, yonder,

Yonder.

Much of the poetry of Gerard Manley Hopkins is characterized by darkness and despair, reflecting his lifelong interior struggles. After converting to Catholicism, which estranged him from his Anglican family, Hopkins burned much of the poetry he had written, and even stopped writing for seven years. After ordination as a Jesuit priest, an assignment in Ireland left him feeling isolated and melancholy, thus giving rise to his so-called "terrible sonnets." But somewhere in his darkness, Hopkins experienced God's light. He moved beyond self-reproach to divine acceptance. On his death bed with typhoid at the

age of forty-four, Hopkins' last words were, "I am so happy. I am so happy. I loved my life."

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[1] Daniel B. Clendenin, *Theological Method in Jacques Ellul* (Lanham: University Press of America, 1987).

[2] Daniel B. Clendenin, *From the Coup to the Commonwealth; An Inside Look at Life in Contemporary Russia* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992); and Daniel B. Clendenin, *Eastern Orthodox Christianity: A Western Perspective* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994, 2003 second edition).

[3] All of these are available at the *Journey with Jesus* archives.

[4] Ephesians 3:15, Luke 3:38, and Genesis 1:2.

[5] Philippians 1:7.

[6] From Dennett's two books *Darwin's Dangerous Idea* (1995) and *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon* (2006). Cf. his newest book, *From Bacteria to Bach and Back; The Evolution of Minds* (2017). In his scathing critique, the British literary critic Terry Eagleton dismissed atheist zealots like Dennett, Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens as "Ditchkins." See his book *Reason, Faith, and Revolution; Reflections on the God Debate* (New Haven: Yale, 2009).

[7] A possible caveat: in England, numerous articles have documented a resurgence of interest in the Anglican Evensong service taken from the *Book of Common Prayer*, despite the continued decline in Sunday church attendance. Some attribute this to the website "Choral Evensong" that allows users to find the closest Evensong service to them across Britain and Ireland, including Catholic services.

[8] Most notably among the Presbyterian Church USA, the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America, the United Methodist Church, the Episcopal Church, the American Baptist Church, the Disciples of Christ, and the United Church of Christ.

[9] Michael O'Loughlin, "Pew Survey: Percentage of US Catholics drops and Catholicism is losing members faster than any denomination," *Crux* (May 12, 2015).

[10] See CARA's website at <http://cara.georgetown.edu/frequently-requested-church-statistics/>

[11] Garry Wills, *Why Priests? A Failed Tradition* (New York: Viking, 2013). Wills says that he believes in those things which are central and essential and not incidental and peripheral, like the Apostles Creed. "That seems a fair amount to believe," he says tongue in cheek. In his memoir, he describes reading his Greek New Testament and saying the rosary every day: *Outside Looking In; Adventures of an Observer* (New York: Viking, 2010); and his more recent book offers an optimistic prognosis on Catholicism: *The Future of the Catholic Church with Pope Francis* (New York: Viking, 2015).

[12] On the Nones, see Elizabeth Drescher, *Choosing Our Religion: The Spiritual Lives of America's Nones* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016). Sociologists have also identified the "Dones," people who have left church but are spiritually active.

[13] Robert P. Jones, *The End of White Christian America* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2016). See the numerous reviews, interviews, and especially the website for his Public Religion Research Institute.

- [14] Harvey Cox, *When Jesus Came to Harvard; Making Moral Choices Today* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2004).
- [15] Marcus Borg, *The Heart of Christianity* (San Francisco: Harper, 2003). David Kinnaman and Gabe Lyons, *UnChristian; What a New Generation Really Thinks About Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007), p. 19.
- [16] For memoirs by those who have lost their faith, see the bibliography for books by Reece (fundamentalist Baptist), Lax and Sentilles (Episcopal), Chater (Catholic), Kirkby (Hutterite), and Wilson (Pentecostal).
- [17] Joshua Cohen and Thomas Nagel, "John Rawls: On My Religion," *The Times Literary Supplement* (March 18, 2009).
- [18] Barbara Brown Taylor, *Leaving Church; A Memoir of Faith* (New York: Harper Collins, 2006); cf. the Benedictine nun Joan Chittister, *Called to Question; A Spiritual Memoir* (Oxford: Sheed and Ward, 2004).
- [19] Ehrman has written about thirty books, including five popular best sellers with sensationalist titles.
- [20] Annie Dillard, "An Expedition to the Pole."
- [21] Luke 23:1-2, John 19:12.
- [22] Acts 16:20-21, 17:7.
- [23] Suetonius, *Life of Nero*, xvi.
- [24] Tacitus, *Annals*, xv. 44.
- [25] Pliny the Younger, *Letters to Trajan*, 10.96.
- [26] Origen, *Against Celsus*, 3.55.
- [27] Revelation 17:5-6.
- [28] Joel Green, *1 Peter* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), p. 18. Many scholars don't believe that the fisherman Peter was the author of the epistle.
- [29] 1 Peter 3:15.
- [30] Acts 17.
- [31] Robert C. Gregg, *Shared Stories, Rival Tellings; Early Encounters of Jews, Christians, and Muslims* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015).
- [32] Identifying a core essence is what Bernard-Henri Lévy does for Judaism in his book *The Genius of Judaism* (New York: Random, 2017).
- [33] Romans 10:9, 1 Corinthians 12:3, and Philippians 2:11.
- [34] 1 Corinthians 15:1-8.
- [35] See the magisterial work by the Yale historian Jaroslav Pelikan, *Credo; Historical and Theological Guide to Creeds and Confessions of Faith in the Christian Tradition* (New Haven: Yale, 2003).
- [36] Gregg, *Shared Stories*. See too Robert Louis Wilken, *The Christians as the Romans Saw Them* (New Haven: Yale, 1984; second edition, 2003); and the classicist John Granger Cook, *Roman Attitudes Toward the Christians: From Claudius to Hadrian (Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen Zum Neuen Testament)* (London: Coronet Books, 2011).
- [37] Stephen Prothero, *God is Not One; The Eight Rival Religions That Run the World — and Why Their Differences Matter* (New York: HarperOne, 2010).
- [38] Gregg, *Shared Stories*.
- [39] 1 Corinthians 8:4-13.
- [40] See the bibliography for representative titles in poetry (Mary Karr, Christian Wiman, Denise Levertov), novels (Marilynne Robinson, Flannery O'Connor, Mary Gordon), history (Garry Wills, Harry Stout), physics (Stanley Jaki, John Polkinghorne), biology (Ken Miller, Joan Roughgarden), astronomy (Owen Gingerich), genetics (Francis Collins), computer

science (Donald Knuth, Ross Picard), philosophy (Richard Swineburn, Alvin Plantinga), materials science and electrical engineering (Richard Bube), neuroscience (William Newsome), law (William Stuntz), and journalism (Peter Hitchens, younger brother of the atheist Christopher Hitchens).

[41] 2 Corinthians 2:16.

[42] Avivah Zornberg, *Moses: A Human Life* (New Haven: Yale, 2016).

[43] Mark 9:38.

[44] W. David Buschart, *Exploring Protestant Traditions; An Invitation to Theological Hospitality* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2006).

[45] For one example, see Brian McLaren, *A Generous Orthodoxy* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006). The term is often associated with the so-called "emerging church" movement. See Tony Jones, who invokes a "generous orthodoxy" several times in his book, *The New Christians; Dispatches from the Emergent Frontier* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2008).

[46] Garry Wills, *Why Priests? A Failed Tradition* (New York: Viking, 2013). CS Lewis wrote about "mere" Christianity, and in 2010 the Anglican bishop NT Wright published his book *Simply Christian*.

[47] Augustine, *Enchiridion*, V.16.

[48] Mary Gordon, *Reading Jesus; A Writer's Encounter with the Gospels* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2009); Garry Wills, *What Jesus Meant* (New York: Viking, 2006); and Michael J. McClymond, *Familiar Stranger: An Introduction to Jesus of Nazareth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004). There have been three distinct "quests" for the historical Jesus in the last two hundred years, with far more controversy than consensus about the results. For all his provocative insights, Marcus Borg could never get beyond the tired and binary distinction between "history remembered" or "pre-Easter memory," in the sense of events in the life of Jesus that really happened, and "post-Easter metaphor," in the sense of the constructions of later Christians. For Borg, the former constitutes the real voice of Jesus, the latter the voice of the community. Implicit in his distinction is the insinuation that the "voice of Jesus" enjoys an epistemological privilege over the "voice of the community." The British literary critic AN Wilson has argued that the quest to find the historical Jesus behind the Christ of faith is a "dead end that goes nowhere" and a "doomed enterprise." The ancients never intended to write "dispassionate history." See *The Book of the People: How to Read the Bible* (New York: Harper, 2016).

[49] Cox, *When Jesus Came to Harvard*, p. 168. Cf. Paul in Philippians 3:12-14: "Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already arrived at my goal, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. Brothers and sisters, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus."

[50] Acts 26:26 and 10:41.

[51] Christian Wiman, *My Bright Abyss; Meditation of a Modern Believer* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2013).

[52] Cf. Daniel Boorstin, *The Seekers; The Story of Man's Continuing Quest to Understand His World* (New York: Vintage, 1999).

[53] Richard Holloway, *A Little History of Religion* (New Haven: Yale, 2016).

[54] Cf. the documentary film by Werner Herzog, *Cave of Forgotten Dreams* (2011).

[55] Oliver Sacks, *Musophilia; Tales of Music and the Brain* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2007).

[56] See *To The Wonder* (2012), *Knight of Cups* (2015), and *Song to Song* (2017).

- [57] Curtis White, *We, Robots: Staying Human in the Age of Big Data* (Brooklyn: Melville House, 2015). The Stanford neuroscientist Bill Newsome reminds me that there is no necessary contradiction between biological survival and spiritual meaning, and that Darwin would happily endorse the latter if it improved adaptive fitness.
- [58] Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *Towards a World Theology* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1981), p. 189. See also pp. 127, 172. Rene Girard of Stanford even argued that religion is the source and origin of all human culture and institutions. See his book *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2001), chapter 7.
- [59] For a withering critique of Freud's life and work, see the controversial book by the emeritus professor of English at UC Berkeley, Frederick Crews, *The Making of an Illusion* (New York: Metropolitan, 2017).
- [60] The most important work on the extent to which scientists do or don't believe in religion is that by the sociologist Elaine Howard Ecklund of Rice University. See her book *Science Vs. Religion: What Scientists Really Think* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).
- [61] See Terry Eagleton, *Reason, Faith and Revolution: Reflections on the God Debate* (New Haven: Yale, 2009); CJ Werleman, *The New Atheist Threat: The Dangerous Rise of Secular Extremists* (Great Britain: Dangerous Little Books, 2015); and Stephen LeDrew, *The Evolution of Atheism; The Politics of a Modern Movement* (New York: Oxford, 2015).
- [62] See my book, *From the Coup to the Commonwealth; An Inside Look at Life in Contemporary Russia* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992).
- [63] See the movies *The Killing Fields* (1984), *Enemies of the People* (2009), and Angelina Jolie's 2017 film *First They Killed My Father*, along with chapter 6 in Samantha Power, *A Problem from Hell: America and the Age of Genocide* (New York: Harper Collins, 1992).
- [64] See Barbara Demick, *Nothing to Envy; Ordinary Lives in North Korea* (New York: Spiegel and Grau, 2010), and Blaine Harden, *Escape From Camp 14; One Man's Remarkable Odyssey From North Korea to Freedom in the West* (New York: Viking, 2012).
- [65] See, for example, Chris Hedges, *I Don't Believe In Atheists* (New York: Free Press, 2008). And for a rejection of the strident new atheists by a "soft atheism," Philip Kitcher, *Life After Faith; The Case for Secular Humanism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014). For a global perspective on mass murder, see Daniel Jonah Goldhagen, *Worse Than War; Genocide, Eliminationism, and the Ongoing Assault on Humanity* (New York: Public Affairs, 2009). The book was adapted into a documentary film that debuted on the sixty-fourth anniversary of the bombing of Hiroshima on August 6, 1945.
- [66] Michael Walzer, *The Paradox of Liberation; Secular Revolutions and Religious Counterrevolutions* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015)
- [67] For the history of Veritas, see the book by its founder, Kelly Monroe, *Finding God at Harvard: Spiritual Journeys of Thinking Christians* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997). The book gathers the stories of forty-two Christians from Harvard.
- [68] See too his recent book, *The Book of the People: How to Read the Bible* (New York: Harper, 2016).
- [69] See Larkin's poems "Church Going" (1955), "Faith Healing" (1964), and "Aubade" (1977). Thirty years after he died, in 2015 Larkin was honored with a memorial in the revered Poets' Corner of Westminster Abbey.
- [70] Ursula Goodenough, *The Sacred Depths of Nature* (New York: Oxford, 2000).
- [71] Max Jammer, *Einstein and Religion* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999, 2002); and Steven Gimbel, *Einstein: His Space and Time* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015).
- [72] Edward O. Wilson, *The Meaning of Human Existence* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2014), *The Creation; An Appeal to Save Life on Earth* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2006), and

*Consilience: The Unity of Knowledge* (New York: Knopf, 1998).

[73] Julian Barnes, *Nothing to Be Frightened Of* (New York: Knopf, 2008).

[74] 2 Timothy 2:10.

[75] Scientists debate the exact meaning of “random,” but I think Barnes is speaking colloquially as a humanist and not technically as a neurobiologist.

[76] Christopher Hitchens, *Mortality* (New York: Twelve Books, 2012).

[77] Cf. James W. Jones, *Can Science Explain Religion? The Cognitive Science Debate* (New York: Oxford, 2015); and David Harker, *Creating Scientific Controversies: Uncertainty and Bias in Science and Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

[78] For example, Daniel Dennett, *From Bacteria to Bach and Back: The Evolution of Minds* (2017).

[79] Marilynne Robinson, *Absence of Mind; The Dispelling of Inwardness from the Modern Myth of the Self* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010). See too the book by the cell biologist Kenneth Miller of Brown University, *Finding Darwin's God; A Scientist's Search for Common Ground Between God and Evolution* (New York: Harper, 1999, 2002).

[80] Owen Gingerich, *God's Universe* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006).

[81] See Carl Sagan, *The Varieties of Scientific Experience; A Personal View of the Search for God*, edited by his wife Ann Druyan (New York: Penguin Press, 2006). Sagan described himself as an agnostic rather than an atheist. The book is full of crude caricatures and straw man arguments.

[82] For my interview with Bill Newsome, see here:

<https://www.journeywithjesus.net/conversations/conversations-index/19-conversations/1175-science-and-faith-an-interview-with-bill-newsome>

[83] Polkinghorne has written over thirty books that have been translated into at least eighteen languages. For one example, see his *Science and Religion in Quest of Truth* (New Haven: Yale, 2011). In addition, Francis S. Collins, *The Language of God; A Scientist Presents Evidence for Belief in God* (New York: Free Press, 2006), Ruth Bancewicz, editor, *Test of Faith; Spiritual Journeys with Scientists* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2010), and Joan Roughgarden of Stanford, *Evolution and Christian Faith; Reflections of an Evolutionary Biologist* (Washington, DC: Island Press, 2006).

[84] *Science and Creationism: A View From the National Academy of Sciences* (Washington, DC: National Academies Press, 1999, 2002); and *Science, Evolution, and Creationism* (Washington, DC: The National Academies Press, 2008).

[85] Mario Livio, *Brilliant Blunders; From Darwin to Einstein — Colossal Mistakes By Great Scientists That Changed Our Understanding of Life and the Universe* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2013). For Dyson's review of Livio's book, see the *New York Review of Books* (March 6, 2014).

[86] Herman Wouk, *The Language God Talks; On Science and Religion* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2010).

[87] Ronald L. Numbers, editor, *Galileo Goes to Jail and Other Myths About Science and Religion* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009). In a subsequent book, Numbers exposes 27 more “myths.” See Ronald Numbers and Kostas Kampourakis, editors, *Newton's Apple and Other Myths About Science* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015). Augustine's advice recalls CP Snow's lament about the mutual ignorance of the sciences and the humanities for each other in his lecture turned book *The Two Cultures and the Scientific Revolution* (1959).

[88] Anthony Everitt, *Hadrian and the Triumph of Rome* (New York: Random House, 2009).

[89] Mary Beard, *SPQR; A History of Ancient Rome* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2015).

- [90] Douglas Boin argues for a much more nuanced interpretation of this “clash” in *Coming Out Christian; How the Followers of Jesus Made a Place in Caesar's Empire* (New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2015). See too Robert Louis Wilken, *The Christians as the Romans Saw Them* (New Haven: Yale, 1984; second edition, 2003).
- [91] *First Apology*, 5. My emphasis.
- [92] 1 Corinthians 8. The title for my own book on this subject comes from 1 Corinthians 8:5-6, *Many Gods, Many Lords: Christianity Encounters World Religions* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995).
- [93] *Apol.*, 37.4
- [94] G.W. Clarke, translation and introduction, *The Octavius of Minucius Felix*, no. 39, *Ancient Christian Writers* (New York: Newman Press, 1974), 8.3-4, 12:5-7.
- [95] Genesis 12:3, Revelation 7:9.
- [96] Raymond G. Gordon, Jr., editor, *Ethnologue; Languages of the World*, 20th Edition, (Dallas: SIL International, 2017). See [www.ethnologue.com](http://www.ethnologue.com).
- [97] See Alan Wolfe, a political scientist at Boston College and director of the Boisi Center for Religion and American Public Life, *The Transformation of American Religion: How We Actually Live our Faith* (New York: Free Press, 2003), p. 64.
- [98] Russell King, et al., *People on the Move; An Atlas of Migration* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010).
- [99] See Bernard Bailyn, *The Barbarous Years; The Peopling of British North America: The Conflict of Civilizations, 1600–1675* (New York: Knopf, 2012). This volume completes his trilogy on the "peopling" of the North American continent that began with *The Peopling of British North America* (1986), and then *Voyagers to the West* (1986), which was limited to the years 1773–1776 and based upon the survival of a complete register of the ten thousand immigrants who left the British Isles for America.
- [100] Rebecca E. Hirsch, *Climate Migrants: On the Move in a Warming World* (Minneapolis: Twenty-First Century Books, 2017). See the movies *Climate Refugees* (2009) and *Kivalina* (2016).
- [101] David B. Barrett, et al., *World Christian Encyclopedia : A Comparative Survey of Churches and Religions in the Modern World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001). For Pew, see <http://www.pewforum.org/2015/05/12/americas-changing-religious-landscape/>
- [102] See too the work of Diana Eck, founder of the Pluralism Project at Harvard: [www.pluralism.org](http://www.pluralism.org).
- [103] Candida Moss, *The Myth of Persecution: How Early Christians Invented a Story of Martyrdom* (New York: HarperCollins, 2013). See Lauren Markoe, “Candida Moss debunks the ‘myth’ of Christian persecution,” *The Washington Post* (May 14, 2013).
- [104] Romans 13:1-7.
- [105] Douglas Boin, *Coming Out Christian; How the Followers of Jesus Made a Place in Caesar's Empire* (New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2015). There is also the classic work of H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (1951) that described five different ways that Christians have interacted with culture: Christ against culture, Christ of culture, Christ above culture, Christ and culture in paradox, and Christ transforming culture.
- [106] Jon Meacham, *American Gospel; God, the Founding Fathers, and the Making of a Nation* (New York: Random, 2006). See too Charles Marsh, *Wayward Christian Soldiers; Freeing the Gospel from Political Captivity* (New York: Oxford, 2007); Greg Boyd, *The Myth of a Christian Nation; How the Quest for Political Power is Destroying the Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006); Randall Balmer, *Thy Kingdom Come; An Evangelical's Lament. How the Religious Right Distorts the Faith and Threatens America* (New York: Basic Books,

2006); Jim Wallis, *God's Politics; Why the Right Gets It Wrong and the Left Doesn't Get It; A New Vision for Faith and Politics in America* (San Francisco: Harper, 2005); and, for a more positive view of the role of religion in the public square, Richard John Neuhaus, *American Babylon; Notes of a Christian Exile* (New York: Basic Books, 2009).

[107] Hebrews 12:14, Titus 3:2.

[108] Richard Mouw, *Uncommon Decency; Christian Civility in an Uncivil World* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1992).

[109] Diana Eck, *A New Religious America* (San Francisco: Harper, 2001).

[110] Deuteronomy 7:6, 14:2, and 1 Peter 2:9.

[111] David Brooks, "The Benedict Option," *The New York Times* (March 14, 2017).

[112] Miroslav Volf, *A Public Faith; How Followers of Christ Should Serve the Common Good* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2011).

[113] Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996). See too Tzvetan Todorov, *The Conquest of America: The Meaning of the Other* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1984), and the book by the Harvard economist and Nobel laureate, Amartya Sen, *Identity and Violence; The Illusion of Destiny* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2006).

[114] Acts 17:28.

[115] Ephesians 3:14-15.

[116] Galatians 3:28. For two very different stories of people who learned to love their "other," see Carla Power, *If the Oceans Were Ink; An Unlikely Friendship and a Journey to the Heart of the Quran* (New York: Henry Holt, 2015). Power calls herself a "skeptical" feminist and "dutiful little secularist" who gained new appreciation for Islam by studying with an Oxford iman. Brian Zahnd, in *A Farewell to Mars; An Evangelical Pastor's Journey Toward the Biblical Gospel of Peace* (Colorado Springs: David C. Cook, 2014), describes "how I reached the point where I could weep over war and repent of any fascination with it—it's the story of how I left the paradigms of nationalism, militarism, and violence as a legitimate mean of shaping the world to embrace the radical alternative of the gospel of peace."

[117] Matthew 5:45.

[118] Exodus 22:21.

[119] *The Odyssey*, Book III.

[120] From Harold Netland, *Encountering Religious Pluralism; The Challenge to Christian Faith and Mission* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2001).

[121] Acts 4:12, John 14:6.

[122] John Hick, *God Has Many Names* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1982); *An Interpretation of Religion* (New Haven: Yale, 1989); and John Hick and Paul Knitter, editors, *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness; Toward a Pluralistic Theology of Religion* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1989).

[123] Michael Kinsley, "Don't Want to Convert? Just Say No," *Time Magazine*, February 9, 2001.

[124] 1 Timothy 2:4, 2 Peter 3:9, 1 John 2:2, Acts 3:21, Romans 8:18ff.

[125] Christopher Tyerman, *God's War; A New History of the Crusades* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006), p. 674. For another example, see James Carroll's sprawling history of Christian anti-Semitism, *Constantine's Sword: The Church and the Jews* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2001).

[126] David Livingstone Smith, *The Most Dangerous Animal; Human Nature and the Origins of War* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2007).

[127] Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, *Not in God's Name; Confronting Religious Violence* (New York: Schocken Books, 2015).

- [128] Philip Jenkins, *Laying Down the Sword; Why We Can't Ignore the Bible's Violent Verses* (New York: Harper Collins, 2011).
- [129] This is one of the main points in Jacques Ellul's theological study of the book of 2 Kings, *The Politics of God and the Politics of Man* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972); and his social scientific study *The Political Illusion* (New York: Vintage, 1967), which concludes that humanity's only hope is to "demythologize" politics of its universalizing pretensions, and restrain it with a more limited perspective.
- [130] Daniel Berrigan, *The Kings and Their Gods; The Pathology of Power* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008).
- [131] Michael Walzer, *In God's Shadow; Politics in the Hebrew Bible* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012). Cf. the historian Garry Wills in his book *What Jesus Meant*: "the program of Jesus's reign can be seen as a systematic antipolitics."
- [132] Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, trans. From the 6th edition by Edwyn C. Hoskyns (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1933), p. 136.
- [133] Richard Holloway, *A Little History of Religion* (New Haven: Yale, 2016).
- [134] Michael Coogan, *The Ten Commandments; A Short History of an Ancient Text* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014).
- [135] These two examples come from James Wood, "God in the Quad," *The New Yorker*, August 31, 2009.
- [136] Peter Brown, "Dialogue with God," *NYRB* (October 26, 2017).
- [137] John Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.13.1.
- [138] The remarkable success of science depends upon it remaining neutral about ultimate causes and restricting itself to its narrow purview of efficient causes. See Owen Gingerich, *God's Universe* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006).
- [139] Cf. Amartya Sen, *Identity and Violence; The Illusion of Destiny* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2006).
- [140] Cf. the charge of speciesism, a term coined in 1970 by the psychologist Richard Ryder of Oxford, and popularized by the atheists Peter Singer of Princeton in his book *Animal Liberation* (1975), and by Richard Dawkins of Oxford in *The Selfish Gene* (1976) and subsequent books.
- [141] On Christianity's long history of sex as the cause and consequence of sin and shame, see Stephen Greenblatt, *The Rise and Fall of Adam and Eve* (New York: Norton, 2017); Elaine Pagels, *Adam, Eve, and the Serpent: Sex and Politics in Early Christianity* (New York: Random, 1988); and, for America in particular, Geoffrey Stone, *Sex and the Constitution: Sex, Religion, and Law from America's Origins to the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Liveright, 2017).
- [142] *Enchiridion*, 8.27.
- [143] Frederick Buechner, *The Sacred Journey* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1982), p. 3.
- [144] See Brennan Manning, *The Wisdom of Tenderness* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 2002), pp. 145, 147, and 33, for the quotes by Julian of Norwich, deMello, and Augustine.
- [145] Brian Wren, *Good is the Flesh: Body, Soul, and Christian Faith* (New York: Morehouse Publishing, 2005).
- [146] The economist Milton Friedman argued in his book *Capitalism and Freedom* (1962) that business has no social responsibility to the public; its only responsibility is to maximize profits for its shareholders.
- [147] Pope Francis, *Laudato Si': On Care for Our Common Home* (Huntington, IN: Our Sunday Visitor Publishing Division, 2015). My emphasis. Among the vast literature on environmentalism, see Bill McKibben, *Oil and Honey; The Education of an Unlikely*

*Activist* (New York: Times Books, 2013); Jared Diamond, *Collapse; How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed* (New York: Viking, 2005); Rebecca E. Hirsch, *Climate Migrants: On the Move in a Warming World* (Minneapolis: Twenty-First Century Books, 2017); Woodeene Koenig-Bricker, *Ten Commandments for the Environment; Pope Benedict XVI Speaks Out for Creation and Justice* (Notre Dame, Indiana: Ave Maria Press, 2009); Elizabeth Kolbert, *The Sixth Extinction; An Unnatural History* (New York: Henry Holt, 2014); and Peter Rogers and Susan Leal, *Running Out of Water: The Looming Crisis and Solutions to Conserve Our Most Precious Resource* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).

[148] Genesis 9:17.

[149] Michael Walzer, *In God's Shadow; Politics in the Hebrew Bible* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012).

[150] Bernard-Henri Lévy, *The Genius of Judaism* (New York: Random, 2017); Frank Anthony Spina, *The Faith of the Outsider; Exclusion and Inclusion in the Biblical Story* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005);

Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996); Toni Morrison *The Origin of Others* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2017); Amartya Sen, *Identity and Violence; The Illusion of Destiny* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2006); and Tzvetan Todorov, *The Conquest of America: The Question of the Other* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1982).

[151] Mary Gordon, *Reading Jesus; A Writer's Encounter with the Gospels* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2009).

[152] Garry Wills, *What Jesus Meant* (New York: Viking, 2006). See also his books *What The Gospels Meant* (New York: Viking, 2008), and *What Paul Meant* (New York: Viking, 2006).

[153] For the genealogies of Jesus, see Matthew 1 and Luke 3.

[154] Matthew 2:2, "Where is he who has been born king of the Jews?"

[155] See Genesis 38 (Tamar), Joshua 2-6 (Rahab), the book of Ruth, and 2 Samuel 11 (Bathsheba).

[156] Romans 5:12-21, 1 Corinthians 15:22, 45.

[157] See Revelation 12.

[158] Elaine Pagels reads Revelation as a piece of "anti-Roman propaganda," in her book *Revelations; Visions, Prophecy, and Politics in the Book of Revelation* (New York: Viking, 2012).

[159] See Matthew 1:20, 2:12, 2:13, 2:19, 2:22.

[160] In 2013, the Israel Museum in Jerusalem premiered the first ever exhibition of Herod "the Great," including 250 artifacts from his tomb. Herod was an ambitious builder, and a few recent biographies have tried to rehabilitate his reputation, but most historians remember him as a paranoid and ruthless madman.

[161] For the five Herods, see Matthew 2:22, Luke 3:19, Mark 6:14–29, Luke 23:7, Acts 12:1, Acts 12:1ff, and Acts 25:13–26:32.

[162] Marcus Borg, *Reading the Bible Again for the First Time* (San Francisco: Harper, 2001), p. 288.

[163] Cf. Brent Landau, translation and introduction, *Revelation of the Magi* (New York: HarperOne, 2010), 157pp. The "Revelation of the Magi" is an anonymous third century text that claims to be a first person narrative by the *magi*, and that was well known in Europe throughout the Middle Ages. The book is a version of Landau's 2008 Harvard dissertation.

[164] See Luke 1:46-55, 1:68-79, 2:14, and 2:29-33.

[165] John 1:46.

[166] Luke 1:38, 42, 45.

[167] According to the Anglican missionary Henry Martyn, who went to Calcutta as chaplain to the East India Company in 1805, the Magnificat had been banned there under British rule. There are similar stories about its prohibition in Argentina after the Mothers of the Disappeared used it to call for nonviolent resistance to the ruling military junta in the mid-1970s, and in Guatemala in the 1980s, but I have not been able to document them.

[168] For more on Mary, see Jaroslav Pelikan, *Mary Through the Centuries* (New Haven: Yale, 1995).

[169] Hebrews 2:10–18.

[170] Wills, *What Jesus Meant*.

[171] Cf. Jeffrey Spier, editor, *Picturing the Bible; The Earliest Christian Art* (New Haven: Yale University Press in association with the Kimbell Art Museum, 2007).

[172] In *The Birth of Christianity* (1999), John Dominic Crossan argues that Jesus was illiterate, as does Reza Aslan in *Zealot: The Life and Times of Jesus of Nazareth* (2014). In *Jesus: A Biography From a Believer* (2010), the eminent British historian Paul Johnson argues that Jesus was “a civilized, cultured, [and] educated man,” who was widely read in secular and religious literature, and familiar with Latin, Greek, Hebrew, and Aramaic. For a full length treatment on the subject, see Chris Keith, *Jesus’ Literacy: Scribal Culture and the Teacher from Galilee* (New York: T&T Clark, 2011).

[173] For a collection of nearly all the non-canonical apocryphal literature from the second to the eleventh century (about forty texts), see Bart D. Ehrman and Zlatko Pleše, *The Apocryphal Gospels; Texts and Translations* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

[174] Ehrman, *The Apocryphal Gospels*.

[175] Luke 2:52.

[176] Mark 3:21, Luke 4:29, John 7:5.

[177] Matthew 6:4. On a spirituality of obscurity, see Jonathan Malesic, *Secret Faith in the Public Square; An Argument for the Concealment of Christian Identity* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2009).

[178] On the Essene community of sectarian Jews at Qumran, thirteen miles east of Jerusalem, and referred to by Philo, Josephus and Pliny the Elder, see John J. Collins, *The Dead Sea Scrolls: A Biography* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013).

[179] Luke 7:33.

[180] Matthew 14:1-12.

[181] Luke 7:30.

[182] Acts 19:3.

[183] Luke 3:21–22 = Mark 1:9–11 = Matthew 3:13–17; John 1:29–34.

[184] Mark 1:12-13.

[185] Hebrews 4:15-16.

[186] Hebrews 2:18.

[187] Mark 2:15-17, Luke 15:2.

[188] This is a deeply unpopular opinion today, but argued by no less than the Jewish scholar Jacob Neusner in his book *A Rabbi Talks with Jesus* (1993).

[189] Isaiah 61:1-2. See 42:6-9, and 58:6-7. Cf. Jesus’ response to John the Baptist’s question in Matthew 11:4-6: “Go back and report to John what you hear and see: The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is proclaimed to the poor. Blessed is anyone who does not

stumble on account of me.” These Messianic works fulfill the words of Isaiah 29:18-19 and 35:5-6.

[190] The story is told in all three synoptics: Matthew 20:29-34, Mark 10:46-52, and Luke 18:35-43. In Matthew’s version there are two blind men, both of them anonymous.

[191] For Mark’s nine parenthetical explanatory translations of Jewish customs for his Gentile audience, see Mark 3:17, 5:41, 7:11, 7:34, 12:42, 15:16, 15:22, 15:34, 15:42.

[192] John 12:37.

[193] Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition, Volume 1, The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition (100-600)* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971), p. 108, and pp. 97-108 on Montanism. The historian Grant Wacker of Duke University credits early American Pentecostals with doing two things well. They encouraged the primitive impulse of a direct and deeply felt relationship with God, and they devised pragmatic ways to “bottle the lightning” without “stilling the fire or cracking the vessel.” They held prayer meetings and founded hospitals, begged God for miracles and built colleges, they could be both credulous and shrewd. See his book *Heaven Below; Early Pentecostals and American Culture* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001). For a short and excellent book on the subject, see Lewis B. Smedes, *Ministry and the Miraculous; A Case Study at Fuller Theological Seminary* (1992), about the “signs and wonders” controversy that erupted there.

[194] Luke 24:19.

[195] Matthew 13:3, 34.

[196] See Robert Johnston and Harvey McArthur, *They Also Taught in Parables* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), which examines 125 rabbinic parables from the first two centuries.

[197] Frank Kermode, “Matthew,” in Robert Alter and Frank Kermode, eds., *A Literary Guide to the Bible* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987), pp. 378–401.

[198] Joachim Jeremias, *Rediscovering the Parables* (New York: Scribners, 1966), p. 181. For a movie about God’s abundance, see *Babette’s Feast*.

[199] *The So-called Historical Jesus and the Historic, Biblical Christ* (1892).

[200] Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan, *The Last Week; A Day-by-Day Account of Jesus’s Final Week in Jerusalem* (San Francisco: Harper, 2006).

[201] William Stringfellow, *Essential Writings* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2013).

[202] Aldo Schiavone, *Pontius Pilate; Deciphering a Memory*, translated by Jeremy Carden (New York: Liveright, 2017).

[203] *Ecclesiastical History*, 2.7.1.

[204] Matthew Sitman, “Did Updike Sell the Resurrection Short?” in *The Daily Beast*, April 5, 2015.

[205] Psalm 139:7-12.

[206] Jeffrey Spier, editor, *Picturing the Bible; The Earliest Christian Art* (New Haven: Yale University Press in association with the Kimbell Art Museum, 2007).

[207] Diarmaid MacCulloch, *The Reformation* (New York: Viking, 2004), p. 394.

[208] See the 2006 movie *Babel* by the director Alejandro Gonzalez Iñárritu, which revolves around four stories. In the desert mountains of Morocco, two boys shoot at a tour bus while playing with a rifle. In San Diego, Susan and Richard travel to Morocco to heal their marriage but encounter tragedy on a tour bus. In Mexico, the nanny and illegal immigrant Amelia attends her son’s wedding but runs afoul of the law when she tries to re-enter the United States. In Tokyo, the deaf and mute teenager Chieko searches for love in all the wrong ways to overcome the fallout of her mother’s suicide and her father’s emotional distance. The movie is in Moroccan Arabic, Spanish, Japanese, English, sign language, written notes, cell phone video, text-message, and English sub-titles.

- [209] Debie Thomas, "Against Christianese," in the *Journey with Jesus* webzine, May 24, 2015.
- [210] This is the theme in Grant Wacker, *Heaven Below; Early Pentecostals and American Culture* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001).
- [211] See David B. Barrett, *World Christian Encyclopedia*.
- [212] For one example see Mother Teresa, *A Call to Mercy: Hearts to Love, Hands to Serve*, edited and with an introduction by Brian Kolodiejchuk (New York: Image, 2016), which devotes one chapter each to the fourteen works.
- [213] For the three lists, see Roman 12, 1 Corinthians 12, and Ephesians 4.
- [214] Skye Jethani and Luke Bobo, "Helping People Connect Faith and Work," *Christianity Today* (March 2017 Web Exclusive).
- [215] The idea of the priesthood of all believers typically appeals to 1 Peter 2:9. See the book by Garry Wills, *Why Priests? A Failed Tradition* (New York: Viking, 2013). For the deeply Catholic Wills, the office of priests is a later addition to the original Jesus story. There's no evidence that Peter was the first bishop anywhere, "least of all Rome." In the gospels Jesus is a bitter critic of the priestly hierarchy that would mediate access to God. The earliest Jesus movement was "radically egalitarian" and characterized by charisms and functions, not powerful offices. If Peter and Paul didn't need a priest, "neither do we." We do need "fellowship in belief," and for that "we have each other."
- [216] See Michael Griffin and Jennie Weiss Block, eds., *In the Company of the Poor; Conversations with Dr. Paul Farmer and Fr. Gustavo Gutiérrez* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2013). Gutiérrez has written over forty books on the theme of God's preferential option for the poor.
- [217] See Gary A. Anderson, *Charity: The Place of the Poor in the Biblical Tradition* (New Haven: Yale, 2013); Peter Brown, *The Ransom of the Soul; Afterlife and Wealth in Early Western Christianity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015); and Peter Brown, *Through the Eye of a Needle; Wealth, the Fall of Rome, and the Making of Christianity in the West, 350–550 AD* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012).
- [218] See Ron Sider's classic work *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger* (1977); Jacques Ellul, *Money and Power* (1954); Justo Gonzalez, *Faith and Wealth; A History of Early Christian Ideas on the Origin, Significance, and Use of Money* (1990); Craig Blomberg, *Neither Poverty nor Riches; A Biblical Theology of Material Possessions* (1999); Douglas A. Hicks, *Money Enough: Everyday Practices for Living Faithfully in the Global Economy* (2010); Paul Farmer, *Pathologies of Power; Health, Human Rights, and the New War on the Poor* (2003); Judith M. Dean, Julie Schaffner, and Stephen L.S. Smith, editors, *Attacking Poverty in the Developing World; Christian Practitioners and Academics in Collaboration* (2005); and the two books by Muhammad Yunus, *Banker to the Poor; Micro-Lending and the Battle Against World Poverty* (1999) and *Creating a World Without Poverty; Social Business and the Future of Capitalism* (2007).
- [219] On Mother Teresa, see *A Call to Mercy: Hearts to Love, Hands to Serve*, edited and with an introduction by Brian Kolodiejchuk (New York: Image, 2016).
- [220] See the remarkable biography by Kate Hennessy, *Dorothy Day: The World Will Be Saved by Beauty; An Intimate Portrait of My Grandmother* (New York: Scribner, 2017).
- [221] Pierce wrote those words in his Bible after visiting suffering children on the Korean island of Koje-do.
- [222] On Fuller's Christian convictions, see his obituary in the *New York Times* (February 3, 2009).
- [223] Warren Goldstein, *William Sloane Coffin Jr., A Holy Impatience* (New Haven: Yale

University Press, 2004).

[224] Joan Chittister, *Called to Question; A Spiritual Memoir* (Oxford: Sheed and Ward, 2004).

[225] See his book *Collapse* (2005).

[226] Elizabeth Kolbert, *The Sixth Extinction; An Unnatural History* (New York: Henry Holt, 2014). See too her 2006 book *Field Notes from a Catastrophe*.

[227] *The New York Times*, October 22, 2006. Cf. here the vast literature, both popular and scientific, on near death experiences, such as Eben Alexander, *Proof of Heaven; A Neurosurgeon's Journey Into the Afterlife* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2012). For a comprehensive, sympathetic and yet critical review of the literature, see the two articles in the *New York Review of Books* by Robert Gottlieb: "To Heaven and Back!" (October 23, 2014) and "Back From Heaven: The Science" (November 6, 2014). Gottlieb considers about two dozen books on the subject.

[228] Cf. Elaine Pagels, *Revelations; Visions, Prophecy, and Politics in the Book of Revelation* (New York: Viking, 2012).

[229] Ephesians 4:18-19.