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Bringing the Body to the Table

GORDON S. MIKOSKI

Everything is changing. We are living through a period of unparalleled technological and cultural transformation. A large percentage of this seismic change comes from making the transition into worldwide electronic interconnection. It seems increasingly right to see the era through which we are now passing as the end of the Gutenberg age and the beginning of the digital age. More and more, we conduct business, get information, look up answers to puzzling questions, and even find intimate partners through electronic means.

The communications aspect of the still-emerging digital reality delights and startles. We can watch world events as they unfold in real time—often unfiltered by government or financial interests. We can carry on instantaneous conversation with one or more people anywhere on the globe at any hour of the day or night. On election night 2008, we even caught on a major news source a glimpse of holographic communication that one could previously only imagine by watching a Star Wars film. Two-way visual communication through programs like Skype has obviated in many cases the need for travel in order to engage in meetings or to catch up with loved ones. While I am still waiting for a mass-market version of a Dick Tracy wristwatch that allows audiovisual two-way communication, such a device will likely soon be available. The largest telephone service provider in New York City wants to stop printing and distributing the White Pages because nearly everyone looks up numbers online or through directory assistance.¹

The digital age has also come to church in a variety of ways. Some have preached dialogue sermons with mission partners in faraway places using a huge screen above the pulpit. Others have used online media for interactive educational resources. Church newsletters are being replaced by Web postings and e-mail distribution. This summer, I look forward to watching in real time on my computer the plenary sessions and corporate worship of the General

Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). Through the virtual world of Second Life, I can even participate in a digital Presbyterian church for worship, Bible study, and fellowship at any hour of the day or night. These examples only represent the tip of the iceberg when it comes to the ways in which the digital revolution impacts the church. The possibilities for rethinking the way we conceive of and practice church, it would seem, are virtually endless.

A number of critical questions have begun to arise, however, about the limits of digital reality and the church. In a course I teach, “Teaching the Bible in the Church,” an unexpectedly heated debate arose recently among students about the possibilities and dangers of Second Life as a tool for teaching the Bible. One side argued that this virtual world could enhance educational ministry for the already involved because it would help them to connect with the church in the online part of their lives. This group also held that a digitally engaged educational ministry might connect with people who might not otherwise ever set foot inside a church building. The opposing voices maintained that too much emphasis given to online realities would fundamentally undermine the church. Why would anyone ever want to come to church when they could simply do churchlike things from the comfort of their own homes (or wherever they happened to have a digital device and an Internet connection)? As for the unchurched who might connect to something churchy in a virtual world, this set of voices was skeptical about the likelihood that such minimal and distant involvement would ever translate into participation in any actual, living, breathing church community.

The questions about the limits of digital media and church were posed rather sharply by a Newsweek article from 2008 entitled “Click in Remembrance of Me.” 2 In it, Lisa Miller posed the question “How can we provide authentic worship through the Web for people who are not part of the church?” The article recounts the story of a couple in Minnesota who gave each other pieces of a bagel and flavored water while participating in an online celebration of Holy Communion originating in Santa Fe, New Mexico. The article also makes reference to two Methodist ministers who have developed Web sites for do-it-yourself Communion. The entire eucharistic liturgy is available online to anyone, anytime, anywhere. All one must do to participate in the celebration of the sacrament is click the prescribed link armed with some form of bread and fruit of the vine. Ostensibly, these Communion-on-demand

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Web sites attempt to meet the spiritual needs of those who cannot make it physically to church.

Recently, I heard about another instance of virtual Communion in relation to a rather unusual field education placement to a “virtual church” in the Northeast. At the appointed day and time (presumably, Sunday morning), digital participants were supposed to sit in front of their computer screens, log on to the appropriate Web site, be ready to break the specific type of bread from Panera, and have at the ready some of a widely available vitamin water. (The reason that every online participant had to have certain brands of bread and vitamin water is unclear.) The presider went through the eucharistic liturgy in real time and instructed the online communicants to do the appropriate things in the appropriate sequence at the appropriate times. The presider and the untold numbers of digital participants partook of the elements simultaneously in digital community. In writing up the field education self-appraisal, the student who had been working in the placement wanted to know whether or not what had taken place was actually Communion. Good question!

I have reflected for a good while on this question. I do not have a major theological problem with bringing Communion to homebound or immobile people immediately following Sunday morning services in which the sacrament has been celebrated. I also support making services of worship digitally available to people far and wide. I know that if I were far from home and, perhaps, facing difficult circumstances, I would greatly appreciate being able to participate vicariously and visually in a service of worship with my home congregation. To be sure, too, there is great value in Skype-type communication in real time between people of a faith community. But I still draw the theological and ecclesial line at the point of online Communion. Why?

Digital or online Communion raises important questions about embodiment and contextuality in relation to the church and the Christian life. The church cannot be true to itself if it is merely an idea or a series of online images. As a fully human community, the church is a multidimensional reality. Its members’ scars, smells, and textures provide three-dimensional richness to their stories and problems. It seems to me that the celebration of the Eucharist—as a practice that expresses something of the core identity of what it means to be church—necessarily involves our real, bodily presence.

The Eucharist never takes place in the abstract. It can only be celebrated in particular places and times. The rich and multilayered character of contexts can be flattened into two-dimensional digital images only at the risk of occluding or distorting crucial dimensions of reality. Virtual Communion treats the
sacrament as but one feature of some other context: a computer screen in a room in someone’s home or in some public place like an airport waiting area.

A further dimension of context in relation to the Eucharist is lost when it goes digital: the communal. In a real church context, one comes to the Lord’s table together with people of all ages and from many different backgrounds—with some of whom one might not ordinarily choose to associate or intermingle. In a fully contextual participation in the sacrament, one encounters and interacts with those whom God has chosen and made part of the fellowship of the church through the waters of baptism: young and old, male and female, rich and poor, gay and straight, black, white, brown, and yellow alike. The baptized are called together to the table in all their demographic and embodied complexities. By contrast, in the privacy and selectivity afforded by virtual Eucharist, those who participate in the event in widely disparate physical locations may never really have to deal with each other in any concrete or Christian manner. In short, online communicants can choose with whom they want to interact; in actual church, one usually does not get to make that choice. In an online environment, there would seem to be a strong pull toward select homogeneity rather than the perpetual urgings of a divine call to graced heterogeneity. Additionally, in online Communion one can serve oneself; in real ecclesial Communion, one is served by and serves others.

Even more deeply, virtual Communion raises important questions about God’s connection with humanity. If disembodied communication were a sufficient strategy for relating to the human family, there likely never would have been an Incarnation. God could have continued to communicate with the human family virtually and remotely through a series of voice messages and disembodied holographic images (think burning bushes and still, small voices). From a Christian point of view, the perpetually stunning disruption is that the fullest and most complete disclosure of God’s being and disposition came in the form of a physical, human presence. Divine accommodation to human capacities involved entering the world in a fully human way: embodied and contextual. Jesus Christ was born of Mary and lived as a Jewish peasant during the first century in a remote, occupied province of the Roman Empire. He was executed as a dangerous subversive of the pax Romana. He was raised from the dead and appeared to Jewish followers in Jerusalem and Galilee. Among other things that might be said, this narrative of divine revelation is scandalously particular, embodied, and contextual.

In the digital age, it may be the case that the classical debates about the presence of Jesus Christ in the Eucharist have been inverted. The question
with which we may now have to wrestle is not “In what way is the Lord present in the Supper?” Instead, the question is “In what ways are we present in the Supper?” In this time of rapid transition into the digital age, it seems that bringing the body to the Lord’s table has as much to do with our bodies as it does with the Lord’s.
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Abstract: The classical doctrine of providence has generally been treated as a subdivision of the doctrine of creation. In stressing the sovereign and wise rule of God over nature and history, it has too often veered in an unduly determinist and philosophical direction that fails adequately to register scriptural notions of the differentiated action of the triune God. A more modest and intellectually tentative account of providence is outlined here, negatively through a sense of historical misuses of the doctrine, but more positively from the conviction that a scripturally based and pastorally adequate approach must represent it as a vital aspect of faith.

The subject of providence cuts across several traditional disciplinary boundaries. These include philosophical, systematic, and pastoral theology. In dealing with the form, content, and purpose of the divine rule over the world, providence touches upon speculative and dogmatic themes that are also of deep existential significance. There are at least four reasons for tackling this subject in the current context. First, it is a central article of Christian faith. If the doctrines of creation and redemption are to be properly related, then some account must be given of how the work of the Creator is extended beyond an initial act of making the universe from out of nothing. Second, the problem of evil calls into question the divine ordering of the world and thus demands an account of providence that offers resources for understanding both the divine rule and the manifest opposition to it. Third, the ways in which the concept of providence is expropriated by civil religion, political rhetoric, and varieties of cultural...
superstition require a theological expression that is distinctive and alert to the possible abuses of this topic. Fourth, the doctrine continues to be of pastoral significance for Christian faith and thus requires some responsible theological comment.

The Heidelberg Catechism (1563) articulates elegantly both the dogmatic and pastoral content of the providence of God. As the Father Almighty, God not only rules over all things but also ensures that these things serve a purpose for which we can be thankful and cheerful:

What do you understand by the providence of God?
The almighty and ever-present power of God whereby he still upholds, as it were by his own hand, heaven and earth together with all creatures, and rules in such a way that leaves and grass, rain and drought, fruitful and unfruitful years, food and drink, health and sickness, riches and poverty, and everything else, come to us not by chance but by his fatherly hand.

What advantage comes from acknowledging God’s creation and providence?
We learn that we are to be patient in adversity, grateful in the midst of blessing, and to trust our faithful God and Father for the future, assured that no creature shall separate us from his love, since all creatures are so completely in his hand that without his will they cannot even move.¹

In what follows, I offer several theses. These aim to sketch the rudiments of a doctrine of providence that is more intellectually modest and low key than classical formulations while also seeking to be adequate to Scripture and the pastoral needs of the church.

*The classical doctrine of providence as it emerged in the history of the Church is too heavily indebted to philosophical resources in the ancient world, particularly Stoicism.*

The term “providence” itself is not widely used in Scripture. The Latin *providebit* appears in Genesis 22:8 where Abraham tells Isaac that God will provide a sacrificial lamb. Yet generally the term *providentia* and the Greek *pronoia* are taken to denote divine foresight. Although these are closely linked to notions of provision, rule, guidance, and purpose, the term “providence” seldom occurs in either the Hebrew Bible or the New Testament.

Its linguistic prominence in Christian theology is more indebted to the influence of ancient philosophy. This has also had a significant effect upon its material content. Here an account of providence was offered, largely in conscious opposition to Epicurean notions of chance. In Plato’s *Laws*, divine rule is affirmed against the view that the gods have no interest in human affairs. For the Epicureans, however, natural and historical events are not governed by any laws or purpose. These happen in a haphazard manner that is attributable only to chance. In the face of this, Stoic philosophy insists upon the determination of everything by the operation of natural laws. These laws reflect a divine logos that infuses the cosmos and works inexorably to fulfill a moral purpose. Consider the following remarks of Seneca:

This much I now say,—that those things which you call hardships, which you call adversities and accursed are, in the first place, for the good of the persons themselves to whom they come; in the second place, that they are for the good of the whole human family, for which the gods have a greater concern than for single persons; again, I say that good men are willing that these things should happen and, if they are unwilling, that these things happen thus by destiny, and that they rightly befall good men by the same law which makes them good.  

Two features of this statement are relevant in assessing its appropriation by Christian theology. First, it is an austere account in which an impersonal moral purpose is fulfilled through everything that happens. Its tone is reminiscent of sermons that many of us will have heard. Within this worldview the sufferings that befall us are to be accepted as our lot, which, if only we willingly assent to them in the proper manner, will lead to an increase in virtue. Second, the Senecan approach tends toward a radical determinism in the role that is assigned to human freedom and responsibility. Both Zeno and Chrysippus liken the human situation to that of a dog tied to a cart. The dog can willingly run along, keeping pace with the cart, or else it will be dragged. Either way its destination remains the same. By this reckoning, every event thus serves a purpose. Foreseen by the gods, the total system of causes governing the universe can be described as “fate.”

These tendencies are undoubtedly present in the writers of the early church, but they are also adapted and at times checked and corrected. In her valuable study of the literature, Silke-Petra Bergjan notes the recurrence of several

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themes: the retributive character of divine providence; its pedagogical function; its eschatological ordering; and its particular concern for individuals. While much of the thought and language is borrowed, it reflects an attention to scriptural themes. So, for example, Theophilus of Antioch can write as if pagan and Christian teachers say much the same thing: “The Sibyl, then, and the other prophets, yea, and the poets and philosophers, have clearly taught both concerning righteousness and judgement, and punishment; and also concerning providence, that God cares for us, not only for the living among us, but also for those that are dead.” On the other hand, the Scriptures provide clearer and deeper insights into the workings of God’s providence. Justin Martyr sees not a fatal necessity or an impersonal fate governing the affairs of human beings, but a God with foreknowledge, oversight, and provision for individual men and women. Clement of Alexandria seems to split the difference by arguing at some length that providence is a widely accepted and ineluctable truth throughout the nations of the world but that its finer details are understood only by Christian philosophers. God is understood as the “invisible and sole, and most powerful, and most skilful and supreme cause of all things most beautiful,” but the inference of these truths requires the teaching of the church.

Two later examples, both from the early fifth century, illustrate further some of the tensions already latent within second-century teaching on providence. In a treatise dedicated to the subject, Theodoret of Cyrus advances a series of rather engaging apologetic arguments for providential order. In many ways, these anticipate the design arguments of Archdeacon William Paley by almost 1,500 years. The providence of God is apparent in the regulation of the planetary system, the seasons of the year, the harmony between species and environment, and the physiognomy of the human body. Even our buttocks are happily arranged, he argues, to provide a natural couch for sitting on the ground or on stone.

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7. Clement, *Stromateis*, 5.14, Ante-Nicene Fathers (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1994), Vol. 2, 474. See also Origen’s Stoic-like description of providence in *De Principiis*, 2.1.3: “Although the whole world is arranged into office or different kinds, its condition, nevertheless, is not to be supposed as one of internal discrepancies and discordances; but as our one body is provided with many members, and is held together by one soul, so I am of opinion that the whole world also ought to be regarded as some huge and immense animal, which is kept together by the power and reason of God as by one soul.” Ante-Nicene Fathers (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1994), Vol. 4, 269.
Around the same time, Augustine offered a more somber and chastened reflection on the ways of providence but nevertheless one that also affirms the rule of God throughout the cosmos. In the *City of God*, he inveighs against all forms of astrological fatalism. The constellation of the stars has no causal influence upon life on earth. Earthly occurrences are not determined by remote stellar or planetary events. As in Theodoret, much of the discussion has a curiously modern ring, particularly in his extended discussion of twins. Their similarities and differences must be accounted for by proximate causes of parentage, diet, upbringing, external circumstances, and so on. None of these can be explained by the identical constellations at the time of their birth. Yet we can also affirm that God through these secondary causes, including voluntary agents, brings about an overarching purpose.

We might draw two lessons from all this. The assumption that the church shared providentialist beliefs with the philosophies of the ancient world led its teaching in one direction. No doubt the struggle against theories of chance and fortune helped to forge this alliance. But it led to an overbearing determinism that leaned too far toward an acquiescence with the way things were. This ignored biblical themes of struggle and resistance, these requiring a more dynamic approach to the subject with reference to the agency of the Holy Spirit. On the other hand, it is clear that already in the early church the attention to Scripture required some criticism and qualification of regnant theories of providence. Divine providence is purposive, particular, and parental and is not to be confused with fate or fortune.

The leaning in a determinist direction generated some serious problems for the later articulation of the doctrine, at least in the Latin West. In Thomas Aquinas and John Calvin, for example, we find much that reflects the Stoic inheritance. The primal will of God explains everything that happens; nothing that is not fixed by divine decree can occur in the cosmos. While God’s will is mediated by secondary causes, these latter are instruments that in every respect fulfill the former. One consequence of this is that the distinction between divine permitting and willing, more characteristic of Orthodox theology, tends to collapse in much medieval and Reformed dogmatics. In practical terms, it

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leads to an account of providence in which too much is attributed to a positive
divine will at the expense of rendering God inscrutable and impersonal. This
exercised a powerful hold over the Western tradition and became a source of
complaint by Karl Barth in his radical revision of the Reformed doctrine of
providence.¹¹

*The doctrine of providence is misplaced when presented on speculative, intro-

ductive, or political grounds. Grounded in revelation, it is an article of faith

that needs to be carefully distinguished from surrogate accounts.*

We cannot assume the divine rule of the world on the basis of empirical obser-

vation. Too much that happens is unpredictable and contrary to what we under-

stand to be the will of God for this to be attributed to providence. Theologians,

preachers, and pastors have attempted this, of course, sometimes in ways that

were well intentioned and even on occasion inspiring. Consider this extract

from a sermon by Hugh Blair, the great preacher of the Scottish Enlightenment.

Why this man was prematurely carried away from the world in the begin-

ning of a promising course; why that deserving family were left over-

whelmed with grief and despair, by the loss of one who was their sole

benefactor and support; why friendships cemented by tender ties were sud-

denly torn asunder by death; these are inquiries to which we can now make

no reply, and which throw a dark gloom over the conduct of the Almighty.

But the spirits of the just above, who are admitted to a larger view of the

ways of God, see the reasons of such counsels. They see that one man was

seasonably taken away from dangers and evils to come, which, unknown
to him, were hovering over his head. They see that Providence was in

secret preparing unexpected blessings for the family who appeared to be

left disconsolate and hopeless. They see that it was time for friendships to

be dissolved, when their longer continuance would, to some of the par-

ties, have proved a snare. Where we behold nothing but the rod of power

stretched forth, they discern an interposition of the hand of mercy. Let

us wait till this promised *hereafter* arrive, and we shall in like manner be

satisfied concerning the events that now disturb and perplex us.¹²

¹¹. For a summation of the doctrine of providence in Reformed orthodoxy, see Heinrich


Theology*, ed. David Fergusson (Exeter: Imprint, 2007), 84. A distinguished preacher and minister

of St. Giles in Edinburgh, Blair was also the first holder of a chair in English literature. His ser-

mons went through numerous editions in the nineteenth century and were translated into German

by Schleiermacher.
While this is moving and appealing in many ways, it suggests too hastily that everything works out well in the best of all possible worlds. In some future estate, there will be a perspective by which our seeming misfortunes are rendered blessings. Three problems attach to this. One is that while the future may enable us to overcome or even forget the past, it cannot on these terms be said to justify it, as if what once cursed us was merely a blessing in disguise. (It is curious how many of the clichés and expressions of speech we carry with us are overloaded with notions of a divine providence, as in the old Scots adage “What’s for you will no go by you.”) Second, this epistemological perspective is not ours, at least not yet. We have to assume it in order to offer this type of response, and this we cannot do simply as an interpretation of what is presently accessible. The surd element in human existence is not adequately acknowledged. The extent to which our lives are torn apart by error, accident, or sheer bad luck seems missing. The dysteleological nature of suffering is not fully registered in Blair’s reflections. This kind of pastoral exhortation, for all its elegance and genuine sensitivity, seems strangely out of place after the traumas of the twentieth century. Third, from a christological perspective, we have to regard this world not as perfectly ordered but in need of its redemption. The doctrine of providence must also take a cruciform shape rather than appear as a theology of glory in which everything is already perfectly in place.

A further reason for a greater caution than is apparent in many speculative accounts of providence is our awareness of the ways in which these have too readily been co-opted for imperialist and totalitarian projects. Again, much of this reflects the twentieth-century experience. In his book *Politics as Religion*, Emilio Gentile shows how many of the political entities that have emerged in modern times have tended to appropriate religious symbols, myths, and rituals drawn from older faith traditions. This is true particularly of fascism, communism, and Nazism, but also of the civil religion that continues to manifest itself in Western democracies. Within the rhetoric of these political regimes, there were powerful but problematic claims to be the vehicles in world history of divine providence. Saint-Simon remarked on his deathbed that religion can never disappear from the world but only transform itself.13 This is apparent in the manner in which a wide variety of political movements functioned in a religious manner, seeking to mobilize the masses by the use of religious rhetoric and ideology.

The term “civil religion” was first coined by Rousseau to describe the ways in which a religion with its stories, rituals, festivals, and symbols might serve

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to foster a sense of communal identity and so articulate the primary political loyalty of citizens. For Rousseau, the dogmas of a civil religion had to be “few, simple, and exactly worded, without explanation or commentary.” He proposed “the existence of a mighty, intelligent and beneficent Divinity, possessed of foresight and providence, the life to come, the happiness of the just, the punishment of the wicked, the sanctity of the social contract, and the laws.” Civil religion must also have a tolerance threshold. Without this, religion will undermine rather than promote social harmony. The only feature of a religion that must be proscribed is intolerance.

Something of this is echoed in Thomas Jefferson’s inaugural addresses and of the way subsequently that American history was woven into a discourse that expressed a sense of divine providence through a mission to the rest of the world, a testimony to political freedom, and the heroic sacrifice of the war dead. National acts of thanksgiving for the general and special mercies of the Creator were thus elicited. As a promised land for refugees who found freedom, dignity, and happiness amid their ethnic and religious diversity, Americans found resources through the nineteenth century for the distinctive tenets of their civil religion. Even through the traumas of the Civil War, Abraham Lincoln could interpret the sacrifices involved partly as a divine chastisement but partly also as the regeneration of a national mission.

In Europe, civil religion functioned somewhat differently but with close parallels. The British imperial project was reinforced through much of the nineteenth century by the conviction that this was a divinely appointed mission and one that rendered an important service to other parts of the world. Religion thus not only promoted internal civic life but legitimized imperial expansion, much of the appeal being again to divine providence. Wilberforce, the evangelical reformer and leading abolitionist, argued that the opening of India to the imperial venture was itself providentially organized. The renewal of the East India Company charter in 1813 enabled Wilberforce and the Clapham sect to campaign for the insertion of the so-called pious clause in the parliamentary act, which required formal support for Christian mission in the subcontinent. Petitions were submitted to Parliament with almost half a million signatures, much of the supporting campaign having drawn heavily upon notions of divine providence. Robert Hall, a Baptist minister, claimed that “our acquisition of power has been so rapid, so extensive, and so disproportionate to the limits

15. Ibid.
of our native empire, that there are few events in which the interposition of Providence may be more distinctly traced.”

The difficulties surrounding civil religion are not too hard to identify. Michael Walzer has noted that civil religion tends to work best when it is least like a religion. In other words, its tenets and rituals are more likely to be widely embraced when these are of a minimalist nature. Civil religion requires for a social consensus a theological minimalism, but what happens where this does not exist? While it may be possible to incorporate Jewish and Muslim citizens into a piety of creation and providence, civil religion will inevitably struggle in societies where there are higher levels of secularism and outright disbelief. These may be in a minority, of course, but arguably much of Western Europe is now in this position. A further difficulty arises when the terms of a civil religion imply an exceptional mission under divine providence that is not given to other societies and nations. As Walzer again points out, its domestic effects may be benign, but these can spill over into national hubris with bad side effects: “Civil religion often makes for intolerance in international society by encouraging parochial pride about life on this side of the border and suspicion or anxiety about life on the other.”

Philosophies have sometimes endeavored to explain progress in history by reference to a forward momentum gathering up each contingent event and episode into a narrative moving inexorably toward a grand conclusion. The most renowned of all such accounts is Hegel’s, though in the famous image of Minerva’s owl he himself admitted that we can only detect this pattern with the benefit of hindsight: “When philosophy paints its grey on grey, then has a shape of life grown old. By philosophy’s grey on grey it cannot be rejuvenated but only understood. The owl of Minerva spreads its wings only with the falling of the dusk.”

In an important respect, Hegel’s is a deeply Christian philosophy. Unlike all the great philosophers that preceded him, he finds in history the key to the meaning of our existence. This must owe a great deal to the Judeo-Christian heritage and its claim that God’s purposes are revealed and enacted temporally. Divine revelation unfolds in history and can be known by means of the testimony of the past. Historical and philosophical knowledge are intertwined

19. Ibid., 76.
in this account. In other ways, however, this is far removed from a Christian understanding of providence. First, it appears to subordinate the claims of each individual to the greater good of the whole. If we find ourselves trampled amid wars of conquest, this may serve some grander purpose being expressed across history. Yet it seems remote from the biblical concern for those on the margins, the excluded and dispossessed who are privileged by the prophets in their teaching and by Jesus in his lifestyle. This commitment to people and groups on the underside of history seems curiously lacking in Hegel’s great project. A second anxiety with any progressive theological reading of history is that it presupposes an immanent purpose being worked out irresistibly within human events. Yet this leaves out much of the apocalyptic element in Scripture and tradition. Here events have an unpredictable tendency to deteriorate, to produce crises, contradictions, and disharmonies within nature and history. Only God can remedy this eschatologically, acting from above and beyond rather than through a gradual process of cosmic evolution. At this point, whiggish historical schemes are at odds with an important element of the Christian tradition.

As an alternative, however, personal introspection cannot in itself be the primary index to divine providence, though this is not to deny that there may be some important signs of God’s grace evident in our individual lives. Indeed, it is hard to imagine a life of faith without these. Nevertheless, we should not seek to make of our lives microcosms of a Hegelian philosophy of history or a Stoic account of nature in which every event inherently serves some wider pattern that God is working within us. There is much that happens to us that is the result of good and ill fortune, external circumstances in which we find ourselves constrained, and of course our own failings and limitations. To attempt to see all these as directly from the hand of God or as fated misses the significant role exercised by these forces in the created order. To say that we have no regrets in life, as I heard a distinguished Christian philanthropist once claim, seems naively triumphalist. Or to claim simply that everything is meant to be and must be for the best in the best of all possible words is unduly fatalist. Of course, much Protestant literature has proceeded along these lines with attention devoted to the inner spiritual development and personal biographies of the faithful. The hand of God is detected in everything that happens so that some pattern must be discerned or interpreted. This can lead to some quite frivolous speculation in the event of good fortune—such as God’s reserving a parking place for me—or crushing disappointment and disillusion when things suddenly go wrong. Why is God doing this to me, especially when I have tried to lead a faithful and upright life? Jesus’ remarks about the fate of those who
were crushed by the tower of Siloam and his reflection on the man born blind suggest that there is no direct divine correlation between the merits of our actions and the fate we suffer. Each event may provide a fresh opportunity for serving God or deepening faith, but it is important to distinguish this from the (more Stoic) claim that these events are directly visited upon us to exercise some hidden blueprint.

A fuller treatment of this aspect of the topic would need to consider the ways in which human beings seem incurably superstitious. Notions that we can manipulate God (or some pagan surrogate such as fate, destiny, or fortune) abound in activities that are inherently unpredictable simply because of their complexity, or because we lack any adequate knowledge of causal processes, or because of the way in which outcomes are finely balanced. The marketing of the National Lottery in the United Kingdom has played on this by suggesting that this may be the night of all nights when fortune has fingered us for a life-transforming windfall. Most pastors will have little difficulty in recounting pastoral circumstances where people sought to manipulate divine providence by their actions, often with the very best of motives. I can recall once being asked to bless a new house because a couple were experiencing fertility problems. We know that many sports personalities are superstitious and religious, sometimes because they think this will give them a competitive advantage. Some golfers will silently pray before making a crucial shot, as if God was likely to reward them for their piety, thus presumably punishing an opponent who played without such invocation. A story is told of the famous baseball catcher Yogi Berra, who, when an opposing hitter crossed himself, quietly suggested, “Why don’t you just let God enjoy the game?”

*In Scripture, providence narrates an account of the God-world relationship that is often described in covenantal terms. Although asymmetrical, this relationship is one of codependence and is threatened by human failure and the turbulence of natural forces.*

In making this claim, much that is latent in the traditional doctrine of providence is called into question on grounds of scriptural adequacy. This has become particularly apparent through recent Jewish exegesis of the Hebrew Bible. The assertion that God is in some sense dependent upon creation is of course in tension with much of what has traditionally been held about divine aseity and impassibility. This aspect of the tradition is important in pointing to ways in which God is unlike creatures and thus establishes in creation a set of
relations that are asymmetric. Nevertheless, the surface narrative of Scripture strongly suggests that these relations are marked by codependence and a relative autonomy of parties.

Recent commentators such as Walter Brueggemann and Terence Fretheim have provided a corrective stress on the relationality of God with respect to creation, a relationality that is often expressed though not exhausted by the language of covenant. References scattered throughout the Hebrew Scriptures suggest that God is a relational being by virtue of the divine community that God inhabits. Later Christian theology has been nervous around these allusions, particularly since they seem to threaten an exclusive monotheism. However, we read of the divine council, the sons of God, heavenly messengers, and a celestial wisdom (Gen 1:26; Isa 6:8; Jer 23:18–23; Prov 8:22–31). Whatever their ontological status or function, they seem to underscore the strong scriptural sense of God existing in a communicative relationship with other conscious beings, one that is properly characterized in personal and relational terms. Biblical metaphors for God are generally personal rather than impersonal, often making use of anthropomorphic and anthropopathic language. Fretheim classifies these metaphors generally as personal, ordinary, concrete, everyday, and secular. In other words, they typically draw upon the mundane world of social life to characterize the identity of God in relation to the world. He notes that even nonpersonal metaphors tend toward a relational aspect: “I bore you on eagles’ wings and brought you to myself” (Exod 19:4). The giving of the divine name to Israel also intensifies the covenant relationship, entailing further possibilities of encounter and communication. At the same time, however, it also makes God’s honor vulnerable to the misuse of that name.

The Hebrew prohibition of images, moreover, is not cited to protect God’s ineffability or unknowability so much as to avoid misrepresentation of God’s relatedness. The idols “have mouths, but do not speak; eyes, but do not see. They have ears, but do not hear; noses, but do not smell. They have hands, but do not feel; feet, but do not walk; they make no sound in their throats” (Ps 115:5–7). Unlike the false gods, as in the contest on Mount Carmel, Israel’s God is one who lives and therefore can speak, hear, and act. As such, this God is also the creator of the world, living in relation not only to Israel but to all the families of the earth (Gen 12:3). The affirmation that “God is” or “God lives” is explicated in dynamic, personal, and relational terms by the Old Testament. Here God is not approached by a philosophical via negativa or an abstract account of the most perfect being but through a tradition of divine-human exchange.
The relationship of God to creatures is expressed, moreover, through a system in which all creatures are interrelated in a cosmic whole. God does not relate to us merely as individuals but as persons who exist in relation to one another and to the wider environment. The social and natural orders of the world are deeply connected in ways that affect God also. This is a recurrent theme in the Psalms and the Prophets: “The land mourns, and all who live in it languish; together with the wild animals and the birds of the air, even the fish of the sea are perishing” (Hos 4:3). One feature of this web of life is that we have a system that is neither chaotic nor deterministic. There is a rhythm that is natural to it in the regularity of the seasons, the succession of day and night, the movement of the planets, and the universal patterns of life and death. The world is God’s good creation. At the same time, however, there is “no little play in the system.” Within the order of the cosmos, there are events that appear random, surprising, and surd. There are forces, sometimes within us, that threaten the harmony and delicate complexity of life. Although good and worthy of celebration, the world is not yet a finished project; it remains a site under construction. The closing speeches of the Book of Job explore this duality of divinely bestowed order threatened by untamed forces. This ambivalence of God’s world needs to be registered by an adequate doctrine of providence.

If we think of creation as an interconnected world established in a continuing relationship with its Maker and Redeemer, then we can attribute a proper place to creaturely action, initiative, and power in ways that reflect the codependence of God without lapsing into synergism or Pelagianism. The divine-human relationship is asymmetrical in terms of its setting, yet it is one in which God becomes reactive and in some respects dependent upon what has been made. Within this conceptual space, activities such as prayer, obedience, rebellion, forgiveness, redemption, and blessing now become possible. Fretheim writes:

God works from within a committed relationship with the world and not on the world from without in total freedom. God’s faithfulness to promises made always entails the limiting of divine options. Indeed, such is the nature of this divine commitment that the relationship with Israel (and, in a somewhat different way, the world) is now constitutive of the divine identity. The life of God will forever include the life of the people of God as well as the life of the world more generally.

22. Ibid., 20.
This suggests that there are at least two aspects of providential reflection in Scripture. Roughly speaking, these correspond to a general and special providence, although the tension between them has often been overlooked. In one aspect, the order of the world reflects the divine wisdom. The regularity of day and night, the seasons of the year, and the provision that is made for creatures all attest the covenant faithfulness of God (Gen 8:22; Ps 104). This order is experienced in the daily rhythms of life creating stability, well-being, and human flourishing. It is closely aligned with respect for God’s law in the Psalms and in wisdom literature. Elements of New Testament teaching draw upon this tradition, especially the teaching of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount. God’s gracious provision is for all creatures, relieving us of unnecessary anxiety (Matt 6:25–34). At the same time, Scripture presents the social and natural world as threatened by disruptive elements. Its order and design are often concealed and disturbed by the forces of sin, suffering, and evil. These are contested by the action of God in patterns of struggle, resistance, and redemption. The purpose and rule of God are not wholly apparent, as Job and Qoheleth suggest. Yet this is balanced in the canon by a second aspect of providence, one that is more particular. Here providence is described more dialectically, its discernment becoming difficult even within the lives of the faithful. God’s reign is hidden in ways that are troublesome. In the experience of wilderness and exile, it can become hard to identify what God intends or does. Yet this does not result in a suspension of belief; instead, it is the occasion for fresh and deepened affirmation. “Indeed,” writes Walter Brueggemann, “in its countertestimony, Israel used the occasion of Yahweh’s hiddenness to magnify its claims for the generous, creative, and faithful governance of Yahweh.”23 This more dramatic and interactive account is apparent also in Paul’s remarks about the foolishness of the cross by which God’s wisdom is displayed, not through standardized norms of power, such as those depicted in Greek philosophy (1 Cor 1:18–25). The world is redeemed through the cross, the paradigmatic image of divine weakness and dependence upon the created world. Jesus’ crucifixion is itself part of the cosmic whole, but a part that is proclaimed to determine its identity and final outcome. Furthermore, the subsequent preaching of this gospel and the spread of the church are also viewed as expressing a divine purpose within history, “a plan [oikonomia] for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth” (Eph 1:10).

In view of this array of scriptural allusions to divine foresight and provision, it may be misleading to restrict the doctrine of providence to a subdivision of the doctrine of creation. Its standard textbook locus, this has not served the account of providence well. Providence is an aspect of all three articles of the creed and requires a differentiated account of divine action in any adequate treatment. A Trinitarian theology of providence might usefully assist us in this respect by presenting it in ways that are not dominated by a single model appropriated to the first person.\textsuperscript{24} Both Son and Spirit participate intimately in the work God’s particular providence.

If we know the content and scope of God’s providence from contemplating the history of Israel and its fulfillment in the person and work of Christ, then the signs of providence will begin here and spread outward into the cosmos. Yet in discerning these, we remain within the circle of faith.

God’s providence in our lives is most evidently displayed not in material success, health, or other forms of prosperity. It is best evinced in the knowledge of the forgiveness of sins and in the power of the sanctifying Spirit. Providence is evident less in what happens to us than in how we live “amidst the changes and chances of this mortal life.” Its center is in the church’s life of praise, confession, supplication, and obedience. From there, we can understand the course of our lives and our world as governed by God’s good providence. But this must remain an expression of faith rather than a psychological insight, a cosmic vision, or a political philosophy. In this way alone, we may believe and look for the signs of God’s good creation, the redeeming work of Christ, and the coming kingdom everywhere around us. These can be discerned variously in the rhythms of life, the grace discovered in our lives, gifts of human friendship, and even in political states that achieve a measure of justice, civic harmony, and peace for their citizens. But our discernment must always be partial and often reserved amid the shadows and imperfections of the world. It proceeds outward from the center of a faith grounded in the “foolishness” of the cross.

So what we have here is something like the rudiments of a chastened and deflationary doctrine, yet one that strives to be scripturally faithful and appropriate to the pastoral needs of the church. It was this impulse that drove Karl Barth to the claim that the clearest signs of providence in the history of the

\textsuperscript{24} This is argued in Reinhold Bernhardt, \textit{Was heisst “Handeln Gottes”? Eine Rekonstruktion der Lehre von der Vorsehung} (Gütersloh: Kaiser/Gütersloher, 1999), and Charles Wood, \textit{The Question of Providence} (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2008).
world are the preservation of Holy Scripture, the witness of the Jews, and the survival of the church. What is surprising about this list is perhaps its modesty in relation to grand schemes of history. He does not speak about the rise of democracy in the modern world, the defeat of Hitler’s regime, or the birth of the United Nations. Only those events and circumstances that stand most closely in relation to the light of Christ can be represented as tokens of God’s providence.

However, as we have already seen with respect to the Hebrew Bible, the rule of God is not confined to Israel or the church. It extends outward from this central action to the entire created world. In this respect, the distinction between works of special and general providence may have a place. The work of salvation determines not only the community of the faithful but the whole cosmos, and this must include the natural world and our rootedness in it. To that extent, we can rejoice in the regularities of nature and the rhythms of life as echoes of God’s goodness, those phenomena that have often been classified as works of general providence. Given the unity of Scripture, the single economy of creation and salvation, and the cosmic scope of christology, there requires to be a place for this in the life of the church as well in the life of Israel. Thus, the created order can be celebrated for its goodness as can our physical and social life as belonging to it.

Particular events may also resonate with God’s purposes and be received gratefully in this light—birth, marriage, and sometimes even death—but their reception as such must always be provisional and tentative. To the extent that they forward Christ’s purpose, they can attest God’s rule. But our vision is partial at best, and our confession at this juncture remains a modest one. Even within the good creation there is also decay, disease, and cruel misfortune, together with the insidious and widespread effects of sin. Christian faith requires us to think of the same world as both providentially ordered and yet also “fallen.” In celebrating God’s providence, the Psalms live with this tension, as does Job, a book too often neglected in the church’s theological reflections.

Social and political harmony may also be interpreted rightly as signs of God’s providence insofar as these are intended by God, made possible now in part, and promised more fully. Isaiah’s vision of international peace is a celebration of God’s coming providence that determines our political and social life already (Isa 2:2–4). But this cannot confer upon any one political program or epoch a privileged instantiation of divine providence. History is littered with

examples of groups and nation-states that claimed too much for themselves often at the expense of others.

Concluding Postscript

Can we speak of everything that happens as willed by God? Classical Reformed dogmatics did this by reference to the threefold pattern of divine action—preservation, concurrence, and overruling. But the divine requires to be characterized in a carefully differentiated manner. Insofar as the world is created and sustained by God, it exists in its totality by the divine will. If this entails that every event is permitted by God, then we cannot shrink from speaking of everything happening in accordance with the divine will. At the same time, if everything that happens can create an occasion for some redemptive prospect, then we cannot say that any event lies irrevocably outside the providential rule of God. However, what must also be pressed, and perhaps more vigorously than before, is that the nature and purpose of God’s action in redemption produce a criterion by which the divine will is to be measured. In this respect, there is clearly much that happens that cannot be said to be God’s will. On the contrary, the setting of God’s will in Christ must entail God’s rejecting of all that is not in conformity with this. The classical doctrine said too little in this respect, thus creating the impression of an inscrutable and impersonal sovereign will. Here we must eschew any appeal to hidden explanations, as in Blair’s sermon cited above, and admit that there is a surd element in life that is incomprehensible.

Whether answers are what people require is in any case doubtful. Would it help to cope with the loss of a child to learn that it fitted some overarching scheme the details of which will some day be made clear to us? What is needed is strength to keep going and the hope that Christ’s victory will finally gather up all that God blesses in our lives. In this respect, the doctrine of providence needs to be even more serviceable on bad days than on good. As Barth asks, “For all we can tell, may not we ourselves praise Him more purely on bad days than on good, more surely in sorrow than in rejoicing, more truly in adversity than in progress?”

This seems to me one mistake that much modern criticism of religion makes. If the cosmos contained only order with good consequences for everyone, we would find it easier to believe. This is an assumption of much current secular

attack on faith. Yet faith seems to flourish on stonier ground; we need it more, and it serves us better in times of suffering and struggle. Many of the great hymns of providence were written in times of threat, pain, and fear. Luther’s “Ein Feste Burg” is the hymn of a beleaguered church threatened by political uncertainty; Rinckart’s “Nun danket alle” was written for his community at a time following plague and heartbreaking loss. George Matheson’s “O Love That Wilt Not Let Me Go” was probably composed amid the onset of blindness. These testimonies to providence succeed best when attention is directed toward the christological center of faith, from there moving both outward and inward; in doing so, they prevent a lurch into speculation, sentimentality, or a premature closure on the problems.
Theology Today

STEFFEN LÖSEL

The Kirchenkampf of the Countercultural Colony

A Critical Response

Abstract: This article offers a critical response to the contemporary renaissance of Anabaptist ecclesiology among mainline theologians such as Hauerwas, Cavanaugh, and the proponents of the Missional Church. I focus on their claim that through its ecclesial practices the church must become a countercultural colony in society. I contend that the notion of the church as countercultural colony is problematic on three counts: First, it obfuscates the solidarity in sin between church and world, leads to ecclesial triumphalism, and ignores how interwoven churches are with their social surroundings. Second, it can lead to blindness toward the sufferings of the world beyond the confines of the church. Third, through an undue domination of ecclesiology by the metaphors of exodus and martyrdom, it creates the impression that God’s people are always under siege, thus ignoring the struggles of God’s people at other times in history to build a society according to God’s law.

In recent decades, mainline churches both in Western Europe and North America have experienced a significant loss of their membership, and even more drastically, of their cultural, social, and political influence. Theologians agree that this new situation signals the end of Christendom, a form of social organization, which over centuries ensured Christian churches a highly formative role in European and North American societies.¹ Not surprisingly, this loss

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¹. Although many Christians in North America subjectively experience a loss of the socio-political influence of mainline Protestantism, it is all but clear if mainline churches are actually losing their influence in society. See the differentiated sociological studies of Claude S. Fisher and Michael Hout, Century of Difference: How America Changed in the Last One Hundred Years (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2006), 186–211, and the various contributions to Robert
of sociopolitical relevance has sparked both in Europe and North America a renewed discussion of ecclesiology and, especially, of the church’s relationship to the wider culture. Theologians on both sides of the Atlantic have called for a new self-understanding of the church, one that responds to this changed situation of the church in society and involves a form of ressourcement, that is, a return to the biblical sources.

What especially marks American responses to the demise of Christendom, in contrast to the European debate, is a renaissance of Anabaptist ecclesiological notions among mainline theologians. Anabaptists have always had a much greater presence in North America than in Europe. In recent decades, however, their influence has spilled over into mainline churches, as evidenced by the work of theologians such as the Methodist Stanley Hauerwas, the Roman Catholic William T. Cavanaugh, and the multidenominational proponents of the so-called Missional Church movement. These theologians offer Anabaptist-influenced criticisms of what they call Christendom-style approaches to the relationship of church and state. All of them oppose the notion that the church is called to exercise a direct transformative influence on its sociocultural surroundings. For these theologians, the church fulfills its political mission instead by being a “countercultural colony,” a distinctive community that offers the world an image of God’s kingdom through its communal practices.

I offer a critical analysis of the North American renaissance of Anabaptist ecclesiology among mainline theologians. I focus on Anabaptism’s understanding of the political mission of the church, its notion of what it means for the church to be the church, and its concept of communal practices. Recognizing the important witness that Anabaptist communities have offered the world in the past, I argue that the “countercultural colonists” rightly challenge the contemporary church to enter into a renewed ecclesiological debate in a post-Christendom era. Yet I also challenge their ecclesiologies on several counts: first, for severing the solidarity that unites church and world both in terms of


The Church as Countercultural Colony

Understanding the ecclesiology of the countercultural colonists requires an appreciation of their critique of Christendom, a notion that we may define with Oliver O’Donovan both as “the idea of a professedly Christian secular political order, and the history of that idea in practice.”

The countercultural colonists oppose the view that the church should seek to turn society into an image of God’s kingdom. They reject such efforts, in the words of Stanley Hauerwas, as “Constantinian” and “accommodationist,” and they charge the defenders of Christendom with heralding an understanding of the church as “a consumer-oriented organization” or else as “a helpful prop for the state.”

Hauerwas’s critique of Christendom’s “Constantinian social strategy” focuses specifically on the way Christians attempt to influence the political process through political lobbying. This approach, Hauerwas and his former colleague at Duke University, William Willimon, contend, dilutes the radicalism of Christian ethics, by “filtering them through basically secular criteria . . . [and] pushing them on the whole world as universally applicable common sense, and calling that Christian.” In Hauerwas’s view, this position is based on an erroneous epistemology. In order to participate in the regular political process of the world, the church would need to have at its disposal the necessary knowledge and sources of information that usually undergird political decisions. Yet such expertise is precisely what the church lacks. The church only knows how to be church, a worshiping community and the herald of God’s kingdom. By adopting the Constantinian approach to politics, the countercultural colonists claim, “the church is underestimating the peculiarity of Christian ethics,” which presupposes personal faith in Jesus of Nazareth and membership in the community.
of the faithful. In both cases, the right epistemological presuppositions are missing: Politics presupposes a knowledge the church does not have; Christian ethics presupposes a faith non-Christians do not have.

While the church must not try to advocate for its views through lobbying, this does not mean that the countercultural colonists believe the church to be apolitical, privatistic, or sectarian. On the contrary, they passionately defend the political nature of the gospel, as long as one realizes that we are dealing in the church with “politics as defined by the gospel.” In arguing that the church practices an alternative form of politics, the countercultural colonists follow one of the most influential proponents of Anabaptist ecclesiology in twentieth-century North America—Mennonite theologian John Howard Yoder. Since the 1960s, Yoder has heralded an alternative understanding of the church’s political significance, arguing forcefully that Christians must refuse direct participation in the political order because it is based on state-sanctioned violence. Christians, who, in Yoder’s view, must follow Jesus’ path of nonviolence, should instead bring their political convictions to bear through the witness of their communal life of faith and “the creation of an alternative social group.”

For Yoder, this political strategy is by no means a “withdrawal” from society but rather a following in the footsteps of Jesus, who rejected “both quietism and establishment responsibility.” In other words, Yoder’s alternative strategy does not mean that Christians must reject the political order in principle. Rather, they recognize that some aspects of society in a fallen world are so entrenched in sin that entering into these structures renders the Christian witness impossible. Christians must, therefore, discern carefully when they should enter the political process and when and where they need to refuse to do so. At times, they may well support certain political initiatives, help solve specific political problems, and foster a certain mindset in society. Depending on the specific circumstances, they will do so indirectly by joining the public debate on ethical questions, such as the morality of the death penalty, or directly by intervening with the state, for example, on behalf of specific

8. Ibid., 71; see also ibid., 69–70; “Missional Witness: The Church as Apostle to the World,” in Guder, Missional Church, 119; and John Howard Yoder, The Christian Witness to the State (Scottsdale, PA: Herald, 2002), 17, 23.
9. Hauerwas and Willimon, Resident Aliens, 30. See also Cavanaugh, Torture and Eucharist, 2, 13.
11. Ibid., 106; see also 185.
12. Ibid., 148, 97.
13. See ibid., 154.
death row inmates. At times, they may vote, and at other times, they may consciously abstain from doing so. Both voting and not voting can be deliberate forms of their Christian witness.

What unites all Christian forms of participation or nonparticipation in society is a certain ad hoc quality. Christians, for Yoder, must not attempt to create the kingdom of God on earth through a large-scale political program or a Christian conception of the state. Rather, the church should limit itself to addressing concrete political issues and to suggesting specific political strategies to improve the situation at hand. Thus, the church’s efforts at influencing the political process will always be very limited in scope. It will point out specific abuses and formulate concrete political solutions.

Despite their willingness to engage in the political processes of society at least to some degree, the countercultural colonists insist that the primary way for the church to influence society is of a different sort. First and foremost, the church ought to stand up for God’s kingdom simply by being the church. As Hauerwas and Willimon put it, “The political task of Christians is to be the church rather than to transform the world.” By being the church, they claim, “we show the world a manner of life the world can never achieve through social coercion or governmental action.” In other words, rather than making this world a better place, Christians must communally prefigure a better world to come.

The demand that the church needs to be the church stems from Karl Barth, who developed the idea in the midst of the German Confessing Church’s struggle against the Nazi regime’s efforts to integrate the Protestant Church into the totalitarian Nazi state. The countercultural colonists’ indebtedness to Barth becomes explicit when they claim that the church stands apart from the world through its knowledge of Jesus Christ, and even more when they borrow the term “Confessing Church” to describe the model of church for which they advocate. Hauerwas describes this model as “a radical alternative,” which

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15. See ibid., 20–21. For a critique of Yoder’s overly negative evaluation of secular authority, see O’Donovan, Desire of the Nations, 151–52.
17. See ibid., 32–33, 38.
18. Hauerwas and Willimon, Resident Aliens, 38. See also 46.
19. Ibid., 83.
20. See, for example, ibid., 28, 77. Hauerwas credits Yoder with having introduced the term into the North American debate. Through the use of this term, Yoder sought to distinguish his preferred model of the church from what he calls on the one hand the liberal activist and on the other hand the conservative conversionist church. While the first of these two alternatives focuses entirely on social reforms and, in Hauerwas’s summary of Yoder’s account, “becomes a sort of religiously glorified liberalism,” the second only offers a privatistic ethics and quickly “seems to degenerate into a religiously glorified conservatism” (ibid., 45).
“finds its main political task to lie, not in the personal transformation of individual hearts or the modification of society, but rather in the congregation’s determination to worship Christ in all things.”21 Spoken like a true Barthian!

Yet on a closer look, the American version of the Confessing Church distinguishes itself sharply from its German predecessor. Theologically, the differences are rooted in an utterly different conception of what it means for the church to be the church. For the countercultural colonists, the church defines itself not primarily by what it confesses (as is the case for Barth), but rather by how it lives. The countercultural colonists deduce their preference for orthopraxis over orthodoxy from the epistemological rule that Christian faith and Christian life are inseparable: “We cannot know Jesus without following Jesus.”22 To be sure, the countercultural colonists do not assume that each individual Christian has to lead a heroic and sinless life for the church to be a community of virtue.23 Because Christian ethics is communal rather than individual, the church need not be a perfect society.24 Still, the church fulfills its role as herald of God’s kingdom not just through its proclamation, but even more so through its being and practices. As the Missional Church proponents put it, “The church is a preview of life under the rule of God in the age to come, a forerunner of the new Jerusalem, a foretaste of the heavenly banquet, a sign of the reign of God.”25

This focus on communal practices leads Hauerwas and his peers to develop their central claim that the church must become a countercultural colony formed by the story of Jesus Christ. The countercultural colonists’ titles for this community are too numerous to recount in full: a “colony” of “resident aliens,” “an island of one culture in the middle of another,” “a social alternative,” “an alien people,” a “countercultural phenomenon,” “a new polis,” “a new people, an alternative polis, a countercultural social structure,” “an adventurous colony in a society of unbelief,” “an alternative society of peace and justice,” “a contrast society,” to name just a view.26 What unites this litany of titles for the church is the dialectical relationship they assume between church and world. The church always stands against the world: the community of grace against a world of sin, the order of redemption against the order of creation.

21. Ibid., 45.
22. Ibid., 55. See also “Missional Witness: The Church as Apostle to the World,” in Guder, Missional Church, 130–31.
23. See Hauerwas and Willimon, Resident Aliens, 81.
24. See, for example, “Missional Community: Cultivating Communities of the Holy Spirit,” in Guder, Missional Church, 158, and Hauerwas and Willimon, Resident Aliens, 90.
25. “Missional Witness: The Church as Apostle to the World,” in Guder, Missional Church, 128.
26. Ibid., 110; Hauerwas and Willimon, Resident Aliens, 47, 76, 12, 18, 30, 46, 49; Cavanaugh, Torture and Eucharist, 117, 180; Hauerwas and Willimon, Resident Aliens, 51, 46.
Given this dialectical understanding of church and world, the Christian mindset toward the surrounding culture must be one of revolution. The church must not try to reform the world but must overcome it. But how does the church achieve this goal? It must make its communal life one of pedagogical purpose—a formative context for the individual Christian. Through the countless life-stories assembled in the church, the community forms its members in its practices. This may sound like an anti-authoritarian pedagogy of positive reinforcement through role modeling. But don’t be fooled. Upon closer inspection, the underlying pedagogy is rather old school, discipline being the key word here. Christians must discipline their desires, while the church may need to discipline its wayward members.

Let me conclude my analysis of the countercultural colonists’ ecclesiology by noting that differences do exist among them with regard to the exact relationship of the Christian communities to their surrounding culture. While Hauerwas and his students propagate a strong cultural separation, others are more cautious about how insular such a countercultural identity can be. The proponents of a Missional Church, for example, realize that it is impossible “that the church or the gospel it preaches is somehow outside culture.” They admit that the church “is always bicultural, conversant in the language and customs of the surrounding culture and living toward the language and ethics of the gospel.” Accordingly, these authors have a less-ambitious goal and strident rhetoric for the church. All that Christians need to do is “to live differently from the dominant society even at just a few key points.” Radical nonconformity is not needed, but rather accurate discernment of when, where, and how much the church must distinguish itself from the surrounding culture. While this much more tempered confidence in the church’s ability to be genuinely countercultural commends the Missional Church proponents, one wonders how they can continue under these circumstances to meaningfully speak of the church as a “contrast society.” Here, rhetoric and admitted reality no longer cohere.

Appreciation and Critique

There can be no doubt that the situation of the church in the West has changed significantly in recent decades. Christendom is waning. For better or worse, the

27. See, for example, Hauerwas and Willimon, Resident Aliens, 62–63.
28. See, for example, ibid., 78; and Cavanaugh, Torture and Eucharist, 237.
29. “Missional Church: The Church as Apostle to the World,” in Guder, Missional Church, 114.
30. Ibid.
31. Ibid., 127. See also ibid., 120.
church’s social influence that once could be taken for granted no longer exists on either side of the Atlantic. If Oliver O’Donovan is right, this situation brings its own set of advantages, if the risk of Christendom has been from the beginning on “a Babylonian captivity [of the church] to its own Christian rulers” and an abandoning of the church’s missionary impulse toward society and its rulers, which could falsely been interpreted “as achieved and complete.”\(^{32}\) In the present situation, a renewed discussion of ecclesiology is helpful and necessary. It is perhaps Stanley Hauerwas’s greatest achievement to have initiated this discussion in the mainline churches. The efforts of the various representatives of the Missional Church movement in North America or even of Pope Benedict XVI in Europe to disentangle their churches from their all-too-close symbiosis with state, society, and the larger culture provide empirical evidence for a widely felt need to rethink the role and relationship of the church to the world around it.

The experience of the younger churches (especially in Africa)—which have never enjoyed the comforts of a Christendom-like situation, are attractive in their missionary appeal, vibrant in their communal life together, and socially relevant despite their nonestablished position in society—provides a further impetus for the northern churches to start thinking about how to reinvent themselves for the twenty-first century. As David Fergusson notes, “The story of Christianity outside Christendom is not a narrative of sectarian ecclesiology but of deeply instructive ways in which the churches can exercise social significance in education, medicine, welfare and political reform without ever enjoying, and seldom contemplating, the benefits of establishment.”\(^{33}\)

In this emerging ecclesial situation, the countercultural colonists rightly point to the Radical Reformation as an important alternative model for the church’s relationship to its surrounding culture.\(^{34}\) If for no other reason, they do so at least because Anabaptist communities have had to cope for centuries with situations where they have not enjoyed the privileges of the mainline churches. Their experience, closer as it is both to the early church and to a post-Christendom period, is surely beneficial to reflect upon.

What should cause mainline traditions to reflect on free-church ecclesiologies is also their rightful insistence that the church’s proclamation must find

\(^{32}\) O’Donovan, *Desire of the Nations*, 197.

\(^{33}\) David Fergusson, *Church, State, and Civil Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 155; see also 157.

\(^{34}\) See, for example, “Missional Witness: The Church as Apostle to the World,” in Guder, *Missional Church*, 124.
theological expression. As Oliver O’Donovan, hardly a countercultural colonist, formulates, “Political theology has an ecclesiological mode, which takes the church seriously as a society and shows how the rule of God is realised here.”

In the past, many free-church communities have given a particularly strong witness to the Christian gospel precisely at those points where the ecclesial representatives of Christendom have failed. Here the abolitionist stance of Quakers and Mennonites against slavery in antebellum America and their concrete practice of helping fugitive slaves escape to the North stand out in particular. In light of the tragic failure of mainline denominations on this moral issue, one cannot but acknowledge the serious challenge that Anabaptist communities present to the political witness of other churches. Such an unambiguous witness should spur mainline churches to reflect on possible ecclesiological reasons for their moral failures in the past.

Solidarity and Nonconformity

These contributions notwithstanding, the current renaissance of Anabaptist ecclesiology far beyond Anabaptist communities is questionable on a number of counts. First, we need to look at the question of how both the church and the world with its institutions relate to the kingdom of God. To say it upfront: My fear is that the notion of the church as alternative society is based on too close and uncritical an association of the church with God’s kingdom. By juxtaposing the church’s life to that of the world, rather than contrasting God’s kingdom to both the church and the world in their respective callings, the advocates of a countercultural ecclesiology distort the church’s limited mission as the herald of God’s kingdom. They insinuate instead that God relates positively to the world only through the church and thus unduly restrict God’s engagement on behalf of the world. God seems to have no interest in the world beyond the church. Creation is spoiled by sin, and redemption is available only in the church.

Therefore, the world must enter into the community of the faithful.

36. David Fergusson remarks judiciously that “the moral seriousness of this radical Christianity is one of its most compelling features” (Fergusson, *Church, State, and Civil Society*, 44). He observes further that “the radical movement in its discipline and community structure bore witness before the rest of society to the moral possibilities of a Christian life and polity. In their economic and social ties, they offer a glimpse of an alternative community under the Word of God. By doing so, they provide a critical standard by which the world can measure itself. . . . They serve the world by disclosing new possibilities” (43).
in order to experience God’s reconciling and redemptive will. By contrasting the church’s communal life of lived practices to that of the world’s sins, the countercultural colonists, in short, deny the world the experience of redemption and thus a direct and positive function vis-à-vis God’s kingdom.

By drawing the dividing line between church and world in terms of the life of the ecclesial community and its practices (rather than, as Barth would have it, with the church’s knowledge of God’s kingdom and its task to proclaim God’s reconciliation of the world to the world), the countercultural colonists run into another problem: They sever the solidarity in sin that unites the church with the world. On the one hand, they admit that individual Christians continue to sin. On the other hand, they exclude the church as the community of virtue from this solidarity. The church is said to be different from the world precisely at this point: The church is a community of virtue, the world presumably a place of vice. As such, this countercultural ecclesiology does not acknowledge that both church and world are places of virtue mixed with vice. Ecclesial self-glorification and triumphalism, I worry, are latent dangers in this conception of the church, despite all assertions to the contrary.

What is needed here to check such triumphalism is a healthy dose of Lutheran anthropological realism. Luther’s much maligned anthropological axiom Simul iustus et peccator, which Barth applied to the church, is meant to ensure a genuine sense of Christian humility vis-à-vis God and neighbor. Believers are called to recognize that they are just as much sinners as those in the world around them, even when they have been justified through faith by grace. Similarly, the church ought to recognize that it sits in the same boat as the world in terms of its sinfulness. Jesuit theologian and political ethicist David Hollenbach makes this point succinctly when he argues in Augustinian idiom that
civil society is not, or need not be, identical with the kingdom of Satan or the civitas terrena. Nor is the church identical with the heavenly Jerusalem or the civitas Dei. Elements of the City of God can be found in all dimensions of civil society and in the political community as well, while distorted loves and human sinfulness are present within the historical community of the church.

38. See Kathryn Tanner, Theories of Culture: A New Agenda for Theology (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997), 101–2.
In other words, it is not virtues and vices that distinguish the church from the world, but rather its different missions vis-à-vis God’s kingdom. The church is called to proclaim God’s kingdom, which is marked by the perfect harmony of justice and peace; the world and its political, social, and economic order are called to create justice and peace here and now, even if only in preliminary and at best penultimate instantiations.

If the countercultural colonists fail to describe adequately the church’s solidarity with the world’s sin, they also, in my view, refuse to accept full Christian responsibility in creating a society in conformity with the values of God’s kingdom. Government, they claim, is a worldly affair, spoiled by sin, and to be left for others. To be sure, as we saw, Yoder and some of the countercultural colonists do admit a qualified participation in the political process. They grant the church the political task of critical observation, education, and even ad hoc interventions. Hauerwas and his students are, at least in their rhetoric, much less clear about such constructive Christian participation in the political tasks of government. Yet the fundamental problem of the countercultural colonists remains the same in both cases: If government with all its implications is a form of stewardship for God’s creation and thus, according to the first creation account, a human obligation, then refusal to fully participate in the political process evades the Creator’s charge to humankind to take good care of God’s creation. It is a refusal of solidarity with the rest of humanity in the stewardship of the earth and its creatures.

At this point, the countercultural colonists might object, as Yoder does, that “Christ [himself] renounced the claim to govern history,” that God’s engagement in the world by no means implies that Christians ought to participate in the worldly affairs of government. Moreover, Hauerwas and Cavanaugh may add that when dealing with the state Christians are confronted with oppressive Caesar. In their view, the church is always under siege from hostile forces in the world, and thus it finds itself inevitably in a situation of opposition, which requires martyrdom rather than cooperation.

These objections, however, reveal the highly selective reading of Scripture that undergirds the ecclesiology of the countercultural colonists. First of all, this reading of the biblical witness unduly reduces God’s engagement in the world to the Incarnation, as if there was no previous history of salvation and no divine gift of a homeland for God’s people. Not only the Incarnation, however,

41. On this point, see Stout’s instructive discussion of Hauerwas’s anti-democratic rhetoric in Democracy and Tradition, 118–161.

42. Yoder, Politics of Jesus, 234, 97.
but also the history of Israel’s attempts at creating a society in accordance
with God’s law should be highly relevant for Christians.\textsuperscript{43} It is telling that the
countercultural colonists have little to say about Israel’s political history after
escaping Egyptian bondage and Babylonian captivity. According to their story,
Christian existence seems to take place inevitably in a politically oppressive
context similar to that of early Christianity under Roman persecution.

Of course, the context of the early church was colored by being a counter-
cultural situation. Here Caesar inevitably turned into a symbol of oppression.
Acknowledging the pagan state’s animosity toward the church, however, does
not necessitate that one identify secular authorities at all times and everywhere
with Caesar or Pharaoh. Egypt, Babylon, and Rome are simply not the only and,
frankly, not even the most common contexts for the church. While the church
must separate itself from the dominant political culture in times of oppression,
it must at other times encourage its members to work constructively with oth-
ers for the greatest common good. As Oliver O’Donovan has argued in another
context, “The prophet is not allowed the luxury of perpetual subversion. After
Ahab, Elijah must anoint some Hazael, some Jehu.”\textsuperscript{44} In other words, the criti-
cal prophetic mission of the church must be accompanied at other times by
constructive efforts at creating a society in keeping with God’s will.

Reflecting on the significance of Israel’s history for Christianity, O’Donovan
draws several theological conclusions that, I think, are helpful for developing a
biblical theology of church and society. When interpreting the Old Testament,
he contends, one must treat the history of Israel’s political traditions as history,
not merely as “a dictionary of quotations,” as “a subversive counter-history,”
or as “a history of progressive undeception and the emergence of rationality
from barbarism.” One must instead read it “as a history of redemption, that
is, as the story of how certain principles of social and political life were vin-
dicated by the action of God in the judgment and restoration of the people.”\textsuperscript{45}
Christian theologians may take inspiration, then, from the variegated history
of Israel’s political traditions, which in turn allows them to draw differentiated
conclusions for different ecclesial contexts. It is this rich array of contexts that
makes the Hebrew Bible so important for a political ecclesiology. It prevents
Christian theologians from reducing the political situation of God’s people to
one historical paradigm, namely, oppression, and from ignoring the long strug-
gles of God’s people at other times to build a society according to God’s law.

\textsuperscript{43} See O’Donovan, \textit{Desire of the Nations}, 132.
\textsuperscript{44} Ibid., 12.
\textsuperscript{45} Ibid., 27–29.
If the ubiquitous comparison of all forms of government with Caesar is unhelpful for fostering Christian responsibility in the affairs of government, so is the undue domination of the ecclesiology of the countercultural colonists by the imagery of martyrdom. To be sure, Jesus demands that believers “take their cross upon themselves.” Taking one’s own cross upon oneself, though, does not always mean martyrdom. Biblically, Christians must not all seek to become martyrs or even seek to interpret their life exclusively through such a lens. In the New Testament, we rather find a narrative plurality to describe the Christian life. For example, Mary, the mother of Jesus, Mary and Martha of Bethany, or the various other women mentioned in the New Testament do not fit easily under the one-size-fits-all description of martyrdom as the epitome of Christian existence. As Paul argues in 1 Corinthians, there is a variety of charisms, and no one Christian has received all of them. Surely martyrdom is one possible option of how to live a faithful Christian life, but it certainly is not the only option. Martyrdom is just as legitimate a Christian witness as attempts to translate the gospel into politics. As O’Donovan puts it, “Since true martyrdom is a powerful force and its resistance to Antichrist effective, the church must be prepared to welcome the homage of the kings when it is offered to the Lord of the martyrs.”

Finally, the countercultural colonists’ interpretation of the church’s political circumstances is disputable in terms of its underlying christology. Sure, Jesus did not intend a violent overhaul of Roman rule, even if the Romans misunderstood his messianic claims that way. Yet the biblical evidence also does not support the view that Jesus started a separate community with alternative communal practices. In first-century Palestine, such was the approach of the Essenes and the Pharisees. Jesus, however, joined neither community. His proclamation addressed all of Israel as God’s people. Even more, Jesus repeatedly attacked the self-righteousness that followed from the Pharisees’ emphasis on living a recognizably holy life. The Gospels record a number of disputes about religious practices and a publicly displayed life of virtue. In light of these conflicts, it seems questionable to claim Jesus as the author of the countercultural colony.

Countercultural or Counterintuitive?

The refusal of ecclesial solidarity with the world raises another fundamental issue in the countercultural colonists’ ecclesiology, namely, that they do not acknowledge sufficiently how interwoven all ecclesial communities are with

46. Ibid., 215.
their cultural surroundings. This lacuna is simply the flip side of the inflated rhetoric of the church as countercultural colony. In her work *Theories of Culture*, American theologian Kathryn Tanner has shown that the model of the church as an alternative society is deeply wedded to modern theories of culture and does not hold up well to postmodern insights. While Tanner does not discuss Hauerwas and the countercultural colonists explicitly, her arguments helpfully expose the flaws in their ecclesiological proposal.47

Tanner argues that the notion that “cultures are self-contained and clearly bounded units, internally consistent and unified wholes of beliefs and values simply transmitted to every member of their respective groups as principles of social order” is deeply problematic.48 Postmodern critics contend that this notion underestimates the historical processes that cultures undergo; that it illegitimately treats cultures as consistent wholes, when they are internally much more diverse; that it presupposes a cultural consensus that often does not exist; that it treats culture as a principle of social order, which it often is not; that it falsely presupposes a primacy of cultural stability over cultural change; and, finally, that it erroneously treats cultures as internally consistent units with clear boundaries toward the outside world. In short, the modern notion of cultures does not hold up to empirical evidence.

For her part, Tanner applies this postmodern critique of modern theories of culture to the question of whether one can speak meaningfully of a distinctly Christian culture in the midst of a surrounding host culture. Tanner doubts that one can define a Christian communal culture apart from its wider cultural context.49 If there is no evidence that cultures present themselves as internally consistent wholes, there also is no evidence that Christians maintain a distinct Christian cultural identity “by maintaining an alternative social world.”50 The above-listed presuppositions for such a cultural scenario simply are missing.

In sociological terms, Tanner argues, Christian communities rather resemble the model of a voluntary association.51 The difference between an alternative society and a voluntary association is that members of the latter have many social interactions with people who do not belong to their community.52

47. Tanner directs her critique on the one hand at the representatives of Radical Orthodoxy and here, in particular, at John Milbank, and on the other hand at postliberal theologians, such as George Lindbeck and the Yale School.
49. Ibid., 67.
50. Ibid., 97.
51. See ibid., 98, 103.
52. For the following argument, see ibid., 98–99.
Indeed, Christians do belong to other groups, are members in other organizations, and engage in a range of activities far beyond the boundaries of their ecclesial communities. In fact, Christians act upon their faith-based convictions often not within their own ecclesial communities, but rather through membership in other, extraecclesial organizations. The character of these interactions with other people “infiltrates” the way people interact within their church communities. In other words, social interactions and the cultural codes that govern relations between Christians and non-Christians inevitably influence the way Christians interact with each other. Furthermore, distinctly Christian social practices do not cover the whole range of human interactions. In order to account for all necessary forms of social relations, Christian communities must borrow “institutional forms from elsewhere,” namely, “from the very society they oppose.” For example, despite various denominations’ efforts to root their own forms of ecclesiastical organization in the New Testament, all of these structures show strong similarities with surrounding cultures, be it medieval feudalism, the bureaucratic state of the nineteenth century, or the corporate culture of late twentieth-century capitalism.

Note that comparing Christian communities to voluntary associations rather than likening them to an alternative society does not require one to deny that Christians share a distinctive lifestyle with particular values, practices, and perhaps virtues. Of course, Tanner contends, being a Christian comes with ethical demands. While the church is not identical with the reign of God, it tries to instill kingdomlike values in its members and shape them into a christomorphic way of life. This way of life, however, should affect not only social interactions within the Christian community (life in the colony, as Hauerwas would say), but rather all interactions that Christians have: those inside and those outside the church, those with other Christians, those with non-Christians, and those with the whole of God’s creation. Thus, for example, Christians are called not only to preserve God’s creation in their individual and communal life, but also to protect their environment at local, regional, national, and international levels. In other words, it is not enough to reduce mountains of trash after Sunday’s coffee hour through reuse and recycling programs; Christians should also be interested in reducing society’s oil dependence, increasing public transportation, and preserving the rain forests—goals they cannot achieve

54. Ibid., 98.
55. See ibid., 103. On this point, see also Fergusson, Church, State, and Civil Society, 164.
on their own, but only in cooperation with other members of the global human community. Without being engaged in these public issues, Christians would live a bifurcated life, with two sets of values and practices.

If the countercultural colonists go wrong, then, in defining Christian identity in terms of an alternative society, they also err when they contend that distinctive social practices delineate clear boundaries between the church and the world. To be sure, Christians will try to promote among themselves those social practices that correspond to their understanding of God’s kingdom. As Tanner shows, however, this does not mean that such social practices distinguish Christians clearly from other members of society. Others also work for the preservation of the environment. Moreover, Christians even take over many of their practices from others. Christian practices are, as Tanner says, “essentially impure and mixed, the identity of a hybrid that always shares cultural forms with its wider host culture and other religions (notably Judaism).” To take environmentalism again as an example: Christian engagement on behalf of God’s creation, while often explained by theological ethicists as rooted in the values of the second biblical creation account, did not initiate a new trend in the post-industrial West of the 1970s and 1980s but rather followed a larger social trend that emerged elsewhere.

If Christians share many of their practices with others, then the way they relate to the surrounding culture is not that of an all-or-nothing confrontation, as Hauerwas and his students so often imply. Rather, Christians approach culture in a differentiated manner. They adopt and transform practices of their host culture in what Tanner calls “a piecemeal process,” adopting one practice, transforming another, and rejecting a third. How Christians evaluate a particular practice depends entirely on the individual practice in question.

Moreover, if social practices do not create clear-cut boundaries between Christians and non-Christians, they also do not necessarily unite Christians across time and space. It is all but clear that one can find a set of common social practices that could function as markers of Christian identity. There simply is not enough continuity among Christian practices all around the globe and across history. In any case, Tanner argues, self-same Christian practices semper, ubique, and ab omnibus are not what God desires. Such a request is nothing short of idolatrous, as “something human would be illegitimately elevated to the status of God and take God’s place as the focus for human obedience.”

56. For the following point, see Tanner, Theories of Culture, 108–12.
57. Ibid., 114–15.
58. Ibid., 117. See also Fergusson, Church, State, and Civil Society, 4.
59. Tanner, Theories of Culture, 135–36.
What ensures Christian continuity over time and across space, Tanner argues, is not the uniformity of ecclesial practices but rather the common task of all Christians to witness to the God of Jesus Christ through a life of faith in light of God’s kingdom. Two factors always prevent the church from achieving a stronger unity than that of a common task: *confusio hominum* and *Dei providentia* (to put it with Barth), that is, the fallibility of sin, which marks all ecclesial efforts at agreeing on faithful practices, and “the freedom of God to ask the unexpected of people in new times and places.”\(^6\) In light of these mitigating factors, Christian social practices simply have no obvious unity across time and space, or, to put it differently, their unity only appears retrospectively as the “consistency of a God of free grace,”\(^6\) which does not rule out changes and new insights. The church has not always condemned slavery; rather, it has fought and split over the issue until a consensus emerged.

In sum, the attempt to secure the church’s identity over against the world in terms of its distinctive communal practices is as questionable as Hauerwas’s notion of the countercultural community. If the church does not present an alternative culture and society of its own, it also shares many if not most of its practices with others in its cultural environment. With Luther, we might say that good Christian community engages in good Christian practices, but good Christian practices never define a good Christian community.

**Narcissus and the Victims**

The question of communal practices brings me to my third critical point, which concerns the claim that the church ought to be preoccupied primarily with its own identity. Here I am troubled that this notion easily leads to blindness toward the sufferings of the world, or at least to a refusal to actively engage those sufferings beyond an individual and communal level, honorable as that may be.

This danger is best exemplified in the Confessing Church in Nazi Germany, of which American countercultural theologians often present an overly hagiographic picture in order to lend their own ecclesiological vision an unduly heroic character. Their adoption of the name “Confessing Church” falsely insinuates that the present situation of the American church is comparable to the *Kirchenkampf* of the Confessing Church against its oppression under Hitler. It is not. One does not have to endorse all aspects of late capitalist culture in order to find such a comparison out of place. It inappropriately glorifies

\(^6\) Ibid., 136.

\(^6\) Ibid.
contemporary American churches and, vice versa, belittles the martyrdom that Christians endured in Dachau and elsewhere after 1933. Moreover, by borrowing its name, some American theologians also reveal a rather uncritical view of the Confessing Church in Germany. It is telling that they seldom discuss the painful failure of the Confessing Church in Nazi Germany to speak out on behalf of the Jews. To be sure, the Barmen Declaration is an impressive document of ecclesial opposition against Nazi attempts to integrate the Protestant Church into the totalitarian state. Yet its strength is also its weakness. The Confessing Church was concerned about the freedom and independence of the church, but with few exceptions it remained all too passive in its engagement on behalf of other victims of Nazi terror, above all the Jews. The church worried about its own integrity when it should have focused equally on the integrity of other victims of Nazi terror.

The danger of insularity increases even more if one links Barmen’s focus on the church’s purity with an emphasis on communal practices, as the counter-cultural colonists do. Barth’s ecclesiological model includes at least in principle an emphasis on the outward orientation of the church. In the counter-cultural model, in contrast, the church is turned toward itself. If the church attempts to fulfill its mission by separating itself from worldly politics, it runs the whole gamut of risks that Barth warned about: Like Narcissus, it engages in navel gazing, becomes an end in itself and for itself, inevitably begins to glorify itself, and forsakes active solidarity with the victims of world history.

To be sure, the advocates of a free-church model may insist that the church’s communal practices include helping one’s neighbor, overcoming racial and economic segregation, or excommunicating torturers from the community. Such communal practices surely are political acts of solidarity with a world in need. Christians, if they want to be credible witnesses of God’s kingdom, must engage in such lifestyle choices. But Christians should also realize that they are neither the only ones who do so or that a certain lifestyle decision will suffice in helping the victims of human history survive. Ecclesial communities alone are not capable of sufficiently addressing the world’s problems. They may contribute to the world’s well-being at a local level, yet as political theologian David Ferguson points out, they are “generally less well-equipped to mount large-scale welfare projects, and are less effective at sustaining the

62. On this point, see Ferguson, Church, State, and Civil Society, 123. Ferguson criticizes Barmen’s “preoccupation with national government” and the resulting lack of theological attention to other institutions of civil society, all of which, in his view, “proved disastrous with respect to its silence on the plight of the Jews.”
care of some of the most vulnerable members of society.”

From the perspective of history’s victims, neither individual nor communitarian efforts are enough. They must go hand in hand with political efforts at systemic change. It is exactly this need for the state that makes the countercultural refusal to participate fully in the political process so dangerous. It abandons the world’s victims where they need systemic intervention rather than makeshift help: in systems of political, racial, and economic oppression, or as they confront the grave consequences of global warming.

Only by contributing fully to the human tasks of government, then, can Christians overcome the bifurcation of reality with which they find themselves confronted and become fully citizens of two cities, good stewards of God’s creatures, and ambassadors of God’s reconciliation. Surely the church needs to preach and to represent God’s kingdom to the world in word and deed. But this task of the church does not absolve Christians from their responsibilities as God’s creatures and for God’s creatures. As the Barmen Declaration makes clear, God’s claim is upon all of created reality, not just the church. Christians therefore need to assume political responsibility. Doing so, in David Hollenbach’s words, allows them “[to build] up the terrestrial common good as a real though imperfect image of the highest good of the heavenly city.” In other words, the point of Christian political engagement is not to create the kingdom of God on earth, but to create human institutions that reflect it.

Conclusion

The renaissance of Anabaptist-inspired ecclesiology over the last forty years is a clear sign that there is a widely felt need for the church to reposition itself in Western societies that were once dominated by the Christendom model. One cannot easily dismiss this challenge that the countercultural colonists present to the mainline churches. Indeed, churches will have to reinvent themselves if they want to continue to be sociopolitically relevant. The free-church model of the Radical Reformation is one option to contemplate if one seeks ecclesiological renewal. Within Western Christianity it presents the main historical alternative to Christendom, a notion of church-state cooperation that has flourished in different instantiations for almost 1,500 years and still can be

63. Ibid., 149.
64. See ibid., 124.
felt in its aftereffects today. Historically, free-church communities have often provided the world with a strong witness to the Christian gospel and have on many occasions stood in stark contrast to the accommodation of other churches to the dominant culture and its social sins. This fact surely contributes to the widespread appeal of the countercultural model of the church among theologians, students, pastors, and churches in North America today. If nothing else, it must serve other churches as a constant reminder of the perpetual need for self-critical introspection and penitence.

Nonetheless, as I have sought to demonstrate, the ecclesiology of the countercultural colonists does not offer a successful way out of the present ecclesiological impasse. For one, it seems empirically unlikely that the ethical radicalism and homogeneity of small ecclesial communities of religious dissenters can be adopted by large mainline churches coming out of very different theological traditions. Lutherans, Presbyterians, or even Hauerwas’s United Methodists are the most unlikely candidates, for example, for the pacifism and radical nonconformism that Hauerwas and his peers suggest.

Beyond the issue of its empirical realization, there remains the host of theological problems that haunt the ecclesiology of the countercultural colonists. Its advocates do not acknowledge the deep solidarity between church and world either in terms of sinfulness or in terms of the positive role that each can play vis-à-vis the kingdom of God. Furthermore, their ecclesiology bifurcates the Christian existence as believers and citizens and, in so doing, underestimates the interdependence between ecclesial communities and their surrounding culture. Finally, the dual focus on ecclesial purity and practices can lead to inertia vis-à-vis issues of social justice by failing to support systemic efforts to address the root of such sins.

What Christian churches in a post-Christendom era might need, then, is both a more humble account of the church’s mission within God’s history of salvation and a less dramatic picture of Christian existence in the world. Ecclesial privileges in society will surely dwindle, as will the church’s close cooperation with the state in some parts of the world. There is no question also that the church will have to find innovative ways of advocating for its ethical positions—ways that better reflect its own nature as the body of Christ than mere political lobbying does. There remain ample opportunities to proclaim God’s kingdom in word and deed, surely no less than ever before. It behooves the church to do so, however, not just in the interest of self-promotion and self-preservation but rather in the interest of a world in need.
Abstract: Biblical scholars and theologians who wish to distance themselves from the methodological trappings of modern biblical scholarship and retrieve a theologically informed interpretation of Scripture are increasingly turning to patristic practitioners of biblical exegesis such as Augustine. Augustine shows in his exegesis of John’s Prologue that there is actually not much difference between what patristic interpreters and modern interpreters do with Scripture. The dissimilarities that exist are not so much in a difference in tasks but in the execution of them. Augustine is untroubled appealing to the grammatical and rhetorical tools of his day. Yet what differentiates Augustine’s use of such tools from his modern counterparts is his a priori commitment to a spiritual construal of the text’s subject matter, God’s Word. For Augustine, God’s Word is not a static historical phenomenon but is ever present and thus able to speak to the church in and through the testimony of the apostolic witness. Augustine thus gives primacy to divine communicative acts over his interpretative undertakings. The communicative presence of God’s Word informs his understanding of, and thus approach to, the historical particularities of the text. For Augustine, theories of understanding, history, or texts cannot be the starting point for a theological exegesis of the Bible because human reasoning must first be redeemed and thus directed by the communicative presence of God’s Word.

The Confrontation of the Historical with the Theological in the Bible

Over the past twenty years or so, there has been a movement among biblical scholars and theologians toward recovering a distinctively theological interpretation of Scripture.¹ Within this movement there has been a critical reevaluation

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¹ I am borrowing this notion of “movement” from Daniel J. Treier’s recent book, Introducing Theological Interpretation of Scripture: Recovering Christian Practice (Grand Rapids: Baker,
of historical criticism that has dominated biblical studies in the academy for the past few centuries. It is important to note the variety of meanings for the term “historical criticism,” which this article does not have space to address. For our purposes, practitioners of historical criticism see the world as immediately intelligible to all rational people so that the “real” world becomes detached from its biblical rendering. Since the “historical” has its own autonomous realm that the biblical text now simply verifies, a great deal of effort is devoted to developing procedures and methods for understanding and interpreting this realm. Thus, many biblical scholars understand historical investigations of Scripture as a discrete form of inquiry that excludes theological concerns.

Theological interpreters of the Bible, such as John Webster, believe the interpretation of Scripture is not “an instance of a more general phenomenon, whose features are stable and discernible across widely divergent contexts.” Contrary to what happens in many biblical departments, theological interpreters see “the Christian reading of the Bible . . . as a spiritual affair, and accordingly as a matter for theological reflection.” In an effort to distance themselves from the methodological trappings of modern biblical scholarship, some have turned to patristic practitioners of biblical exegesis to learn what it means to interpret the Bible theologically.

I will endeavor to do the same by investigating Augustine’s exegetical practices, in particular his exegesis of John’s Prologue. Augustine is an excellent resource for doing this because he was, on one hand, untroubled by appealing to grammatical and rhetorical tools of ancient interpretative practice, yet on the other hand, he was not committed to a heavily theorized investment in philosophical theories of interpretation as is the case with modern biblical scholarship. Nevertheless, Augustine shows us that there is actually not much difference between what patristic and modern interpreters do with Scripture. According to George Schner, “The variance between modern and

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2008), 11. For another excellent overview of what has transpired in the last twenty years in the theological interpretation of Scripture, see Stephen E. Fowl, Theological Interpretation of Scripture (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2009).
3. Fowl, Theological Interpretation of Scripture, 18.
5. Ibid., 307.
patristic practice is not essentially a significant difference in tasks, but in a different prosecution of them.”

What distinguishes Augustine from his modern counterparts is that he avoids staking too much on one particular theory of history, or of texts and understanding, for that matter. Augustine does not hesitate to call on various philosophical theories for interpreting texts, yet only in an ad hoc and pragmatic way, as a means of finding a tool to do the job.

What allows and guides Augustine’s ad hoc use of historical, literary, and philosophical critical tools is his “spiritual” construal of the text’s subject matter, God’s word. For Augustine, God’s word is not an inert historical figure that can be examined at arm’s length under the lens of a historical-critical microscope, but God’s ever present self who reveals himself in Jesus Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit. Augustine’s spiritually construed reality of the subject matter—the triune, incarnate, and redeeming Word—informs and orders his understanding and thus his approach to the human and historical realities of Scripture. Historical, literary, and philosophical inquiries are permissible and even encouraged but, unlike modern investigations, only insofar as they serve and are guided by the same spiritual understanding of God’s Word. Since the interpretative acts of the interpreter are informed by the same spiritually oriented understanding of the text, the degree to which human reasoning is redeemed by God’s Word is fundamental to a theologically informed use of historical, literary, and philosophical tools.

Spiritual Understanding of the Text’s Subject Matter

For Augustine, the subject matter of John’s Prologue, God’s Word, is not a static historical phenomenon but is ever present and able to speak to the church today in and through the testimony of the apostolic witness, thus giving primacy to divine communicative acts over his interpretive undertakings. Augustine’s opening remarks in his sermon on John 1:1–5 are particularly instructive here. Quoting 1 Cor 2:14, Augustine reminds his congregation that the “natural man perceives not the things which are of the Spirit of God” (1.1).


because “the mountains,” as Augustine calls the Scripture writers, are able to speak to us only when they are illuminated by the Spirit (1.7). God’s Word is ever present as the light of the world (John 1:4) who, says Augustine, “by means of [John] confesses himself . . . [and] . . . by whom He desired Himself to be pointed out” (2.7).

Furthermore, the self-manifestation of God’s Word is, for Augustine, ingredient to the being of God that is God’s triune self, negating any need for a nontheological prologue to revelation. This is evident in Augustine’s rejection of the Arian notion that the Word was made (1.11). Augustine believes the author of John’s Prologue is “contemplating the divinity of the Word” (1.5). It is impossible that God’s Word is created because, as it says in verses 2–3, “He was in the beginning with God [and] all things came into being through him.” Thus, God’s Word is not born of the flesh but “of the Father alone, the God-Word with God, through whom all things were made” (1.17). Since those things addressed in John 1:1–5 “were said regarding the ineffable divinity of Christ,” he is “not . . . as the earth is in the world, the sky is in the world, as the sun . . . and men” but “as the Artificer governing what He had made” (2.10), “as of the Only-begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth” (2.16).

The only way God’s Word is perceived is by the power of the Holy Spirit (1.1). God’s Word makes himself known as the Father in the Son through the power of the Holy Spirit. Nevertheless, the Word reveals himself with historical particularity. God’s Word reveals himself as the Incarnate One, Jesus of Nazareth. As Paddison says, “The prologue unmistakably identifies the eternal Word with the startling reality of a particular enfleshed human being, ‘the Word became flesh’ (John 1:14a).” For Augustine, we are not capable of perceiving God’s Word unless “wisdom condescended to adapt Himself to our weakness and to show us a pattern of holy life in the form of our own humanity.”

That is why Augustine argues in his interpretation of verse 13 that “the Word Himself first chose to be born of man that you might be born of God unto salvation” (2.15). For it is “by His very nativity he made an eyesalve to cleanse the eyes of our hearts and to enable [us] to see his majesty by means of his humility” (2.16). When the Word became flesh, He “became,” as Augustine says, “a medicine unto us, so that as by earth we were made blind, by earth we might be healed” (3.6) and might behold “His glory, the

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glory of the Only-begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth” (v. 14). The historical particularity of the Incarnation is intrinsically connected to the eternal Word who reveals himself as the Father in the Son by the power of the Spirit.

Yet this does not mean that normal historical investigations will suffice, because, as Augustine reminds his audience in his interpretation of verse 10, they cannot see the Word’s glory, since “they themselves are darkness on account of their sins” (1.19). At the beginning of De doctrina, Augustine is very critical of those who reject the proper grammatical and rhetorical methods of interpretation: “I wish such persons could calm themselves so far as to remember that, however justly they may rejoice in God’s great gift, yet it was from human teachers that they learned to read.”11 But he is also very clear that Scripture teaches that the reader is in great need of repentance, because “each man should first of all find in the Scriptures that he, through being entangled in this world . . . has been drawn away from such love of God and such a love for his neighbor as Scripture enjoins. That fear which leads him to think of the judgment of God, and that piety which gives him no option but to believe in and submit to the authority of Scripture compels him to bewail his condition.”12 Readers are not epistemological subjects inherently capable of ordering their approach to the biblical text. For Augustine, there is an unbridgeable distance between humanity and God’s Word that can only be bridged by God’s act of redemption on the cross. “For no one,” says Augustine, “is able to cross the sea of this world, unless born by the cross of Christ” (2.2). That is why Augustine encourages his congregation to “cling to Christ according to that which He became for us, that you may arrive at Him according to that which is, and according to that which was” (2.3), as did the apostles: “In order that [the apostles] might arrive at that which they saw from afar, they did not depart from the cross of Christ, and did not despise Christ’s lowliness.” If readers “do not depart from the cross and passion and resurrection of Christ [they will be] conducted in that same ship to that which they do not see, in which they also arrive to see (2.3).” Accordingly, writes John Webster, a Christian reading of Scripture is “not so much constructive or constitutive of what is heard, but a consent to the text as an instrument for the speaking God, and therefore the self-presentation of God’s will to save.”13

11. Ibid., 2.
12. Ibid., 32.
Spiritually Informed Use of Theories

The subject matter of John’s Prologue, God’s Word, is ever present and eloquent, revealing himself as the triune, incarnate, and redeeming Word. This spiritual map of God’s Word informs Augustine’s understanding of and dealings with the human and historical realities of Scripture. For Augustine, the human and historical aspects of the biblical text function as a sign that witnesses to God’s self-revealing Word. The biblical text is a sign that “causes something else to come into mind as a consequence of itself.”

In this way, Augustine’s thinking on language and in particular the biblical text is, as Rowan Williams argues, “heavily theologically conditioned.”

The human and historical properties of Scripture are not self-sufficient so that an appeal to natural agents is sufficient. They exist in the sphere of and are thus shaped by the economy of God’s Word.

In his sermon on John 1:1–5, Augustine tells his congregation that the author of John’s Gospel cannot naturally speak of divine things: “John himself spoke of the matter [of God’s Word] . . . only as he was able; for it was a man that spoke of God, inspired indeed by God, but still a man” (1.1). Thus, the biblical text cannot be read from as if it were transparent to divine things, because John is “not the light” (John 1:8). For Augustine, there is no material attribute in the text that can illuminate God’s Word. No theory of the understanding of texts and their historical backdrop can ground or become a foundation for illuminating God’s Word and thus a theological interpretation of Scripture.

Nevertheless, the illumination of God’s Word is not ahistorical. Augustine recognizes that the biblical text is a historically contingent document. John “was a man sent by God” (my emphasis) (1.6). Yet John was “one of those mountains concerning which it is written [in Ps 72:3]: ‘Let the mountains receive peace for your people, and the hills righteousness’” (1.2). As a mountain, John “came for a witness, that he might bear witness concerning the light, that all might believe through him” (2.5). Despite the historical contingencies of the text, it nevertheless functions as a sign that witnesses to God’s Word. “Therefore let us lift our eyes to the mountains,” encourages Augustine, “from whence shall come our help; and yet it is not in the mountains themselves that our hope should be placed, for the mountains receive what they may minister to us; therefore, from whence the mountains also receive there should our hope

be placed” (1.6). This “whence” is God’s Word who “upon John . . . shed the beams of his light; and by means of him confessing himself” (2.7).

As a witness to God’s Word, the Bible in no way eludes the historical and cultural entanglements that influence all texts. Augustine’s plain-sense reading of the text reflects his appreciation for its human, historical particularities. I choose “plain” as opposed to “literal” because, unlike some literalist interpretation of Scripture, Augustine is very well versed in the human processes of interpretation, which include advanced literary analysis of original languages and philosophical applications of logic, dialectic, and scientific methods. Yet by plain sense, I also mean, following Lewis Ayres’s lead, that for Augustine the “mind of the author was discerned by focusing on elucidating the text not reconstructing the world within which the author wrote.” Instead, the plain sense follows, as Frances Young argues, “the ‘mind’ of Scripture,” “the overarching Rule of Faith,” or the “story of redemption.” Augustine’s plain-sense reading of Scripture reflects not so much a dismissal of historical particularities of Scripture, but a reorientation of historical investigations so that they serve, not master, the text’s subject matter, God’s Word, which scriptural language—along with all of its historical aspects—serves and to which it points.

To illuminate this point, consider Augustine’s exegesis of verses 6 and following. Augustine concludes that God’s Word became a man “because if He should come as God, He would not be recognized” (2.4). Since God’s Word became a man, Augustine concludes,

there was sent before Him a great man, by whose testimony He might be found to be more than man. And who is this? “He was a man.” And how could that man speak the truth concerning God? “He was sent by God.” What was he called? “Whose name was John?” Wherefore did he come? “He came for a witness, that he might bear witness concerning the light, that all might believe through him.” (2.5)

Augustine offers no behind-the-scenes summary of John the Baptist: where he came from, what might have influenced his thinking, and so on. He simply unfolds what the text says about this particular historical figure, using the

18. Ibid., 129.
19. Ibid., 134.
20. Ibid., 130.
literary skills at hand, while keeping in mind his relationship (and thus that of the text’s) to the one who sent him—namely, God’s Word.

**Spiritual Understanding of Human Reasoning**

The subject matter of John’s Prologue can only be known through God’s triune being in the incarnate and redeeming Word. God’s triune, incarnate Word redeems the biblical text, including all its human and historical particularities, so it can serve as a sign that witnesses to God’s Word. In the same way, human reasoning must be redeemed so that it can engage in the use of historical and literary-critical tools in a theologically faithful manner.

Augustine believes we cannot order our relationship to God’s Word by way of any general philosophically or historically contrived hermeneutic because of the “incomprehensibility of the divine nature to human (and especially fallen) intelligences.”

Augustine is quite clear that “the natural man does not perceive” divine things (1.1). “The science of reasoning is of very great service in searching into and unraveling all sorts of questions that come up in Scripture.” Yet readers must “not . . . venture heedlessly upon the pursuit of the branches of learning that are in vogue beyond the pale of the Church of Christ.” No one can comprehend the divine nature of God’s Word because, as Augustine says, “they are burdened by their sins, so that they cannot see . . . [not because] . . . the light is in any way absent [but] because they are not able to see it; for they themselves are darkness on account of their sins” (1.19). Our minds are conditioned by what Augustine calls “the sickness of the proud” (3.2). Thus the human mind is incapable of understanding Scripture simply “through the daily habit of daily words . . . [because] he has not the means of going . . . [since] the sea of this world interrupts our course” (2.2). For Augustine, human reasoning simply needs help.

Assistance comes, as mentioned above, from the Incarnate Word, who “first chose to be born of man that you might be born of God” (2.15), and “by His very nativity he made an eye-salve to cleanse the eyes of our hearts, and to enable us to see his majesty by means of his humility” (2.16). “Yet no one is able to cross the sea of this world,” says Augustine, “unless borne by the cross of Christ” (2.2). Therefore, “it behooves you to be new-made by the Word” (1.12) and “borne by the wood” (2.4) of Christ’s cross. Only if we “cling to

23. Ibid., 74.
Christ” (2.3) and “believe in the Crucified One . . . shall [we] arrive thither” (2.4), where we can “behold His glory, the glory as of the Only-begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth” (2.16). In light of God’s redeeming activity, we “recognize the fact that we are men, that is, to the end that we may rise to that height from humility” (1.4). Thus the process of encountering the depths of the biblical text is first and foremost the transformation of the reader’s capacity to go there. Theological exegesis proper is the work of human reason in and thus conditioned by the communicative presence of God’s Word.

Conclusion

The rise of theologically informed strategies for interpreting Scripture has, and rightly so, raised questions about the presumed methodological starting points biblical scholars readily adopted in their exegesis over the past few centuries. Consequently, biblical scholars and theologians are increasingly at odds regarding the starting points for interpreting Scripture. Augustine is an excellent resource to help bridge the increasing methodological divide between theologians and biblical scholars. He shows us that our practices are no different from his own. What differentiates modern biblical scholars’ dealings with Scripture from his is the prosecution of them. The prosecution of modern biblical approaches to the Bible is determined by when, where, and how revelation takes place. “Simple though it sounds,” says Schner, “the rudimentary question to ask of modern [scholars] is: does revelation happen, and if so, where, when, and how?”24 For Augustine, the “where, when, and how” of revelation starts simply with the subject matter of the text, God’s Word, which in turn informs his understanding of the text and shapes his reasoning and his use of historical, literary, and philosophical theories as a way of finding a tool to do the job. God’s Word, in particular the triune, incarnate, and redeeming Word, properly orients the various exegetical tasks so that interpretation of Scripture is first and foremost God’s divine address to us. In the context of this address, we need not anxiously submit the text to the latest hermeneutical theories of language, understanding, or history to justify our exegetical conclusions. Yet neither do we need to fear their use, as long as they are adapted and thus redeemed by the triune God who reveals himself in the Incarnate Word.

Abstract: This article investigates what is entailed in the claim that Christ is the meaning of history. It takes stock of the postmodern antipathy for metanarratives in order to understand both their failures and tendencies toward domination. In response, I draw on an Augustinian, christological hermeneutic for the Old Testament and find a parallel reading of history in the rhetoric of liberation theology that understands history in a sacramental, nontotalizing manner as the history of Christ.

I

Against those who turn green in the face at the mention that history is anything at all, I propose understanding history as sacrament. In the first place, this means that it is a confession of the givenness of time as itself the kind of gift that all of creation is—without reserve and therefore marked by abundance, overflow of love, superfluity, excess of joy, and trinitarian prodigality.

Creation’s existence as gift immediately and radically qualifies all attempts to say what it is for, every pained and earnest questioning of what it is all about, and each explosion of curiosity that asks why there is something rather than nothing. It is also a confession that we need not discover some insatiable, temporal panopticon that will mollify every sufferer through adversity with the knowledge that the pains of human living are somehow “for a reason.”

I suspect that the same reticence to find meaning to it all also underlies a contemporary distrust of finding Christ too much in the Old Testament. Augustine was not alone in utilizing a christocentric hermeneutic loathed by modern biblical scholarship. He expressed it this way in a sermon on Psalm 98: “Our

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whole design, when we hear a Psalm, a Prophet, or the law, all of which was written before our Lord Jesus Christ came in the flesh, is to see Christ there, to understand Christ there.”¹ What is seen when Christ is seen there is a “sacrament” (sacramentum) or “symbol” (signum), something visible that both hides and discloses a deeper spiritual reality or truth.² The Old Testament is sacramental in this precise sense.

I have no interest in entering into debates about the interpretation of Scripture. I only want to think through what it would mean to see all of history as a set of symbols that point to Christ. Any philosophy that sets itself against metaphysical ideas eventually runs aground on the successes of its own project. It is very difficult to dispense with all metaphysics and not to employ in the process an alternative that cannot rightly be described as anything but metaphysics. Nietzsche wanted to do this, and he called himself an “anti-metaphysician.” But William Connolly thinks this is just too much hot air. He insists that Nietzsche, whatever else he thought himself to be, was only a non-Christian metaphysician.³ Likewise, it is very difficult to dispense with a metaphysics of history and not thereby introduce another one through the backdoor. The rejection of history’s telos trades on an admittedly nonteleological account of reality in which temporal events are just “one damn thing after another,” in which the praise of discontinuity marries a love for incoherence, contingency, and the evacuation of all things explanatory. Catherine Pickstock argues that the grammar of conjunction has been replaced by the grammar of asyndeton; history and reality as liturgical have been replaced by brute list.⁴

II

I think there are good reasons to reject the idea that history is simply a list of disconnected events. There are certainly those who think that the postmodern aversion to metanarrative only feigns distaste for hegemony. There are at least two significant claims presently promulgated about history that now seem very difficult to resist.

First, the First World War notoriously took the steam out of any form of optimistic belief in history’s sure and steady progress. As the twentieth century

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¹. Quoted in Carol Harrison, Beauty and Revelation in the Thought of Saint Augustine (Oxford: Clarendon, 1992), 85.
². Ibid.
³. See William E. Connolly, Why I Am Not a Secularist (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), chap. 1.
unfolded, it became less and less possible to hold on to any such notions. Let us refer to this claim about history as failure. Second, if the grand metanarrativists ruined it for us, they did so by sowing deceptive mythologies that cloaked, silenced, and choked out the competition whereby “grand” only too easily came to be exposed as the stories of power that the powerful tell about themselves and the sure triumph of their ideas. This is what is generally meant by ideology. The stories need not be false in order to be considered ideological, only leading and manipulative. These are best done at a high level of abstraction and removed from actual events. The end of history therefore coincides with the end of ideology. Let us call this second claim about history domination. I shall return to this theme later and only note for now the way that no one pretends that domination has ended, only that something like the therapy of doing without grand narratives correlates with chastening political power. Whether this leaves the victims of domination unable to name and identify ideology as such, then, is a question worth asking.

Nevertheless, if we are going to talk about failure and domination, we ought to look more specifically at what we mean by these. For example, what exactly failed? Jean-François Lyotard famously described the condition of postmodernity as marked by “incredulity toward metanarratives” and in its place, owing to human finitude (and epistemological humility), recommended limiting our strivings to “little narratives” that drastically reduce the size of the contexts of historical events. If metanarrative is what has failed, we can and ought to break that down further. This kind of characteristically modern view of history made claims about knowledge (certainty) and direction, and these two are in fact interrelated.

The modern spirit was, as we all know, one of extreme and unprecedented skepticism. Things would no longer be accepted on faith or on account of the authority of tradition but would now be made to bend before that severe new god: reason itself. In doing so, great skepticism would pave the way for great confidence because once this or that bit of knowledge had passed the test—having been, as we say of aspiring politicians, suitably vetted—there would be nothing beside the rigors of our own exacting inquiry that we would need to point to in order to say that this is something we know with confidence. Yet the modern spirit, fantastically oblivious to its own ineptness in this


regard, managed to carry on for quite some time—launching revolutions and building nations along the way—before it became apparent that the bluff had been called. The very same confidence that funded the irrefragable outcome of rigorous inquiry, as it turns out, had also been responsible for the idea that we might be confident of the inquiry itself in the first place. The so-called postmodern subject therefore emerged within and from the cracks in the confident modern knower.

I take it that all of this is by now very old news. But one of the things to notice in this admittedly grossly reductionistic account is that the confidence was self-serving. The newly christened modern individual, for someone like Immanuel Kant, both claimed a newfound freedom and summarily sought to justify it. The circle, however, comes around on the individual again in only a slightly different way: Breaking free from everything that binds the individual and therefore threatens his freedom means that what is needed more than anything else is an account of that freedom that owes to nothing that might bind. While in former times one expected to encounter various theological defenses of the freedom of the will within, say, the doctrine of creation with the corresponding problems associated with sin, evil, choice, and grace, the modern project produced political and philosophical defenses of the freedom of the individual that had every intention of leaving behind so much theological deadweight. As a consequence, any knowledge—if it is to be had confidently (and since mere belief would not pass muster, one must be confident of what one knows if one wants to count it as knowledge)—must be something that any rational, enlightened, and, therefore, free-thinking person would come up with if only he put to use the full capacity of his critical faculties. If anyone was still unconvinced, we could simply chalk up her irrationality to lack of courage; clearly, she is merely and dubiously homesick for the archaic traditions of her ancestors.

The theme of domination enters the analysis at this precise point. Before saying more about that, it is worth summarizing what failed in the modern account of knowledge. Its pretensions were exposed when, given the sheer range of alternatives, this account was forced to tip its hand. Of course, the mere existence of a range of options in no way discredits them all. What it does discredit is a phlegmatic insistence that the range will diminish as the options steadily (and thanks to reason’s growing achievement) converge on the right one. If the First World War marked ultimate disillusionment for this kind of optimistic read on history, it only partly owes to the carnage and devastation on the battlefields that ought to have been the playing fields of the world’s most enlightened peoples. Rather, the violence that had been hidden in the name
of not being necessary to an age that had learned to overcome conflict with reason was now exposed for being a very real entailment in bringing about the uniformity everyone had hoped was being made apparent and realized by other means. For a thinker like Michel Foucault, who spent quite a lot of time rethinking the main moves of the Enlightenment, it became clear that knowledge and power go together.7 This knowledge is of a particular sort: overconfident, exclusive, certain, objective. Furthermore, such knowing is necessarily characterized by masking off its opposites: doubt, ambiguity, guesswork, and subjectivity. The project of wresting knowledge from the domineering clutches has therefore been, as much as anything else, a political project for which the mere and unavoidable facts of cultural diversities furnish a compelling starting point and for which civility, toleration, and coexistence furnish an admittedly modest but utterly prudent and vital goal.

To speak of goals is to invoke the second of the features of the discredited and much-maligned view of history (the first being certain knowledge), namely, its direction. And a prominent reason that postmodernity is (or at least appears to be) so coy about teleology surely has to do with this attempt to uncouple (or as Nietzsche would say, unchain) history from its overzealous champions. If one wants to speak about the failures of Marxism, for example, one may find that there is a lot to say, but its failure to generate a convincing payoff when it comes to a teleological history will certainly be one of the most salient ones. The inevitable revolution of the proletariat in the twentieth century clearly has not converged satisfactorily on “the end of history.”

By implication, then, if history is not going somewhere, then it seems obvious to many that it must have no meaning. An Aristotelian telos is as much about future directedness as it is about the present purposefulness that it discloses, which means that when grand narratives are told, they are told as the gradual and inexorable unfolding of progress toward reaching the thing toward which things have been aiming all along. It is no doubt a function of our increased awareness of the diversity of traditions that we must not only talk about loss of agreement between moral communities as to what the ends of human life are, but also find ourselves confessing the possibility of living a modern life without ever needing to come to grips with them at all. If we ever find ourselves talking about the meaningless of modern life, this is precisely why. What rushes in to take meaning’s place? Terry Eagleton describes it thus: “History loses its sense

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of direction, giving way to the cyclical, the synchronic, the epiphany of eternity, the deep grammar of all cultures, the eternal now of the unconscious, the primitive energies at the root of all life-forms, the moment in and out of time, the still point of the turning world, the collapse of novelistic narrative." The goal and meaning of history, in other words, have not so much left in their place a vast and sublime nothingness, but they have shifted the focus onto the significance of the fleeting moment. Such moments are disconnected as much as possible from every other moment; in fact, the more successful we are at disabusing history of all meaning, the more every unit of time will be allowed to breathe on its own, as it were, discharging the hegemony of the future and the sovereignty of deep time. We are left with the fragments generated by the success of what David Martin calls “the postmodern scheme to end all schemes.”

It seems to me that in all of this, we have a near reversal of some of the well-worn modern anxieties in the attempt to dislodge them. If the modern revolution was birthed in its breaking free from the past to declare itself unbridled toward an optimistic horizon, the emancipation of the rational subject, then the postmodern alternative is breaking free from future-oriented impulses that in its incredulity it had until recently taken to be the meaning of freedom itself. That freedom had been too unkind to the particulars of here and now in the name of catching the inner energy of all things up into the momentum of a universalizing time. The contemporary context, exemplified better with ethnography than with theory, is thereby saved from the totalizing and clumsy architects of the long term who always threaten to write the present away into a too-smooth, homogenized history with their ham fists. Such contexts, by their own design, were too large, the intervals of time too expansive, to give the kinds of accounts afforded by “little narratives” that forego sweeping explanatory power in favor of the nimble and slight. Grand narratives were (and still are) the favorite stories of those with sovereign privilege, since they always become the stories of their own triumphs. “Micropolitics” is therefore the postmodern style of political engagement that refuses to use the king’s mode of storytelling against him but instead undermines him with nonsovereign tales of living and acting, of making quite clear that the alternative is not a better king—more just, less tyrannical—but a people whose place in history can be told in a completely different way.

10. To be sure, not every grand narrative of history is an optimistic one. Arthur Schopenhauer’s,
III

In the midst of this situation, then, to suggest that Christ is the meaning of history risks reproducing the old hegemonies, especially those that were only ever warmed-over messianisms to begin with. Will not some insist on guarding fragile reality by looking for a healthy recognition of the discontinuous? Where in Christ—a patent, individual identity—are these ruptures and breaks?

I believe the answer is best made by appealing to Christ’s actual identity. “Christ in all things” is not nearly as imperialistic as it sounds, since Christ is everywhere unique and different, impossibly evasive, and frustratingly mysterious. It is surely one of the great ironies of the postmodern distaste for history that in its efforts to avoid flattening and reducing it, it nevertheless enacts its own sweeping reduction, namely, the one in which history is reduced to change itself. Nothing more faithfully preserves continuity than continuous discontinuity. But the Christian alternative to change itself (and to a misunderstood “everywhere unique and different”) is not static and unassailable constancy but mystery. And it is a mystery that is simultaneously God’s saving plan and Jesus Christ himself.11

History is disclosed in Christ to be the history of Christ. But this is far from claiming that history really has a uniform, hidden plot. Getting all of this right has been a project dear to liberation theology, and it is there sometimes exemplified in a way that corrects those who too hastily only know how to cry “Marxists!” For example, Leonardo Boff is very close to Augustine. Although it admittedly sounds absurd, Boff not only reads christologically the history that the Old Testament recounts on the basis of what is revealed in the New Testament. He more importantly, in reading all of history through Christ, paradoxically ends up reading the history of Christ himself christologically. What does that mean? Only that an appeal to Christ as the meaning of history is not an appeal to a silver bullet. Christ can no more be reduced to a single meaning than can the history that discloses him, and exactly because he is disclosed in the present as living and raised and therefore active and approached through mysteries.

For example, consider the matter of suffering. It is crucial that Christ’s suffering does not explain suffering, but instead leads to a constant looping back for example, was grand but also utterly pessimistic—that life is better not lived since life means suffering.

over all other human sufferings in order to discover Christ’s solidarity in them. When claims are made that one is participating in the suffering of Christ, they strive to attribute a certain kind of meaning to something that actually forbids the closure of meaning on it exactly through this attribution. Our suffering, in other words, is not said now to “make sense” once it is linked with Christ’s anymore than there was a hidden rhyme or reason to Christ’s own suffering. I link my suffering to Christ as a way of expressing a hope that despite the futility of abandonment, there is nevertheless resurrection. But it is precisely not a way of enabling me to point to something that my suffering (or anyone else’s, including Christ’s) means. Christ simply is its only meaning through, in a sense, affirming its utter meaninglessness. To put the same point differently, Christ in history grants history meaning by relieving it of the need to make any sense. Christ as meaning leaves us with many more questions than answers, we might say, but orients us in the direction from which they will come.

Still, there is a sense that if we say as much about suffering, we have still said more than we ought to. To bring suffering within the realm of things that we are capable of comprehending with concepts is to perpetuate on a different level—that of thought—the violence suffered. This same violence may also be enacted against beauty and goodness since in all cases, the aesthetic dimension of relating to them through wonder, astonishment, horror, repulsion, and so on is undermined by translating that dimension into analytical categories to be thought. This translating is never accomplished without remainder.

The philosopher Cora Diamond cites R. F. Holland’s discussion of miracles in which the latter describes them as simultaneously empirically certain and conceptually impossible.12 Jesus’ turning water into wine would have been easy to verify empirically but was and is impossible to understand conceptually. It is impossible to think it, but not to taste it. So long as the impossibility of understanding it is kept from overpowering the tasting, the appropriate human response is one of wonder, awe, and astonishment rather than skepticism. The skeptic’s problem is not therefore a philosophical one about the misuse of concepts but one of the human imagination, an inability to entertain the possibility that reality will overflow our ability to conceive of it. The skeptic is not asked by believers in miracles to suspend reality, but only to open her eyes to what is really there, however much it will horrify or delight more than it will fit into prior categories. Christ’s incarnation as solidarity with the anawim is “miraculous” in this sense.

He does not enter the *anawim*-life and the *anawim*-reality (i.e., poverty) in order to explain it, but in order to be part of its empirical reality.

We must not, however, lose whatever politics of the gospel that enables Christianity to point to the material, economic, and other reasons that the poor suffer. The point is surely that neither the suffering itself nor the making of others to suffer has any meaning. It is only dissonance, disruption, insult, and scandal. There is no “appropriate” response to its meaninglessness other than horror, disgust, and outrage.

The Christian alternative found in Christ’s impossible solidarity retains and holds open its impossibility as part of what is involved in its being solidarity whatsoever. “Argument” in this sense is the work of nonincarnate Logos, a movement between words and concepts at a remove from their subject matter. In contrast, incarnation situates the Logos within the excessiveness of reality, not in order to reduce it or explain it, but precisely by way of itself being excessive to it. Put differently, Christ is the meaning of the excessiveness of all things through his solidarity with what is inexplicable. The incarnate Logos is therefore more than word since part of what “the excessiveness of things” means is that things are always more than what can be said about them. (People always say more than what they think they are saying with their words, books are always different from the ones the authors wrote, and on and on.) In all of this, we should not lose sight of the fact that excess is the gratuity of gift. Furthermore, the excessiveness is unremittingly evasive: It cannot be “solved” by trying to say more; our words fail to link up with reality’s fullness, but the reason is not because of our poor word choice. Any choice of words or thoughts must be chastened by an imagination that seeks further ways (often affective ones) of linking up with what is real but that are not subjected to overweening, conceptual control.

All of this, of course, tempers and qualifies, in a very radical way, any claims about what it means for history to have meaning. The Son of God does not render the fleshy world comprehensible for us according to a divine vantage point by himself becoming flesh. Rather, his entering the world as a man is just as impossible conceptually as is our conceptualizing the world he enters. His solidarity with the world, then, is a sharing in the difficulty of living that neither overcomes our inadequacy to it nor leaves us to our inadequate explanations. Christ is one with the world by being to it and in its midst as an aspect of its unfinished character.

So in talking about the meaning of history as Christ, part of what we are saying is that history will not only be brought to Christ, but Christ himself will
be a part of what is brought along since he is a part of that history. In other words, he is not just an end, but he is also an object of what moves along to meet that end.

IV

Such meaning, following Boff, while not reduced to the liberation of peoples nevertheless is disclosed, again, sacramentally through such actual liberations. The gospel is good news to the poor. But it is a mistake to think that political and material liberation only points to the more fundamental saving aspects of the gospel. The fact that they are symbols of salvation only means that they are at the same time not actually acts of salvation if we limit the meaning of history to only those things that can be understood nonsacramentally.

If, for example, the Exodus of Israel from Egypt functions in a christological hermeneutic merely or even mostly as a symbol of salvation from sin, then this failure to read history sacramentally also shows itself to be a failure to see Christ as history’s meaning. Against this, the particular deliverance of Israel from Egypt as well as the manifold ways that this story has been recapitulated or appealed to through the ages as protest against injustice (by American slaves, for example) both point to and are God’s saving acts. Mere signs would be replaceable by equivalents since only the deeper meaning would have value. But the way that history as the history of Christ himself reveals Christ is by both showing and enacting—showing, as it were, simultaneously nothing other than what is enacted, and the incomplete and therefore yearning quality of what God has done. Boff upholds this sacramental quality by insisting that salvation not be patently identified with the liberations in history, “because the latter are always fragmentary, never full.” Nevertheless, he continues, “salvation is identifiable in historical liberation introduced by human beings. That is, salvation is concretized, manifested, and anticipated in these historical liberations.”

Put simply, that the gospel is evinced in history cannot entail anything less than that what is good about the good news would evaporate apart from the history of it being so evinced. When slaves are released from bondage, for example, this is a “real presence” of God’s reign that anticipates the alleviation of all human wretched material conditions only inasmuch as it is already one such instance of it. This is to invoke sacramental language that is every bit as appropriate as when it is used of the Eucharist.

Again, history is, in Boff’s words, subject and entitled to continual re-reading because the past is “sacrament of the present.”14 In fact, the same historical events can be read in differing ways depending on present reality. To illustrate this, Boff discusses the ways that each of two strands within the Old Testament itself tells Israel’s story in different ways depending on whether it is part of the narrative of Israel’s glory days under David or the narrative of Israel’s depravity that is the result of a long decadent history. In the latter case, “the events of the past are so many sacraments of Israel’s present infidelity.”15 What are we to make of this shifting hermeneutic? If a hegemonic account of history always threatens to subsume particular events under so much grandness, then surely it is hardly an improvement to make particular events mean (grandly, of course) whatever one wants them to mean in the present. But surely we will always attempt to make sense of our present in terms of our past, which will involve returning to the stories of the past in ways newly illuminated by our present circumstance. Augustine’s christocentric hermeneutic was also not a silver bullet in this sense but an unfolding of truths in proportion to Christ’s own freedom. Imagining himself as Moses, Augustine asserts in Confessions, “If I had to write with such vast authority I should prefer to write that my words should mean whatever truth anyone could find upon these matters, rather than express one true meaning so clearly as to exclude all the others.”16 This is an astounding thing to say. At the same time, it probably only works if Augustine is putting words into Moses’ mouth in a way that assumes Christ. If so, then Augustine does not mean that anything we choose to say about Scripture will be true, but that the truth of Scripture—and by extension, perhaps all of history—is multiple. Further, it can only ever be known because the continuity between present (readers) and past (events or texts) is one that Christ creates, preserves, and inhabits.

IV

Of course, this is all too hasty and only yearns to be developed further. The dangers of secular optimism, when applied to history, have become all too obvious. The dangers of a secular evacuation of meaning from history, however, are more difficult to state without falling back into the modes of reading

history that postmodernism rightly rejects. A sacramental account of history’s meaning points to the problems with both modern options: what was misguided was not their search for meaning but the depths of their terrestrial and material commitments.

Paradoxically, as I have suggested here, the best way to be true to the earth is to offer all earthly things up to God as return gifts in sacramental acknowledgment that the things we are holding are themselves participants in a deeper reality than we can know merely by experiencing them in their materiality. And this also goes for all time and all history.

Yet if God is disclosed in such things—and not just as dispensations and exemplifications of divine grace but also as acts in which grace is somehow an agent (as any decent sacramental theology will adduce)—then we are right to call them mysteries. The modern, rationalistic spirit, of course, was dead set against mysteries. Its desire to know, however, was not so much an overreaching, upward grasp to be like God. It was rather more prosaically a covert contentment with small things—things evacuated of depth. It was, on the whole, an abbreviated set of desires that was pretty happy with idols. It made its peace with its reduced objects of worship. Nietzsche, of course, took a hammer to such things and in many cases was exceedingly right to do so. Perhaps the Christianity he knew relied on gods that were really as hollow as he judged them to be. Yet a more fulsome Christian account crumbles less easily before interrogators who suitably chasten the modern preference for knowledge of surfaces. For such an account, the history of God with created time is the history of the Son. History is gift and sacrament, possessing no meaning more fundamental than Christ himself and seeking no consolations more than the joys of Christ’s presence within it.
Abstract: This article explores the redemptive significance of the patience of Jesus. It examines how the patient suffering of Jesus is uniquely manifested in Jesus’ life of obedience, crucifixion, and burial, in order to shed light on how God brings about redemption in a world marked by great suffering and evil. The article uses two novels, Peter De Vries’s *The Blood of the Lamb* and Wallace Stegner’s *Crossing to Safety*, in order to examine how it is precisely the patience of Jesus that provides the possibility for redemption in the midst of awful situations of suffering and grief.

In his novel *The Blood of the Lamb*, Peter De Vries bluntly addresses the many shades of personal crisis that arise from immediate experiences of suffering and death. Amid the various phases of grief, lament, protest, and resignation, De Vries offers a hopeful glimpse for the possibility of redemption. This glimpse takes the form of bright insight into the patience of Jesus crucified that shines into the darkness of overwhelming grief. The issue I will address in this article is the light that shines into the darkness of the grief of De Vries’s protagonist, Don Wanderhope. Why is the foot of the cross truly the only genuine alternative to inconsolable despair? What is it about the deliberate and infinite patience of Jesus that manifests his redemptive and saving work?1

Wanderhope’s encounter with the redeeming patience of Jesus takes place in the midst of a disorienting emotional swing. Gleeful with the news that his

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ten-year-old daughter’s leukemia is in remission, Wanderhope drives to the hospital with a cake. On his way, he stops into the church of St. Catherine and joins others kneeling in prayerful silence. There he meets a night nurse from the hospital and is told of an aggressive infection that is spreading through the ward of the hospital like wildfire. His daughter Carol is being ravaged by the infection and will succumb later that afternoon. In his rush to get to the hospital, Wanderhope leaves the cake on the church pew. After Carol’s death, Wanderhope leaves the hospital, stops into a bar for “six or seven drinks,” and then heads to his car to drive home. Staggering under the heaviness of the loss and grief, Wanderhope engages in a final act of seemingly futile protest:

Passing the church of St. Catherine on the way to the car, I suddenly remembered the cake. I went inside, out of curiosity. It was still there on the pew, undisturbed. I picked it up and started out with it. . . .

Outside, I paused on the sidewalk, one foot on the bottom step. I turned and looked up at the Figure still hanging as ever over the central doorway, its arms outspread among the sooted stones and strutting doves.

I took the cake out of the box and balanced it a moment on the palm of my hand. . . . Then my arm drew back and let fly with all the strength within me. . . .

It was a miracle enough that the pastry should reach its target at all, at that height from the sidewalk. The more so that it should land squarely, just beneath the crown of thorns. Then through scalded eyes I seemed to see the hands free themselves of the nails and move slowly toward the soiled face. Very slowly, very deliberately, with infinite patience, the icing was wiped away from the eyes and flung away. I could see it fall in clumps to the porch steps. Then the cheeks were wiped down with the same sense of grave and gentle ritual, with all the kind sobriety of one whose voice could be heard saying, “Suffer the little children to come unto me . . . for of such is the kingdom of heaven.”

There the scene dissolved itself in a mist in which my legs could no longer support their weight, and I sank down to the steps. I sat on its worn stones, to rest a moment before going on. Thus, Wanderhope was found at that place which for the diabolists of his literary youth, and for those with more modest spiritual histories too, was said to be the only alternative to the muzzle of a pistol: the foot of the Cross.²

Wanderhope’s vision of clarity centers on the infinite patience of Jesus. As Christ hangs on the cross, he endures and absorbs the abuse of his enemies and

with patient trust experiences the silence and abandonment of God. Or, more to the point of Wanderhope’s circumstance, Jesus patiently expresses lament toward God with the words “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Mark 15:34), and he endures the lament and protest of those who grieve. As the scene ends, we see that Wanderhope is brought to his knees and comes to recognize that the only place he can be in this time of loss, grief, and anger is at the foot of the cross. For it is at the foot of the cross where we look up to see the face of the God who suffers with us, enters into our agonies, and in the patient endurance of Jesus overcomes suffering and death and brings about our redemption.3

This moment of clarity is short-lived, however, and Wanderhope finds another alternative to the muzzle of the pistol, namely, the solidarity of those who suffer grief and the task of offering comfort to those who mourn. Months later, when Wanderhope can finally bring himself to go through Carol’s things in her bedroom, he comes across a tape that Carol recorded for him. On this recording, she recites his “philosophy of life”—a paragraph published, months earlier, by his alma mater’s magazine. Carol attributes her courage in the face of her illness to Wanderhope’s musings of facing the beauty and horror of this world while enduring of the silence and absence of God. “The quest for Meaning is foredoomed,” Wanderhope confidently asserts:

> Human life “means” nothing. But that is not to say that it is not worth living. What does a Debussy Arabesque “mean,” or a rainbow or a rose? A man delights in all of these, knowing himself to be no more—a wisp of music and a haze of dreams dissolving against the sun. Man has only his own two feet to stand on, his own human trinity to see him through: Reason, Courage, and Grace. And the first plus the second equals the third.4

Our reason tells us to face facts; we then muster up courage to face them, and finally we can display grace. This is not a grace we receive from God but rather a grace we can give to those who suffer and mourn. Hearing the daughter he has buried speak these words hits Wanderhope hard; he feels like he has been nearly clubbed to death. Before the dawn of the next morning Wanderhope retrieves a cross necklace from his bedroom, or as he dismissively

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3. As Nicholas Wolterstorff reflects on the death of his own son, Eric, “God is not only the God of the sufferers but the God who suffers. The pain and fallenness of humanity have entered into his heart. . . . And the great mystery: to redeem our brokenness and lovelessness the God who suffers with us did not strike some mighty blow of power but sent his beloved son to suffer like us, through his suffering to redeem us from suffering and evil.” Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Lament for a Son* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 81–82.

describes it, “a small cruciform trinket.” He then takes the necklace, walks to the edge of the backyard, and hurls it with all his strength into the woods.

Wanderhope is spent from the years of struggle with God, with faith and unbelief, as he witnessed and accompanied a continuous string of people dying: his beloved brother, a lover, his wife, father, and now, most precious of all, his daughter Carol. He composedly acknowledges that he cannot be consoled in his grief and that he has been excluded from God’s presence:

The child on the brink of whose grave I tried to recover the faith lost on the edge of my brother’s is the goalkeeper past whom I can now never get. In the smile are sealed my orders for the day. . . . As for the other One, whose voice I thought I heard, I seem to be barred from everything it speaks in comfort, only the remonstrance remaining: “Verily I say unto thee, Thou shalt by no means come out thence, till thou hast paid the uttermost farthing.”

Instead of being comforted by Jesus, his patient suffering on the cross, and his call of welcome to the little children, Wanderhope now can only consider Jesus as the judge, or even the adversary, who has sentenced him to a life outside of God’s presence. This realization, we must recognize, does not lead Wanderhope to utter despair—the muzzle of a pistol—rather, it leads him to the community of human sufferers, for which there is no consolation or redemption, but there is the possibility of compassion for the pain and grief of others. This human community of fellow-sufferers just might provide the support needed in order to cope, but this community and Wanderhope’s world are void of the possibility of redemption. As Wanderhope concludes, “Again the throb of compassion rather than the breath of consolation: the recognition of how long, how long is the mourner’s bench upon which we sit, arms linked in undeluded friendship, all of us, brief links, ourselves, in the eternal pity.”

My aim is not to dismiss out of hand Wanderhope’s ultimate conclusion that an actual alternative to nihilistic despair is the solidarity and mutual offers of comfort and compassion within the community of sufferers. Rather, I wish

5. Ibid., 242.
6. Ibid., 243–44. The biblical reference is Matt 5:25–26: “Agree with thine adversary quickly, while thou art in the way with him; lest at any time the adversary deliver thee to the judge, and the judge deliver thee to the officer, and thou be cast into prison. Verily I say unto thee, Thou shalt by no means come out thence, till thou hast paid the uttermost farthing” (KJV).
7. Ibid., 246.
8. Stanley Hauerwas comments on the end of the novel, “The novel ends with Wanderhope’s comment that all we can gain from our suffering is a sense of compassion for one another’s hurt—that we are all sitting on a mourners’ bench that is longer than we had imagined. Such a response to the suffering of a child like Carol can be but an extremely attractive and humane form
to examine the insight into Jesus’ “infinite patience,” which Wanderhope tentatively and briefly embraced, well aware of the darkness of his grief. It is precisely the gravity of this grief that draws him away from the gospel of the cross and toward a reaffirmation of his previous conclusion—that the most we can hope for is the sympathetic comfort of others, and the most we can do is to offer compassion to others as we join them in their grief. We must acknowledge that in the face of suffering, especially in the death of a child, the silence and absence of God can be acute. The Christian is not a naive optimist unable to relate to Wanderhope’s struggle; rather, the Christian lives in faith and trust that God has overcome our suffering and darkness and will bring redemption to painful situations. On this point, I will follow the wise advice of Arthur McGill: “So far as a Christian wrestles with real darkness, his theologizing will be open to the unbeliever. The fact that the believer seeks and moves toward the light does not mean that he has departed from the darkness. It means the contrary. It means that he still knows the darkness, is still joined with unbelievers, though he also knows something more: he knows the Lord.” 9 One key thing the believer knows about the Lord is that the Lord is patient, and this patience leads to salvation.

Patience as the Mark of Jesus’ Redemptive Life That Leads to Death

One principle way we may consider the redeeming patience of God is to relate the patience of Jesus, which is demonstrated in his life, passion, and death, to the power and love of God. Hans Urs von Balthasar articulates what is at stake by granting priority to divine love and then understanding divine power as being shaped by this love. He writes, “God is not, in the first place, ‘absolute power,’ but ‘absolute love,’ and his sovereignty manifests itself not in holding on to what is its own but in its abandonment—all this in such a way that this sovereignty displays itself in transcending the opposition, known to us from the world, between power and impotence.” 10 Note that Balthasar is in no way suggesting that God is powerless; rather, he is indicating how God precisely and uniquely demonstrates power through the apparent frailty of self-giving love.

of unbelief. According to this response—and it is not a response that can easily be dismissed—in the absence of God the best we can do is comfort one another in the loneliness and the silences created by our suffering.” Stanley Hauerwas, God, Medicine, and Suffering (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 34.


If impatience, stemming from power, is marked by a desire to control and coerce in the quest or demand for results, patience, as a manifestation of love, yields control and does not rely on coercive manipulation in order to achieve its desired outcome. The patience of Jesus, therefore, is displayed in his availability to others. Jesus does not operate in a way that is controlling, exploitive, or coercive. On the contrary, he gives of himself; in fact, he gives himself for the sake of others. As McGill writes, “In all his teaching and deeds Jesus stands forth as the advocate of love. It is important to recognize, however, that the love that concerns him has a particular character: it is essentially an activity of self-expenditure for another’s need.”

This self-expenditure is patient in that it is done without calculation and in full awareness that others might abuse this self-giving. It is without calculation, since Jesus does not take up a life of radical self-giving because he is convinced that this is the most effective strategy for bringing about a desired result. Jesus’ patient self-giving is done out of love for others and in obedience to the will and leading of God. Further, in his life of self-expenditure, says McGill, Jesus is free of any fear and anxiety that his deeds will lead to his being taken advantage of: “Jesus is not afraid that his kind of loving involves the death of life as we usually think of it, because for him this loving is itself the fullness of true life.” Jesus can be patient because he is not afraid. Alternatively we could say that because he is patient, he is not afraid. He is not afraid because he lives from the conviction that this form of self-giving life is true and abundant life, while a life of selfish ambition, which strives to attain and acquire more and more for oneself, is futile and dead. Those who live to expand themselves—their power, control, and influence—tend to be fearful and impatient. They are fearful of the possibility of potential loss, and they are impatient, as they are eager for instant and accelerated success and results. This life of selfish expansion, intent on instant success, results, and gratification is no life at all; it is a living death, which will come to naught. The patience that Jesus exhibits runs counter to what we regularly identify as power and celebrate as success, because it has all the markings of weakness and defeat. McGill describes the powerful patience of Jesus’ self-giving life in terms of his refusal to benefit from his prerogatives and his refusal to exert control over others: “[Jesus] does not vindicate himself with the kind of powerfulness that we have always admired. He does not assert himself, preserve himself, or impose his will upon others.”

12. Ibid., 56.
13. Ibid., 60–61.
One further way to account for the uniqueness of Jesus’ patient life, which challenges the self-assertive and self-aggrandizing shape of our society’s elite, powerful, and successful, is his single-minded commitment to his vocation. Jesus is thoroughly open to the will of God and is uncompromisingly available to the direction of God. He does not overreach. He is not driven by efficiency and effectiveness, which often resort to the imposition of one’s power, the exertion of one’s will over others. Jesus, by contrast, waits upon God, and he does so at every turn. Balthasar maintains that patience is “the basic constituent of Christianity,” which he defines as “the power to wait, to persevere, to hold out, to endure to the end, not to transcend one’s own limitations, not to force issues by playing the hero or the titan, but to practice the virtue that lies beyond heroism, the meekness of the lamb which is led.”

Jesus is not a hero; he is the obedient servant who lives in accordance to the will of God and for the benefit of others. By insisting that Jesus demonstrates perfect patience as the lamb that is led, Balthasar also upholds the saving significance of the entire course of Jesus’ life of patient obedience. In other words, the twists and turns of his life are not mere preliminary preparation for the saving event of the cross and resurrection. As Balthasar concisely writes, “His perfection is his obedience, which does not anticipate.”

Jesus does not anticipate and dictate the course of his life and its outcome. Jesus lives moment by moment according to the will of Father and receptive to the leading of the Spirit. He lives a temporal life of trust in God and commitment to the mission for which he was sent. He does not determine the shape of his life in advance, as if he had access to a number of options and then chose the one that guaranteed success. Jesus refuses to predict and anticipate the future on the basis of his own strength and insight. He assents to and is guided by the Holy Spirit, who mediates to him the will of the Father. Jesus is empowered, directed, and sent by the Spirit as he follows and enacts the Father’s saving will for humanity.

The Patient Jesus—Crucified, Dead, and Buried

In the narrative of the crucifixion we see the climax of Jesus’ life of obedient patience. This patient suffering begins with his refusal to vindicate and assert himself and his identity as he is derided and insulted by unnamed spectators and by the chief priests and scribes who brought about his death.

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15. Ibid., 38.
16. Ibid., 39.
spectators and those who passed by the cross “derided him, shaking their heads and saying, ‘Aha! You who would destroy the temple and build it in three days, save yourself, and come down from the cross!’” (Mark 15:29). These insults are echoed by the chief priests and the scribes as they mock Jesus and demand an immediate sign and proof of Jesus’ identity and power. “He saved others; he cannot save himself. Let the Messiah, the King of Israel, come down from the cross now, so that we may see and believe” (Mark 15:31–32). Of course, there is perfect irony in the words of the chief priests and scribes, for one of Mark’s chief goals is to demonstrate that the saving identity of Jesus is seen only in suffering, death, and seeming defeat. The chief priests and scribes are blind to the genuine identity of Jesus, and they unwittingly and ironically speak the truth in their mocking of Jesus. Jesus’ patient refusal to save himself is exactly what leads to the salvation of others. And his patient refusal to avoid the cross or come down from it manifests his genuine identity as the Messiah, King of Israel, and, in the words of the centurion who looked upon the dead Christ, “God’s Son” (Mark 15:39).

To sharpen the focus of our attention to the complexity of Jesus’ patience, we will now turn to an essay of Balthasar’s that explores the passion of Jesus in terms of vicarious representation. In this essay, Balthasar describes Jesus’ saving work in terms of his twofold passion of the crucifixion and the descent into hell. He does so by emphasizing the saving patience of Jesus, beginning with the cross:

Two aspects can be distinguished here: the first is ordered more to the event of Good Friday, the second more to that of Holy Saturday. In the suffering of the living Jesus, there is a readiness to drink the “chalice” of wrath, that is to let the whole power of sin surge over him. He takes the blows, and the hate they express, upon himself and, as it were amortizes it through his own suffering. The impotence of suffering (and the active readiness to undergo that impotence) outlasts every power of hammering sin. Sin’s impatience, as the sum of all world-historical sinful impatience against God, is finally exhausted in comparison to the patience of the Son of God. His patience undergirds sin and lifts it off its hinges.

17. Commenting on the words of the priests and scribes, Hans Frei writes, “These words detail the pattern of the saving action and suggest that, if Jesus had not forsaken the power to save himself, he could not have saved others.” Thus, the transition from power to helplessness is at the same time the realization of his saving power. There is, then, not only transition but also coexistence between his power and powerlessness.” Hans W. Frei, The Identity of Jesus Christ: The Hermeneutical Bases of Dogmatic Theology (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975), 104.

Here we see the redeeming power of the patience of Jesus, the Son of God, in stark relief. His life of patient obedience culminates in the event of the cross. Jesus not only absorbs the blows of sin and hate. In his patient endurance and his mission to bring salvation, hope, and redemption to humanity, Jesus bears this sin and hate away; he eliminates it. Humanity’s impatient refusal to live in utter dependence upon the grace of God, which manifests itself in hatred toward God and toward his servant, Jesus, is dismantled by the patience of Jesus. We must insist that Jesus is no mere helpless victim, incapable of acting in the face of the powerful. Rather, in obedience, Jesus willingly and actively embraces the readiness for the apparent powerlessness of suffering. Hans Frei notes that Jesus’ vicarious identification with the helplessness of guilty humanity is the climax of the story of salvation: “This helplessness is his power for the salvation of others. Something of his power abides and is accentuated as he becomes helpless. The pattern of exchange becomes the means of salvation.”

As we look back to Wanderhope hurling the cake at the face of Jesus, we see this as a manifestation of lament, disgust, and hatred. Jesus, in his patient endurance, allows and accepts this protest, and by enduring its blows, eliminates the hatred and consoles the grief-stricken. Jesus’ suffering outlasts every power of hammering sin; he is able to take our assaults to the end. Jesus’ endurance does not merely deflect sin. His patient suffering defeats sin and the assaults of sinners; it dismantles and removes it. We can see two ways in which the world’s impatience is exhausted in comparison to the patience of the Son of God. The first is in the rebellious assaults of the sinner—human enmity toward and against God. The second are the assaults of protest against God—assaults of anger and blame. What qualities meet at the cross? The qualities of sinful rebellion and hate against Jesus and the loving, faithful, patient obedience of the Son. Jesus bears our anger, rage, lament, and grief and reaches out his hand of consoling and redeeming love.

The second aspect of the saving work of Jesus is his descent into hell, and like the cross, we can come to a deeper understanding of his burial and descent by viewing it in terms of Jesus’ patience. Balthasar writes:

But there is, on Holy Saturday, the descent of the dead Jesus into hell: that is (speaking very simplistically), his solidarity in nontime with those who have been lost to God. For these people, their choice is definitive, the choice whereby they have chosen their “I” instead of God’s selfless love. Into this definitiveness (of death) the Son descends; but now he is

19. Frei, Identity of Jesus Christ, 104.
no longer *acting* in any way but from the Cross is instead robbing every power and initiative by being the Purely Available One, the Obedient One, but in an obedience that has been humiliated to the point of being pure matter, the absolutely cadaver-like obedience that is incapable of any active gesture of solidarity, let alone of “preaching” to the dead. He is dead with the dead (but out of a final love).

But this is precisely how he disturbs the absolute loneliness that the sinner strives for: The sinner who wants to be “damned” by God now rediscovers God in his loneliness, but this time he rediscovers God in the absolute impotence of love. For now God has placed himself in solidarity with those who have damned themselves, into “nontime” in a way we could never anticipate.20

We see therefore that Wanderhope is not alone, even as he feels outside of the comforting presence of Christ. Even in the isolation of his grief and protest, he is not alone; Christ is with him. Here Balthasar, in characteristic fashion, directs our attention beyond the saving patience of Jesus exhibited on the cross, to the saving significance of the descent into hell. Christ’s burial and descent into hell exhibit Jesus’ patience, as this reality reminds us that Jesus did not instantaneously move, by his own power, from death to resurrection. Not only did Jesus die, but perhaps even more scandalously, he was dead. As such, he was incapable of any activity of his own and was forced to wait for the powerful, life-giving action of the Father. He patiently endured the full reality of human helplessness and hopelessness as an enactment of the utter availability of his obedience to God and as a manifestation of his love for humanity. For Balthasar, Jesus’ presence with those who persist in opposition to the love and grace of God is the clearest demonstration of the power of Jesus’ patience, which takes the form of total availability and obedience. Jesus’ descent into hell demonstrates God’s patience with his creatures. God allows his creatures to have the freedom to hate and reject him. Yet God rules over this freedom. As Balthasar writes, “Creatively freedom is respected but is still overtaken by God at the end of the Passion.”21 God, in Jesus’ presence among the dead, manifests patient fellowship even with those who refuse this fellowship. The sinner who flees from God encounters in the dead Jesus a companion in his loneliness.22

21. Ibid.
22. Balthasar writes, “Only in absolute weakness does God want to give to each freedom created by him the gift of love that breaks out of every dungeon and dissolves every constriction in
As we have seen, Balthasar’s treatment of the descent into hell speaks of Jesus’ solidarity with the loneliness of those who reject God and are damned because of their misuse of creaturely freedom. There is also another, complementary way to see the significance of the reality of Jesus’ burial and full identification with the dead. Jesus’ solidarity with the dead establishes the possibility of hope for those who appear to be lost, and it also provides comfort and hope to those who suffer in this life.

In *Crossing to Safety*, Wallace Stegner’s acclaimed novel of marriage and friendship, there is a moment of profound theological insight into the power and significance of Jesus’ resurrection from the tomb—from the dead. This scene illustrates the deep impact of the reality of the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus on persons who endure years of physical suffering. This episode also shows what hinders people from seeing the saving truth of these events. The scene centers on Piero della Francesca’s evocative painting *Resurrection*. The novel narrates the friendship and marriages of two couples: Larry and Sally Morgan, and Sid and Charity Lang. Late in the narrative, the two couples enjoy a year living together in Italy. One day-trip from Florence takes the couples to the Tuscan city of Arrezo to view a number of Piero’s paintings. After this, they stop at Sansepolcro and convince a sacristan to open the chapel so they can see Piero’s depiction of the resurrected Christ. This Christ is climbing out of the tomb, with visible wounds and a triumphant banner in hand, while the guards lie asleep, perhaps drunk, and unaware. The narrative picks up as they come upon the arresting painting:

> Until then there had been a good deal of frivolity in us, a springtime response to the blossoms and the mild, clear air. But Piero’s Christ knocked it out of us like an elbow in the solar plexus. That gloomy, stricken face permitted no forgetful high spirits. It was not the face of a god reclaiming his suspended immortality, but the face of a man who until a moment ago had been thoroughly and horribly dead, and still had the smell of death in his clothes and the terror of death in his mind. If resurrection had taken place, it had not yet been comprehended.

> Three of us were moved to respect, perhaps awe, by that painting, but Charity thought, or pretended to think, that it was another instance of an artist resorting to shock for his effects. Instead of trying to paint the

solidarity, from within with [t]hose who refuse all solidarity.” Ibid. He ends this essay with the words “Mors et vita duello,” from the sixteenth-century Easter hymn *Victimae paschali laudes*. The stanza continues, “Conflixer mirando: dux vitae mortuus, regnat vivus.” This is translated as “Death and life have contended in that combat stupendous: the Prince of life, who died, reigns immortal.”
joy, the beatifications, the wonder that would naturally accompany the triumph over death—an uplifting idea if there ever was one—Piero had chosen to do it backwards, upside down. She thought he was anti-human in his scornful portraits of drunken soldiers, and anti-God in his portrait of Christ. It seemed to her an arrogant painting. Instead of showing pity for human suffering it insisted on grinding down on the shocking details. Instead of trying to paint the joyfulness of Christ’s sacrifice Piero almost seemed to call it hopeless. Why hadn’t he, if only by a gleam in the sky or the glimpsed feather of an angel’s wing, put in anything that suggested the immediacy of heaven and release? And what terrible eyes this Christ had!

We did not argue with her. She was still developing her sundial theory of art, which would count no hours but the sunny ones. But I noticed that Sally stood a long while on her crutches in front of that painting propped temporarily against a frame of raw two-by-fours. She studied it soberly, with something like recognition or acknowledgement in her eyes, as if those who have been dead understand things that will never be understood by those who have only lived.23

The frivolity of trekking through Tuscany comes to an abrupt halt in front of Piero’s Christ. We may note the “frivolity” of “a springtime response to the blossoms” in contrast to the jarring disturbance of encountering the resurrection of the one who was crucified, dead, and buried. In other words, the resurrection of Jesus is not merely a particular instance of the general reality of renewal of life, as seen in the transition from the dormancy of winter to the blossoms of spring. The resurrection of the crucified and dead Jesus is the unexpected and disruptive movement from death to life, and the once for all defeat of death. Though depicting the victory and triumph of the resurrection, Piero’s Christ is no forgetful Christ. His journey with the dead remains with him. This painting points to the place from which Jesus was raised. Jesus does not forget the horror of the cross and the isolation of the tomb. The suffering is healed and redeemed, but it is not forgotten. There is no impatient turn to look on the bright side of things, but there is the patient contemplation of the stark reality of the pain, suffering, and death that is overcome through the triumph of the resurrection.

How might we account for the resistant response of Charity? Her “sundial” theory of art, in which the artist is to portray life as it is lived in the light of joy and happiness, corresponds to her insistence on looking at the world with stolid optimism, refusing to gaze upon pain and suffering. This view of art

and of the world shapes Charity’s interpretation of the saving work of Jesus as well. While she acknowledges and celebrates his triumph over death, she has a vision of triumph and victory without the pain, the suffering, and the death. Charity cannot see the genuine pity expressed by the solemn face of Jesus, and she accuses the artist of a contempt for humanity and a bitter dismissal of human suffering and pain. In fact, even though Charity lacks perception, the Christ that confronts her in Piero’s painting not only has pity for human suffering and brokenness but in mercy and with great patience enters into solidarity with the particularities of human suffering in all of its “shocking details.” By contrast, Charity’s view of art and the world suggests a desire for a Jesus who shows pity for human suffering, but generically and from a distance. Charity impatiently desires the “immediacy of heaven and release,” and scorns the notion that renewed and redeemed life comes through endurance of pain and suffering. While thinking she is defending God and humanity in her critical response or even rebuke of the artist, she is in fact placing herself in the position of those who tempt Jesus to bring about salvation without following the way of the cross. She moves quickly from cross to resurrection, death to life, avoiding the inconvenient reality of the cold corpse of Jesus confined to the tomb. There is, furthermore, an instance of ironic insight in Charity’s assessment of Piero’s Christ, seen in Larry’s (the narrator) speculation regarding Charity’s condescending judgment: “Instead of trying to paint the joyfulness of Christ’s sacrifice Piero almost seemed to call it hopeless.” Charity expects power without vulnerability and sacrifice without pain. The truth, however, is that Jesus’ patient perseverance in obediently following his vocation leads him to faithfully enter into a condition of helplessness and hopelessness in order to effect God’s saving will for those who are thoroughly powerless, and to bring genuine hope to the hopeless.

Sally, in contrast to Charity’s fleeting glance and instant judgment, “stood a long while” in front of the painting and “studied it soberly.” Sally, who has lived with polio for over thirty years, finds solidarity with the resurrected Christ who knows, first-hand, what it really means to suffer, to die, and to be dead. Sally sees in the “terrible” eyes of Jesus a fellow traveler through the terror of darkness and the uncertainty and fear of pain and suffering. In her study of the painting, Sally bears witness to the biblical affirmation that Jesus is not removed from human pain, is not immune to human suffering, and that the way upon which Jesus goes in solidarity with humanity is the way to the cross and through the tomb. It is Jesus’ patience that ultimately brings about his saving work. Had Jesus, in haste, moved from life to death and then to new life, he
would not have endured, and therefore redeemed, the fullness of the human condition, in all of its pain and suffering.

As it stands, Sally gives expression to a commonly held view of God—through Jesus’ suffering, passion, and death—as a “fellow-sufferer” who understands our pain and anguish: “Those who have been dead understanding things that will never be understood by those who have only lived.” While this certainly goes a long way toward lending comfort to those who suffer, as it provides a possibility for coping with pain and grief, more needs to be said. While there is something comforting about seeing Jesus joining Wanderhope, and Sally for that matter, on the endless mourners’ bench, Jesus goes beyond mere understanding to actual redemption and salvation. God’s presence in Jesus’ suffering is not only an occasion for God to understand humanity and each individual case of human suffering. More than understanding is achieved. God’s presence in Jesus is the particular way that God loves and redeems those who suffer. God’s acting in this way gives genuine hope to those who suffer, hope for a future in which they will be restored and released to enjoy full, abundant life.24

Redemptive Hope and the Patience of Jesus

We now return to Wanderhope at the foot of the cross and his testimony to the infinite patience of Jesus. It is below the battered figure of the crucified Jesus where Wanderhope, if for but a moment, catches a glimpse of the redeeming love of God. While he does, and perhaps ought to, remain angry about the brutal death of his daughter, whose dead body he describes as “some mangled flower, or like a bird that had been pelted to earth in a storm,”25 Wanderhope’s anger toward God is absorbed and overcome by the infinite patience of Jesus, the suffering love of God. Although the comfort of this moment cannot be maintained, and Wanderhope returns to a posture of protest toward God and resignation in the face of the silence and absence of God, he is not completely without hope. His hope rests in the patient persistence of God to pursue him to the end, and the promise God has not left his creatures alone, but is present even in the isolation of suffering and the inconsolable desperation of grief.

24. Kelsey writes, “It is important to stress that God’s fellow suffering in, through, and under Jesus’ passion is not just God’s way of understanding what we go through. It is God’s own odd way of going about loving us, God’s concrete act of loving us in the midst of the most terrible circumstances we can go through. . . . It is only God’s concrete act of loving [us] in the midst of the most appalling situations that makes [our] lives worth living.” Kelsey, Imagining Redemption, 61.
In Jesus Christ, we see that God has walked with his creatures “to the very end” (John 13.1) of death, and not simply biological death, but death experienced in the horror of God’s silence and God’s abandonment. God participates in our affliction, suffering, and pain, and as such enacts his saving and perfecting will for his creatures. God’s patience speaks to his saving identification with us, his merciful intervention for sinful humanity by, in Jesus Christ, acting in our place and on our behalf. Jesus’ cry of dereliction on the cross of Good Friday, and the deafening silence of Saturday, reveal to us that even when we feel the absence of God and experience his silence, we are, in fact, not alone. As Wolf Krötke eloquently and hopefully writes, “Good Friday teaches us that God is with us even in his silence. As he touches us with his silence, he bears the heavy experience we make when he is silent. In all their gravity, such experiences can stop being ultimate experiences that imprison people in distance from God. They do not prevent us from hearing the word of God’s love in his silence.”

26 The patience of God gives us hope in the midst of darkness and suffering, for in his faithfulness the patient God will not give up on his creatures, will not abandon us to darkness, destruction, and annihilation. God is patient in that God is the God of salvation and life. It is in the patient, saving will and action of God that we must place our trust, even, or especially, in the face of the darkness of human suffering, pain, and death.

In attempting to treat so spacious and many-sided a theme, within the time allotted to each of the speakers on this occasion, one can at most hope only to touch upon a few fundamental considerations. I shall confine myself to two main lines of thought, from which we may, as I trust, take a rapid yet fairly comprehensive view, alike of the general principles that underlie this subject and of their concrete expression and practical significance in the particular period of history to which these commemorative exercises direct our attention this morning. In the first place, then, let us consider the nature of the spiritual influence exerted by the Bible as such, and in the second place let us try to form some estimate of the range or extent of this influence, in the case of the English Bible, upon the spiritual life of the English-speaking people.

The Bible is emphatically the book of life. It is a collection of writings which, as a matter of observation and experience, are as vitalizing as they are vital. Directly or indirectly they all bear testimony to One who professed to come into this world that men might have life, and have it abundantly, and who, judged by the events of history, has brought life and immortality to light for a multitude whom no man can number. What the evangelist John says concerning the purpose of his own Gospel is true in a sense of all the Scriptures: “But these are written that ye may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing ye may have life in his name.”

In its realization of this mission the Bible, it must be emphasized, renders its chief service to the individual. Its message and its ministry are primarily personal. Its divinely ordained method of ennobling society as a whole is that of...
transforming, simultaneously indeed yet also separately, its constituent units. One by one, men, women, and children are to appropriate its treasures of truth and grace and life until, in the consummated kingdom of heaven, the race and the cosmos are fully redeemed. Even the subtle intangible yet most real and potent spiritual atmosphere or climate which we instinctively feel when we enter a community in which the human spirit has for many generations homed itself in the sacred Scriptures can and must be traced back to the influence of the Sun of righteousness upon those rivers of living water which, as the Savior affirmed, gush forth from the regenerated personality of each of his followers. Here as in every other vital process the personal factor is the determining one.

Nor is it difficult for us to understand how the Bible becomes the word of life to every one who really accepts its great message. For the unique excellence of the book is its profound, intense, all-pervading spirituality. It is the record of God’s self-disclosure to his people for the benefit of the whole race, and as such a revelation it is fitted to be the bearer of a new and divine life for the children of men. Not that any magical power inheres in the mere letter of Scripture. It is the Spirit that giveth life—that same Holy Spirit who makes those whom he regenerates see with the certainty of an immediate intuition the perfect agreement between the new life that has sprung up in their own hearts and that wonderful world of spiritual truths and heavenly energies and transcendent glories which they behold in the Bible. In a word, the Spirit-led reader finds in the inspired volume as nowhere else him whom to know is eternal life. When this is said, everything is included. For as Principal Fairbairn reminds us, “Man’s thought of God, of the cause and end alike of his own being and of the universe, is his most commanding thought; make it and you make the man.” Does not the repeated experience of every one of us testify that the unity of our own personal life emerges most clearly to our view when, as in the act of prayer, we stand face to face with the only true and living One? Man’s relation to God is, in fact, the fruitful mother-principle that organizes the whole system of his thoughts, affections, aspirations, and purposes. Historically, as Dr. Kuyper, in his noble “Stone Lectures” has so well showed, there have been developed five characteristic expressions of this fundamental relationship between the finite and the Infinite. Paganism seeks and finds and worships God in the creature. Islam takes the antithetic extreme that cuts off all contact between God and the creature, isolating the former from human affairs and confining the latter within a realm of inexorable fatalism. Modernism in its atheistic and agnostic forms as seen in the shibboleth of the French Revolution, “No God, no master,” tries to annihilate all relation to
God, because he is conceived as a power hostile to the state and society. We are concerned more particularly with those other two comprehensive life-systems which have grown up side by side in our western world upon substantially the same biblical foundation, Romanism and Evangelicalism. With all they have in common, the former maintains that God enters into fellowship with man only by means of a middle-link, an external visible institution: it is the hierarchical church that stands between the soul and the source of its life. Over against this the Protestants, and notably of course that commanding constructive genius of the more thorough-going Reformed faith, John Calvin, proclaimed the epoch-making truth, that God, though standing in majestic sovereignty above all his creatures, can and does enter into immediate fellowship with them in the person of the Holy Spirit. In nothing is the contrast more striking than in the views of the two parties concerning the Scriptures themselves. The Romanist accepts the Bible as the word of God primarily because the church tells him it is such; the Protestant accepts the Bible as the word of God primarily because God himself by an immediate testimonio Spiritus Sancti tells him it is such. To the Protestant the message of the Eternal in holy Scripture is self-evidencing. To him God here speaks directly in such wise that he is convinced that it is God who is speaking to him.

But not to dwell upon this particular application of the principle which led the Reformers to oppose the whole papal system, we would emphasize the fact that this self-authenticating revelation of God which the Bible records becomes the chief means for the divine regeneration of human life. When man finds the living God, especially as made known in the person and mission of his only begotten Son, then man also finds himself. He passes through a crisis of his spiritual being that little by little transforms from within his whole life. Standing before the holy Lord God Almighty the sinner feels his soul lacerated by the consciousness of his guilt. But the divine majesty is not completely unveiled until the white radiance of ineffable purity is seen to fall upon the Christ and then to break into the varied hues of that condescending love and redeeming grace that can stoop from the heavenly glories to the lowest abysses of human sin and shame and misery for the salvation of men. This is the marvel of marvels that the quickened soul, Spirit-led and Bible-fed, ever finds in the Gospel—God himself undertakes the sinner’s cause. God is for him; God is with him; God is in him. Through the slow and oft-times painful steps of self-examination, and self-condemnation, and self-renunciation, the penitent rises, by the aid of a divine Redeemer, to the heights of true self-realization. The cross of Calvary, once the object of the guilty man’s scorn and derision,
becomes luminous with a hope that flashes its radiance towards all the horizons of his life and even beyond into the solemn grandeur of the eternal world. Outside of the Scriptures, left to himself, man had lost himself amid the vague shadows of a transitory order of things; but now in the faith that is in Christ Jesus he finds himself, because he rediscovers his Father and his God and all the abiding realities of the spiritual universe. He has become a new creation. His life has a new centre and a new circumference; new ideas and new ideals; new motives and new powers for the realization of the divine purpose that shapes his character and conduct and destiny, the attainment of Godlikeness. No wonder he calls the Bible his sacred book. For all his most precious interests, whether of time or of eternity, are bound up with its life-giving words. It is the light, the inspiration, the comfort and joy of his needy soul as nothing else on earth can be. It is his chief means of spiritual grace and development, working silently day by day, like the sunshine, to enrich and beautify his life. As another has said, “It is thus the revelation of God to man; the revelation of man to himself; and the revelation of the spiritual constitution, meaning and destiny of that cosmic process by which our humanity has come into existence and by which also it will be ultimately ‘delivered out of the bondage of corruption into the glorious liberty of the children of God.’”

Such, then, is the function of the Bible as “the friend and aider of those who would live in the spirit.” Wherever, through the long centuries, the Scriptures have entered into the language, literature and life of a people, wherever their vital message has been appropriated by the human spirit, there these characteristic, life-quickenning, life-transforming, life-ennobling, life-spiritualizing influences of the Gospel have made themselves felt. And not only so, but from the day of Pentecost to the present time there has been a measurable correspondence, as if between cause and effect, between the study of these living oracles and the quantity and quality of the spiritual life of each generation.

When, therefore, we now undertake to estimate the range or extent of the spiritual influence of the Bible in its English translations, particularly in the Authorized Version, which by way of eminence has been the English Bible of the last three centuries, we are confronted by a fact that is as unique as it is significant: no people of the modern world have had their life more thoroughly moulded by the Scriptures in the vernacular than have the people of English speech. How far this may have been due to the number and excellence of their biblical versions, or to that spirituality of mind which they had in common with other Teutons of the North, or perchance to the reflex influence of that great literature of theirs, which came to surpass all others not only in its composite
richness, its intellectual maturity, its creative energy, but also in its ethical seriousness, its democratic sympathies and its religious earnestness, we need not pause to consider. The fact itself is plain enough. How then may we estimate its meaning? We might undertake a historical comparison between our English-American civilization and that based upon the mediaeval conception of the Bible in its relation to church and state. Or we might look at those more static expressions of the spiritual life of a people which we find in their literature and art. But in view of our having thus far spoken chiefly of the dynamic principles by which the Scriptures as such operate in the regeneration of the individual life, it will be more appropriate to pursue the parallel line of investigation and see how far these same principles have affected the various social institutes of the English-speaking world. We have seen that the primary service which the Bible renders is always a personal one, the spiritual improvement, amounting to a positive renewal and not a mere reformation, of every man, woman or child who truly receives its message of salvation. We now maintain that its secondary service to society as a whole is equally vital and, because of the vaster issues involved, even more important—that of maintaining and helping to realize the exalted ideals and the beneficent tendencies of those social institutions which at their best have grown up, if not solely yet chiefly, under the inspirations and the sanctions of the Gospel itself.

First, then, we have the family, the primary social institute, the cornerstone of the home, the school, the church, the state, the nation. It is, of course, based upon natural instincts of the most powerful character, “whose roots are in the body, but whose flowers and fruits are in the soul.” It secures through marriage and parentage a more intimate blending of physical and spiritual interests than does any other human relationship. While, therefore, we cannot say that it owes its very existence to the Bible, it is a truth worth our remembering at such a time as this, that the best homes that the world has ever seen have been those nurtured in the soil and atmosphere of the religious life of the countries in which the Bible has been supreme. The very words father and mother, brother and sister, son and daughter, in our own language, have been expanded beyond their limits in paganism and filled with the richest, because the most spiritual content. In the English-speaking world as nowhere else is that dictum verified, “Only where Christ is crowned king is woman a queen in her home.” I am aware, indeed, that the Puritans of England and New England are not now held in the same high esteem they once were. Doubtless, we realize more thoroughly that they had their roughnesses, their austerities, their temperamental[sic] limitations. But for all that, their lives were centered in God
and circumferenced by the spiritual. Their abodes on the earth were sanctuaries of prayer and Bible study and sacred song, and right well did they understand that most delicate and difficult but withal blessed task of inculcating in children the fear of the Lord that is the beginning of wisdom, and that disposition of mind and heart that seeks and finds God in the common things of life and puts the spirit of divine worship into all the work of life. Here, of a truth, in the purity and sanctity of the home, we have one of the open secrets of the spiritual excellence and supremacy of our Anglo-Saxon civilization. The courtesies, the proprieties, the humanities of our domestic life, its moral strength and beauty, we owe directly to those spiritual influences that have flowed into the sanctuaries about our hearths from the holy hill of Zion, “fast by the oracles of God.”

Again, consider the varied blessings that the spiritual life of the English people, quickened and nurtured as it was by the Bible in their vernacular, has brought to their own and other lands through the manifold activities of the second of our social institutes, the church. The church is the congregation of believers, the communion of those sharing the kindred life of faith in Jesus Christ. As such she is the most spiritual of all the organized forces in human society. I can only enumerate some of her most characteristic and important achievements.

The most obvious is that magnificent missionary enterprise that has sent English-speaking heralds of the cross unto the very ends of the earth. Two events, neither of which can be rightly understood except from the point of view of the religious history of the world, prepared the way for this unique glory of the island-home of our spiritual forefathers—the wresting from Spain by England of the supremacy of the seas, and the evangelical revival in Great Britain and America in the eighteenth century. Since then the spiritual life of the English-speaking people has never ceased to blossom and bear fruit in almost every land and clime; and, as if conscious of, and grateful to God for the source of its sustenance, it has, through the British and Foreign Bible Society and our own American Bible Society spread the good seed of the word broadcast over the earth in the form of over two hundred and fifty millions of copies of the holy Scriptures.

Equally noteworthy is the service of the church in the educational world. Without attaching any undue importance to that creation of the religious life of England, the modern Sunday school, which has the teaching of the Bible as the very ground of its existence, and without dwelling upon the varied service of biblical instruction which the missionary experts abroad and our ministers at home are more and more emphasizing as an essential in all true evangelization,
I would allude to that splendid chapter in the spiritual development of mankind which the church has inspired by her constant devotion to the cause of the common school, the private academy, and the higher institutions of learning. Wherever the Scriptures have been rightly used they have not only showed the inadequacy of merely intellectual discipline, aesthetic culture and utilitarian training, but have also dignified and sanctified art and science and learning by making them the true interpreters of the glory of that God who desires his children to know him in the works of his hand in nature as well as in the special revelation of his grace.

And what shall we say of the numberless humanitarian, charitable and philanthropic institutions and movements of which in all ages, and never more than in the English-speaking world of to-day, the church has been the fostering mother? With all their defects and limitations they have been among the crowning glories of our Anglo-Saxon civilization. The Gospel has heroically grappled with the problem of evil and has done much toward its solution by means of a myriad-fashioned social helpfulness. And mark you, the church has been enabled to render this service herself and to inspire even those outside of her membership to aid her in the task, only by means of that basal principle of her faith which we have emphasized: in the presence of the eternal God, the loving heavenly Father, every human life is sacred, and inasmuch as the redemption in Christ Jesus makes a brotherhood of all believers, the strong are constrained to bear the burdens of the weak, the afflicted and the unfortunate. It is because the English Bible has entered so profoundly into the spiritual life of the English-speaking people that these social duties of the Gospel have been so well understood and, on the whole, so faithfully performed by them.

Still further, it has been the church, the company of those who owning allegiance to Jesus Christ seek to realize his ideals of moral character and conduct, that has done most, by precept and example, to lure and lift the souls of men to higher planes of ethical living. By common consent the Scriptures are the most potent influence to vitalize and develop the moral life of the race. They purge and enlighten conscience; they energize and determine the will of man for righteousness as no other force can do, because they bring motives deep as eternity to bear upon his choices and because they present as the model for our lives One who has not only created humanity’s ideal of perfection but can also bestow the power that transforms his worshippers into a living likeness to himself. As read in the privacy of the home, but even more as proclaimed in the great congregation, where deep answers unto deep in the experience of the common faith, the Bible moves us, guides us, checks us, and sustains us in
our efforts to realize the manifold excellence of the life that is dedicated to the high ends and aims which it keeps before us. The much praised moral earnestness and sobriety, the ethical gravity and impressiveness of our English and American literature are due chiefly to the sublime ideas and ideals of the Bible and the embodiment of these in the conduct of the men and women who have adorned its teachings by their lives.

I can only allude to the last great service which the Bible has rendered through the organized church; I mean its constant influence in keeping religion itself pure and spiritual. Divine worship is grounded in the very instincts of the soul and is therefore a universal phenomenon in human life. But we need to remember that it is the Bible above all other forces that makes and preserves spiritual religion as a living reality, safeguarding it from superstitious errors, sensuous practices and conventional formalism. It does this by means of its basal doctrine that the supreme object of our interest and devotion is a spiritual Being of infinite holiness who must be worshipped in spirit and in truth, with loving gratitude and joy, it may be, but ever also in humility and purity of heart. Thus by virtue of the cleansing and strengthening currents of their spiritual influence the Scriptures have been the chief agency for ennobling and sanctifying religious worship itself in Protestant England and America.

The third social institute that reflects, and therefore helps us to guage [sic] the influence of the Bible upon the spiritual life of the English-speaking people is the state.

It is, of course, no accident of history that the most democratic governments, those guaranteeing the largest measure of popular freedom, have been reared in those countries in which the Gospel has most firmly established itself. For while Christianity as such favors no one political system as against another, it always and everywhere brings to bear upon a nation’s life three far-reaching fundamental principles that slowly but steadily make for republicanism in the state as well as in the church. First, it makes its appeal, as we have seen, primarily to the individual, calling upon him to exercise the prerogatives of his manhood as a free agent in the highest sphere of his thought and action, the realm of his relation to his Maker and Redeemer. Secondly, it recognizes and enforces the sacredness of his own personality as a social unit, requiring him, if need be—and in England the need arose more than once—to assert against the “divine rights” of unjust kings, the diviner rights of his own enlightened conscience. And thirdly, it places all men, rich and poor, king and subject, master and slave upon substantially the same moral plane before God as the one sovereign Lord and Judge of all. Nothing short of these sublime spiritual
conceptions and convictions inculcated by the Bible could ever have shattered the despotisms of caste and class and secured the political enfranchisement of the individual citizen to the extent to which we find it developed in the modern world, first of all in the Calvinistic Netherlands, then in England in the wake of the “glorious revolution” of 1688, and best of all in the constitutions of our several commonwealths and the federal government. It is because of the presence of these dynamic principles of the Gospel in Our life and literature that Wordsworth’s lines are true—

We must be free or die who speak the tongue
That Shakespeare spake.

And the best guarantee for the perpetuity of a government of the people, by the people, and for the people, is found in those supplementary truths of the Bible that there is no liberty worthy of the name save that which exists in obedience to righteous authority; that there can be no just laws or ordinances among men unless they are grounded in the eternal Righteousness; and that the glory of every state, as of every individual citizen, depends upon an ever-deepening conception of, and an ever-increasing devotion to, the revealed will of the King of kings and the Ruler of all nations.

And now lastly, we have the great English-speaking race itself as the most extensive and the most important of the social expressions of the spiritual influence of the Bible in the modern world. Anglo-Saxon civilization is, indeed, a complex product, to which many forces, some of them purely material, have contributed. But its noblest features, its best tendencies, its brightest hopes are simply inexplicable apart from that Book of books, the very translations of which into the vernacular have, through the passing centuries, been the dominating force in creating the first great bond that holds the Anglo-Saxon world together, our common speech; and the spiritual revelations of which have touched these mighty sister nations at a profounder depth of their common interests than has any other factor that has ever entered into the life of either of them.

Friends, what means this universal thanksgiving and joy on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean in connection with those two series of events that are in all our thoughts to-day, in which the King of England and his humblest subject and President Taft and the rank and file of our citizenry are so deeply interested—the various celebrations being held in both countries to commemorate the publication three hundred years ago of this noble English version of the Bible, and these good substantial steps, quite unprecedented in the history of the race, that are being taken on both sides of the water to insure by means of
a permanent tribunal of arbitration lasting and honorable peace between Great Britain and the United States of America? One sentence tells the whole story: through the written word Christ the incarnate Word is coming forth into our Anglo-American civilization in the glory of his Saviorship, conquering and to conquer, after the divinely appointed order of Melchizedek, the King of righteousness first of all, and after that also the King of peace.

So to-day we give God thanks, and ascribe to him all the glory, for the remarkable influence in the past of the English Bible upon the spiritual life of the English-speaking people; and for the future, we pray, for ourselves and for all the tribes and kindreds of the people on the face of the earth

Word of life, most pure and strong
Lo! for thee the nations long.
Spread, till from its dreary night
All the world awakes to light.
This volume, an early representative of the Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible series, is authored by R. R. Reno of Creighton University, who is also the general editor of the commentary series. We may assume, for that reason, that the volume well represents and fulfills the intent of the series: to offer commentary from a theological perspective, finally informed by Christian doctrine that is taken as a “clarifying agent” to help us read Scripture well and faithfully. Like Reno, other authors in the series will be situated in the Nicene tradition—theologians and not biblical scholars. In an appeal to the familiar mantra “War is too important to leave to the generals,” the series seems to affirm that it is theologians (not biblical exegetes) who are the wise senior arbiters who know best about faithful interpretation that arises from “unashamedly dogmatic interpretation.” At the outset I do not think the claim and assumption should go unanswered that critical exegetes do not do theological interpretation, though it may not always conform to the narrow niche this series seems to have in mind.

As one might expect, Reno’s commentary has a heavy focus on the early chapters in Genesis. The commentary moves through the Genesis texts under five rubrics: Creation, Fall, Dead Ends (Gen 5–11), Scandal of Particularity (Abraham and Isaac), and Need for Atonement (Jacob and Joseph). Reno focuses on what he terms “telling verses” and does not, he writes, “follow a consistent method or pattern of exegesis.” This double delineation of his task sets him free to pick and choose and omit at random, without having to take any sustained responsibility for the text. The result seems to be a scanning of the text until the author arrives at a weighty word or phrase that interests him, when he can then offer rich comment, with easy appeal to the New Testament and to the Christian tradition, notably Augustine. Conversely, the commentary for the most part pays little attention to critical matters, for example, finding the defining work of Claus Westermann “impossible for me to use.” The book is to some extent informed by Gerhard von Rad and by the work of James
Kugel. The outcome is a reading of the surface of the text that is eclectic and seems to proceed more or less by free association of ideas.

Thus a full disclosure is necessary: This reviewer is an exegete with particular concern for rhetorical dynamics in the text. From the perspective of my own habitat, I find the commentary at many points interesting and suggestive but with little real interest in the thickness or complexity or even conflictedness of the text. Thus the commentary reflects the recurring habits of theologians that often leave exegetes in wonderment. This approach tends to glide over what is often most interesting and most difficult in a text in order to arrive at an outcome toward which the interpretation drives. Let me provide two examples.

Concerning *creatio ex nihilo*, Reno readily acknowledges that it is not specified in the text. What follows, nevertheless, is a long discussion based exactly on that doctrinal claim, justified “because communities of readers have found them [such doctrines] to be helpful guides to a coherent, overall reading of scripture.” Reno does not pause to ask whether “creation out of chaos,” the clear purport of the text, might also offer such a helpful guide, as of course it has for many faithful readers. Thus the text is displaced by “a more helpful reading.”

Concerning “the fall,” Reno judges that a doctrinal commitment “to the infecting power of original sin does not entirely depend upon the story of the fall” but is “also an inference from the universal necessity of reconciliation in Christ.” While such a read is highly conventional, one must ask about the role of the text in such theological reasoning. It is worth noting that David Kelsey, clearly a Nicene theologian, has recently offered a very different assessment of “the fall” in the Genesis narrative. On these two big issues, this reviewer has the impression that the weight of theological tradition has precluded taking the text itself with much seriousness. But then, the series is committed to that weightiness for the tradition. Reno seems to acknowledge gingerly that the text must serve interests other than the sense it seems to yield.

This is of course the old tension in interpretation between theologians and exegetes. I do not for an instant claim that what “we” do is better than what “they” do, but it is clear that there is a “we” and a “they” who do very different things with the texts. By staying on the surface of the text without attention to its rhetorical finesse, Reno does what theologians are wont to do: read toward a conclusion, indeed, one that fits with and serves dogmatic claims. Exegetes are more likely to be interested in the processes of the text, less certain that it will yield such clear and compelling doctrinal outcomes. As a result, this commentary passes over a great many points that would seem to require interpretive attention from a theological perspective.
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My point is not to urge a further conflict between theologians and exegetes. It is rather to describe fairly what this commentary seeks to do and does. As I read the book, I have wondered if it is the case that theologians (like Reno) and exegetes (like me) have different disciplinary DNA, leading to certain questions and certain satisfactions. If the difference is not genetic, it is at least a cultural divide as acute as the one that C. P. Snow identified. This commentary (and series) will be quite satisfying for certain readers but will disappoint others. My own judgment is that it tends to be more or less confirming of what we have already thought. It does not surprise very often, and no doubt does not intend to do so. One may wonder then how the text is rendered to be freshly “revelatory.” I am glad, in any case, to stand alongside Reno in his thoughtful effort. None of us can do everything, and we are blessed by “a variety of gifts.” I will watch for and wait for a new series engaged across this cultural divide, but at best that is work for another day.

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Deuteronomy

Telford Work


The editors of this series argue that the Nicene tradition should provide the basis for theological interpretation of the Bible as Christian Scripture, and thus the authors of the various volumes “have not been chosen because of their historical or philological expertise.” Instead, the editors have selected theologians known for their “expertise in using the Christian theological tradition.” Readers should expect “experiments in post-critical doctrinal interpretation, not commentaries written according to the settled principles of a well-functioning tradition.”

Telford Work’s dream for the volume “is that preachers, liturgists, teachers, and students in particular would find these observations useful in developing sermons, hymns, lessons and intuitions drawing on Deuteronomy.” He claims to read “every passage of Deuteronomy according to the sensibilities of the New Testament church.” Work divides each of the chapters of Deuteronomy into smaller sections and provides observations on each section under the following rubrics: plain, faith, hope, and love. These rubrics respectively approximate the
premodern senses of literal, allegorical, anagogical, and moral. Each of the
four senses may or may not be discussed, and of the four, the plain sense is
the most often omitted. The author notes that many other fine commentaries
discuss the literal meaning, and therefore he does not always comment on it,
despite the fact that “it teaches us and grounds all the others.”

Yet it is not at all clear how the literal sense “grounds” many of the author’s
observations. For example, in a comment on chapter 28 about foreigners in the
land of Israel, he writes, “Similarly, new subcultures rise within and without the
new Canaan of Christianity: new religious movements, spiritual and ideological
transplants. . . . Unless the weakened remnant correctly diagnoses the problem,
it is likely to pursue the same wrongheaded responses . . . that weakened it in
the first place.” Thus, foreigners are in some allegorical fashion equated with
enemies of the church. In contrast to this example, the author’s questions about
Deuteronomy 12:4 are grounded in the text. As translated by the author, the
verse reads, “You shall not do so to YHWH your God.” What are they com-
manded not to do? It is not exactly clear within the immediate context, and the
author lists several possibilities. In this way, he is discussing the plain sense
of the passage, but these comments are listed under the rubric of faith, which
seems odd. Similarly, with respect to Deuteronomy 28:49–52, Work writes,
“Israel’s enemies are portrayed as predatory aliens, not unlike the goblins and
orcs of Tolkien’s Middle Earth. This makes them more terrifying—and sets up
the scandal of the next passage.” Why is this comment labeled “faith”?

The examples listed above illustrate a lack of methodological consistency,
and this lack significantly undermines the book’s value. Scholars such as Bre-
vard Childs have argued that the church should read the Old Testament as
Christian Scripture, and they have provided models and methodologies for
doing so. Specifically, reading a biblical book canonically involves trying to
understand the structure of the book as a whole, how the composer empha-
sizes different motifs, how it relates to the other books in the canon, and how
all of these things function together to communicate theological claims. In
contrast, the comments in this volume are atomistic observations that are only
somewhat related to the words in Deuteronomy. These observations may help
priests and pastors construct sermons, but what they will be preaching will not
be the message of Deuteronomy.

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Proverbs 10–31: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary

Michael V. Fox
New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009. 752 pp. $60.00.

This much-anticipated commentary by Michael V. Fox, professor of Hebrew at the University of Wisconsin, follows his Proverbs 1–9 (Doubleday, 2000), with which the present volume should be read. The second volume continues the pagination and footnote numbering from the first volume and includes a list of corrections to Proverbs 1–9, as well as notes on developments in Fox’s interpretations (xv–xvi). Proverbs 10–31 also includes a comprehensive bibliography for the two-volume work.

The commentary aims for a broad yet learned audience, including specialists in biblical and philological matters, as well as educated nonspecialists. As in Proverbs 1–9, Fox treats technical matters in smaller typeface within the commentary and in textual notes near the end of the book. The nonspecialist can easily skim the “Translation and Commentary” for Fox’s bolded translations and read his exegetical comments in large typeface, skipping the specialized discussion in small typeface. The transitions from one large-typeface paragraph to the next are usually seamless, although occasionally the commentary in large typeface seems disjointed unless one reads the intervening paragraph in small typeface. In order to read Fox’s complete analysis of a given verse, specialists must flip between the “Translation and Commentary” and “Textual Notes” sections, but this is a small price to pay for an otherwise broadly accessible text.

As one would expect, the book’s core consists in a (largely) verse-by-verse translation and commentary on Proverbs 10–31. Fox’s exegetical insights in this section alone make the volume worth its price. But the book’s introduction and many useful excurses, essays, and extended commentaries offer a synthetic analysis of Proverbs that transcends the atomistic verse-centered interpretations.

In the relatively brief introduction, Fox describes his views on questions of organization, reading individual proverbs, dating, and social milieu. Although I find Fox’s long-standing argument for the royal court as the locus of editorial activity convincing, I would have liked to have seen a brief sketch of alternate theories, such as those Fox provides when he treats the phenomenon of parallelism or discusses matters of dating. In general, Fox understands Proverbs
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10–29 to be an anthology of discrete proverbs. Thus his translation and commentary interpret most sayings individually: “A proverb is like a jewel, and the book of Proverbs is like a heap of jewels.” Nonetheless, Fox discerns larger organizing principles in some sections of Proverbs 10–29, based on proverbial pairs, or on thematic or catchword clustering. Consequently, he translates and comments on such sections as a group, rather than as individual sayings. Fox explains the recurrence of similar proverbs through the circulation of a template, “a recurrent pattern of syntax or wording that serves as a mold for constructing new couplets.” He suggests that the template, rather than a particular saying or constellation of words, constitutes the element that develops and circulates. Also noteworthy is Fox’s discussion of “disjointed proverbs” (a distillation of Fox’s 2004 article on the topic). A disjointed proverb features two lines that create a semantic gap; the gap prods the interpreter to read between the lines. As a result, Fox suggests, disjointed proverbs not only convey truth but engage the reader in a process of reasoning.

In addition to the introductory material, Fox offers extended commentary and excurses on “better than” sayings, connections between Amenemope and Proverbs 22:17–24:22, and the Woman of Strength, among other topics. Yet it is the four essays near the end of the book that, like the essays at the end of Proverbs 1–9, articulate a coherent worldview promulgated by the Book of Proverbs as a whole. The essays in this volume treat changing conceptions of wisdom in the development of the book, the ethics of Proverbs and Socratic principles, revelation and wisdom, and the epistemology of Proverbs. Each essay may be read profitably on its own, but references to other parts of the two-volume commentary facilitate an enriching process of intertextual reading.

Like the first volume, this volume offers readers perspective gained not just from Fox’s intimate familiarity with the Book of Proverbs. The author’s expertise in Egyptian wisdom literature provides an important comparative vantage point from which to interpret Proverbs. Moreover, Fox maintains a dialogue not only with modern scholarship on Proverbs but also with traditional Jewish exegesis, especially with medieval commentaries. As a result, Proverbs 10–31 represents a distillation of a life’s work that, like the much-sought-after woman of strength, could command a price above rubies.

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Homilies on the Gospel of John 1–40


**Edmund Hill, OP, trans., and Allan D. Fitzgerald, OSA, ed.**


Over the last century, scholars have commented on the remarkable state of neglect of Augustine’s _Tractates on the Gospel of John_, a set of 124 homilies on the Fourth Gospel produced between the years 406 and 420. The work is the first and only Latin commentary on John’s Gospel from Christian antiquity and one of only three commentaries by Augustine that span an entire biblical book. The lack of attention to this pioneering work is the more regrettable in that it was both pastoral and theological, as eminently practical for his diverse congregation as it was seminal for the history of theology. There is reason to hope, however, that Edmund Hill’s fine translation of the first forty of these tractates, which treat the Gospel text through John 8:32, will help foster the study of this classic by making it more accessible to all.

This sizeable volume is the most recent in the ambitious effort of the Augustinian Heritage Institute to translate Augustine’s entire corpus into English. Hill is one of the titans of the project, having already translated over fourteen volumes of the series, including all of Augustine’s _Sermones ad populum, De Trinitate_, and _De doctrina Christiana_. He thus brings to this translation a thorough knowledge of Augustine’s preaching and theology.

Allan Fitzgerald, the editor of _Augustinian Studies_, provides an excellent introduction. In addition to dealing with technical matters, Fitzgerald explains the uniqueness of the tractates and suggests that Augustine undertook the massive, preached commentary to help him respond to the Donatists: “Augustine seems to have sensed that preaching on the centrality of Jesus Christ would be an effective way to counter Donatist influence. . . . In the early homilies . . . Christ—whose mediation and honor are diminished by the Donatists—becomes the center of Augustine’s refutation of Donatism.” Fitzgerald thus reasons that it was not only because of its profound impact on him personally that Augustine chose to comment on John, but also because that Gospel “presented the mystery of Christ more fully than any of the other evangelists, showing how Church and sacrament were integral parts of the mystery.”
Hill has once again produced a translation that is eminently readable and faithful to the Latin text. The footnotes are a welcome change from the inconvenient endnotes of many earlier volumes of the series, offering historical background, the Latin text of hard-to-render passages, and occasional cross-references for a given theme in Augustine. A few notes, however, offer hypotheses that Augustine scholars may find idiosyncratic, such as the suggestion that Augustine may have used the Diatessaron. The paragraph subtitles are generally useful. Complete indices will appear only at the end of the second volume.

If the translation’s strength is to bring Augustine’s text alive, an attendant weakness is to make it sometimes overly colloquial (e.g., magna gratia: “amazing grace”; Et Dominus, quia ipsi contra se clauserant: “And the Lord, because they had slammed their door in his face”). The editor offers a caveat at the end of his introduction that seems to acknowledge this tendency: “As part of the extensive review of the original translation . . . contractions have been removed so as to avoid the impression that Augustine spoke in an off-handed or informal manner. The original translation also benefited from a fuller, more careful review than would normally be expected of an editor.”

One final criticism: While Hill rightly provides gender-inclusive translations for words such as homo rather than a wooden rendering of the same with “man,” his equally wooden insistence on gender inclusiveness for such words sometimes sacrifices the beauty and punch of Augustine’s Latin. Thus, at one point Hill renders “Si Verbum non erubuit nasci de homine, erubescunt homines nasci de Deo?” as “If the Word was not ashamed of being born of a woman, are men and women to be ashamed of being born of God?” In such cases, might it not be better to translate homo in a way that more clearly articulates Augustine’s intended chiasm?

These are minor limitations, however. Any translator who has consistently offered such yeoman’s and herculean labors as Hill has done earns the right to broad latitudes in taste. This excellent translation will be useful to a wide readership, especially those who study or teach the Latin Church Fathers, biblical interpretation, preaching, ecclesiology, sacramental theology, and Christian spirituality.

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Historical-critical approaches to Scripture rule out some readings and commend others, but they rarely offer much help to either theological reflection or the preaching of the Word. They do not point the church forward in the life of discipleship. These commentaries have learned from tradition, but they are most importantly commentaries for today. The authors share the conviction that their work will be more contemporary, more faithful, and more radical, to the extent that it is more biblical, honestly wrestling with the texts of the Scriptures.

—from the series introduction by William C. Placher and Amy Plantinga Pauw
A Critical Study on T. F. Torrance’s Theology of Incarnation

Man Kei Ho
Bern: Peter Lang, 2008. 290 pp. $79.95.

For many, the Scottish theologian Thomas F. Torrance (1913–2007) is primarily known for his pioneering work on the integration of theology and science in such works as *Theological Science* (1969) and *Divine and Contingent Order* (1981). With the publication of his Edinburgh lectures on dogmatics, *Incarnation: The Person and Life of Christ* (2008) and *Atonement: The Person and Work of Christ* (2009), the theological world was reminded that Torrance was a champion of Nicene orthodoxy yet with a creative and fertile mind. He was not one to bow down to what he called rationalistic fundamentalism. In this connection, a critical study such as suggested by Man Kei Ho holds much promise.

Ho rightly presents a chapter on theological method because of Torrance’s concern for the relation of theology, science, and epistemology. Yet he immediately betrays a rather disconcerting inability to empathize with Torrance because of Torrance’s wrong “presuppositions.” Ho claims that “Torrance’s whole theological science is founded on a few implicit and explicit presuppositions.” This is particularly odious because, to use Ho’s word, Torrance does not believe the Bible to be “inerrant.” Torrance uses a dialectical theology of a Hegelian stripe (simply because Torrance claims we may not yet have the tools to deal with some unresolved problems!).

What we have in Ho, unfortunately, is the return of a certain kind of conservative evangelicalism that sees in Torrance, as it did in Torrance’s teacher Karl Barth, only the wrong “presuppositions” (see, for example, Cornelius Van Til on Barth) and “dialectics” as a way to dismiss a critical realism that is truly evangelical, a theology of the gospel.

This kind of rationalistic fundamentalism is evident in proceeding chapters: “The Incarnate Son,” “Triunity in Incarnation,” “Incarnation Is the Revelation,” and “Kenosis.” Ho is to be appreciated for seeing the connection of Torrance to his doctrine of the Trinity, but the scant attention to the vicarious humanity of Christ (twelve pages) is quite remarkable, since along with his attention to the contemporary relevance of the *homoousion*—that the Son is of the same substance as the Father—this is arguably Torrance’s greatest contribution to the development of the doctrine of the Incarnation. Apart from discussing *pistis Christou* (the faith of Christ), there is no discussion of the common question,
What is the place of the believer’s faith if Christ first believes? In addition, a key theme throughout Torrance’s christology and soteriology is missing, and that is the interrelation of incarnation and atonement. This was always a passion of his, and not to examine this is inexcusable.

In “Divine Nature, Space and Time,” Ho surprisingly commends Boethius’s view of human nature as substance. Torrance and most advocates of a Trinitarian theology see the basis of a Trinitarian theology of the human person as relational in such an anthropology. Ho claims that for Torrance human nature is “confused” with personhood, when surely this is Torrance’s attempt to view a dynamic relation between the Trinity and the hypostatic union in Christ.

With Torrance’s theology of the homoousion, Ho finally commends something in Torrance’s theology in his chapter “Trinity in Incarnation.” Yet in the following chapter, Ho argues that Torrance may have too rashly criticized Barth’s subordinationism, in which there is an “obedience in God”—which Torrance sees as projecting inferiority into the immanent Trinity. Ho strangely concludes that one would have to view the atonement, then, as “a not accomplished event.” Is this true, however, if Christ continues to pray for us, as Hebrews says (7:25)? Does Ho have a doctrine of the ascension?

Often, Ho portrays Torrance as the typical caricature of the “neo-orthodox,” such as on revelation, historical criticism, and the use of the Old Testament, ignoring even a casual reading of a book of Torrance’s such as The Mediation of Christ and the prominence there of the Old Testament and the vicarious humanity of Christ. Readers are encouraged to read that little book, or the larger tomes Incarnation and Atonement, and await a different work on Torrance’s theology of the Incarnation.

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Transforming Atonement: A Political Theology of the Cross

Theodore W. Jennings Jr.

Amid much current scholarship on atonement that revisits or critically revises established themes and models of atonement, Theodore Jennings’s political
theology of the cross is a fresh departure. Setting aside traditional atonement theories, Jennings argues that “the way forward [in rethinking the significance of the cross] will not lie in attempting to give these now impotent forms of discourse new life again,” but in working outwardly from the starkly political, historical fact that Jesus was executed at the hands of the Roman Empire. In only a few centuries, the absorption of Christianity into the structure of empire itself led, unsurprisingly, to the nearly total suppression of the original, distinctly political character of Jesus’ teachings, ministry, and death, Jennings contends. Yet through careful readings of New Testament texts, particularly the Synoptics and the Pauline corpus, Jennings seeks to surface the ineradicably political significance of Jesus’ ministry as the delegitimation of power structures both religious and political, which led to his execution.

Jennings’s project unfolds in two parts. Part 1 reexamines Jesus’ ministry, culminating in his final days and death, in terms of its political significance. This established, Jennings revisits how Jesus’ crucifixion overcomes Jewish-Gentile divisions, embraces sinners and sufferers, and achieves reconciliation with God, examining them in light of the political significance of the cross. Jesus’ cross breaks down Jewish-Gentile divisions not because in dying Jesus mysteriously makes Gentile “outsiders” like Jewish “insiders,” but because his cross stakes out the site of a new community of ultimate outsiders, namely, the politically and religiously disqualified. In relation to sin and sinners, a political understanding of Jesus’ mission focuses on his practice of “siding with the accused against the accuser.” Jesus thus repudiates the interpretation of adherence to the divine will as having to do with accusing, judging, and excluding. This rejection on Jesus’ part of power, religious or otherwise, that sustains itself by condemnation and threat caused him to be repudiated in turn by both Jewish and Roman power structures.

Notably, Jennings’s commitment to a thoroughly historical-political interpretation of the significance of the cross does not preclude his granting, at least implicitly, the significance of resurrection as the symbol of divine validation of Jesus’ mission and ministry. Cross and resurrection function together to signify God’s rejection of the imperial social order and will ultimately overcome it.

The book’s second half (part 2) traces implications of Jennings’s political theology of the cross for the nature of Christian community, the meaning of dying “with” Christ, and the question of God’s full presence at the cross. Jennings counters the majority view that Paul is preoccupied with christology; rather, says Jennings, Paul’s preoccupation with the cross is in service to his paramount concern with the new social reality it implies. Paraenetic mate-
KEEPING GOD’S EARTH
Edited by
Noah J. Toly and
Daniel I. Block

This unique volume teams scientists with biblical scholars to help us discern what are our environmental obligations as Christians. You’ll read essays from Christian teachers in diverse fields from New Testament, Old Testament, Christian theology and ethics to geology, biology, atmospheric physics and environmental science.
rial is reread by Jennings in this light. Abstaining from pagan sacrifice meat was a repudiation of the empire that such sacrifices honored. “Dying with” Christ implies not ascetic renunciation but “dying to” the imperial paradigm of power. Christian communities live outside these norms and make no peace with them.

Jennings’s rereading of traditional atonement themes are deeply thought provoking, yet not all his claims satisfy. He contends that Jesus stands with sinners without asking for repentance, a view difficult to reconcile with the familiar phrase “Go and sin no more.” Perhaps Jennings assumes we know to read “sin” every single time as “compliance with imperial norms,” but abuse sufferers, among others, may need a more accessible interpretation of Jesus’ engagement with sin. In addition, Jennings’s canonical reference points lie within a limited range, excluding, for example, Johannine literature except for Revelation. One wonders, too, about Pauline texts on slavery and gender relations that seem to promote rather than undercut hierarchical social orderings.

That said, Jennings’s political recalibration of the significance of the cross for faith and practice is deeply energizing. Empire can only respond with terror when the excluded are included, boundaries are crossed, untouchable bodies are touched, and power as domination and subjugation is exposed and destabilized. In the name of the crucified, Christians live in freedom, a new community of the unqualified and the disqualified where God embraces and empowers all.

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The Eucharist and Ecumenism:
Let Us Keep the Feast

George Hunsinger
New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008. 350 pp. $90.00 (hardcover), $29.99 (paper).

I have been waiting for this book for a long time. George Hunsinger, Barth scholar and professor of systematic theology at Princeton Seminary, has devoted years to a careful Reformed exploration of possibilities for ecumenical progress in eucharistic theology. This volume is the fruit of his patient, passionate labor. It is well worth the wait.
The book consists of four parts, addressing presence, sacrifice, and ordination, plus a final section on the Eucharist and social ethics. Throughout, Hunsinger seeks to “show how the Reformed tradition might be brought closer to Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox teachings without compromising Reformed essentials.”

In section 1, Hunsinger argues that for ecumenical convergence all churches must affirm Christ’s real eucharistic presence. He finds a theologically satisfying and ecumenically promising account of real presence in the little-known reformer Peter Martyr Vermigli, who drew from early patristic sources the concept of “transelementation”: “The bread itself was transformed by virtue of its sacramental union with, and participation in, Christ’s flesh.” Transelementation clarifies the relationship between Christ’s risen and ascended body in heaven and the eucharistic elements, affirming that these have “unity in distinction,” without either confusion or separation.

In section 2, Hunsinger offers a compelling interpretation of the eucharistic action as sacrifice. Just as his proposal on presence rests on Chalcedonian logic of unity-in-distinction, so too here: Sacrifice must hold together the uniqueness of Christ’s sacrifice on the cross with the present appropriation of that sacrifice in the Eucharist, without confusion (the danger of the Roman Catholic position) or separation (the danger of the Reformation positions). He does this by reinterpreting eucharistic sacrifice in connection with four affirmations. First, the Passover allows a richer understanding of anamnesis that goes beyond mere recollection of a past event. Second, he insists on the unity of “Christ and his benefits” so that the presence of Christ in the Eucharist includes the presence of his sacrificial work. Third, he argues for a recovery of the three tenses of salvation in the Eucharist, brought together in the epiclesis, in which the Holy Spirit brings past and future into the present. Lastly, he argues for a distinction between Christ as sole saving agent and other acting subjects in the Eucharist so that only Christ effects salvation; others may participate in, and even mediate, salvation, but they may never effect it.

With regard to ordination, Hunsinger bravely addresses five basic questions in ecumenical conversations. He claims that Reformation and Roman Catholic understandings of ministry rest on fundamentally different imaginations: verbal and sacramental. Without trying to bridge the divide, Hunsinger suggests that these might learn from one another. He goes on to propose that Reformed churches should change their practices of ordained ministry (most controversially, that Reformed Christians ought to adopt the three offices of
bishop, priest, and deacon, for the sake of ecumenical convergence). He then offers a series of sharp admonitions to churches in the “high sacramental traditions” regarding ordained ministry. His questions are excellent, and I hope Roman Catholic and Orthodox theologians will see fit to offer substantive responses.

In his final section, on Eucharist and social ethics, Hunsinger revisits H. Richard Niebuhr’s classic *Christ and Culture* in light of the Eucharist. He focuses on the church as the place where cultural transformation happens, and the Eucharist as the central place where “Christ takes earthly historical form as the transformer of culture.” Finally, Hunsinger moves to a consideration of “Nicene Christianity, the eucharist, and peace,” in which he reconsidered Athanasius and Anselm as Christian leaders for whom the Eucharist was centrally related to their witness to peace. Though this section is less clearly integrated with the rest of the book, it is a refreshing rereading of figures (particularly Anselm) whose reputation in recent years has been tied to violence.

There is a great deal to appreciate in this book: wise counsel and passionate commitment regarding ecumenical dialogue; thoroughgoing Chalcedonian logic that reveals Hunsinger’s Barthian lineage; and extraordinary care in rereading sixteenth-century sources that moves beyond polemic to see possibilities for genuine convergence. At times the scholarly voice gives way to sheer poetry, as in Hunsinger’s account of the meaning of Passover. There will certainly be objections to his proposals: from Reformed Christians who recoil at his suggestion that we accept bishops for the sake of ecumenical convergence; from church leaders who do not share his vision of ecumenical unity, advocating instead for appreciation of diversity as intrinsic to the church of Jesus Christ; and from Roman Catholic scholars who wish for greater attention to other Catholic theological perspectives beyond Aquinas.

For those who are committed to ecumenical dialogue, however, and particularly for those of us in the Reformed tradition who long for eucharistic sharing with Christians from whom we are separated, this book comes as a great gift. No ecumenical dialogue on sacraments or church orders for the next generation will be able to ignore the work that Hunsinger has done. May this contribution lead us closer to the day when all Christians will be able to sit together at Christ’s table and keep the feast.

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Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Berlin 1932–1933

Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, vol. 12

Edited by Larry L. Rasmussen


On January 12, 1933, Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote to his brother Karl-Friedrich to tell him “a little about what I am doing.” Dietrich faced a “momentous decision, whether to undertake a parish ministry . . . in East Berlin” or to proceed with an academic career at the University of Berlin. “Strange how difficult it is to make a choice. . . . Every effort to decide what my own abilities are, whether they lie in this direction or that, simply breaks down.” Bonhoeffer’s quandary was less a choice between two career paths than whether it might be possible to serve both church and academic theology.

Throughout 1932 and 1933, Bonhoeffer’s correspondence shows him juggling competing demands. Like Tolkein’s Bilbo Baggins, he finds himself “stretched thin. Like butter, spread over too much bread.” He writes to a supporter of the youth club he founded in Charlottenburg, requesting more money. He reports to the Berlin Consistory on his slow progress in student chaplaincy at the Technical College in Charlottenburg. He is drawn into ecumenical work, advising officers of developing ecumenical agencies and acting as a German delegate to several ecumenical bodies and conferences. He is active from the outset in the Young Reformation Movement and the Pastors’ Emergency League, from which the Confessing Church would later arise. He cowrites the first drafts of the Bethel Confession, writes on the “Jewish question,” and broadcasts on the principle of the Führer (later apologizing to colleagues because he overran his allotted time and was cut off).

He is equally busy in the academy. He campaigns, unsuccessfully, to have Karl Barth elected to a chair in systematic theology at Berlin. He teaches (this volume includes a splendid new version of Bonhoeffer’s christology lectures). He engages in extracurricular work with students, including putting on a carol service.

There can be little wonder that the period covered by volume 12 ends with Bonhoeffer opting to take up a pastorate in London, while keeping options at the university open by agreeing only temporarily to suspend his status as a teacher.

Like all of the eight biographical volumes in this sixteen-volume scholarly English translation from the German critical edition of Bonhoeffer’s writings, volume 12 is divided into three parts: letters and documents, essays
Larry Rasmussen, a peerless interpreter of Bonhoeffer’s theology, contributes an introduction to the English edition and well-chosen, succinct notes throughout the volume, making sense of aspects of the text that may not be clear to English-speaking readers. The German editors’ afterword is also included, together with a chronology, a bibliography, and indices of names and subjects. All of this is undertaken to the high scholarly standard characteristic of the whole translation project.

Some material appears in English for the first time. In several places fresh translations of familiar texts suggest subtle shifts in understanding of what Bonhoeffer meant to say. For example, in a footnote on page 364, the editor alerts readers to an important shift of meaning signaled by the replacement of “lawlessness” with “lack of rights” in Bonhoeffer’s description of the consequences of the state’s actions in implementing anti-Semitic legislation.

Each of the biographical volumes can claim to contain the crucial period of Bonhoeffer’s life; this volume has the strongest case. Intellectually, Bonhoeffer is already well formed. His doctoral thesis and his “habilitation” thesis as a lecturer are behind him. His ecclesiology, his christology, and his political theology are each confidently expressed in one or other of the texts in the volume.
There are equally clearly intimations of what is to come in the *Ethics* and the prison letters. Dietrich Bonhoeffer is fully present here *in nuce* in all the messy contingency of life’s frustrating detail and complexity, struggling always to see the wood amid the trees.

Yet in spite of the fact that Bonhoeffer gets things right more often than not—impressive beyond his tender years (the volume ends with him at age 27)—the note of uncertainty about whether he would be able to hold together the “worlds” of academic theology and of the church is what strikes me. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, when centrifugal forces push church and academic theology apart in the English-speaking world, a German theologian from the last century still has insights that can heal the wounds.

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**God and the Philosophers**

*Keith Ward*


Of late, there has been a little flood of books with a title similar to this one. Two of the more prominent—*Philosophers without Gods* and *Philosophers and God*—are collections of essays by contemporary philosophers, the first articulating a rejection of religion, the second a sympathetic treatment of some traditional religious concepts and ideas. Keith Ward’s volume is different not just in being the work of a single author but in its historical focus. Its purpose is to draw attention to the fact that the hostility to religion associated with contemporary philosophy is something of a historical aberration. This hostility arises from a materialist or physicalist conception of reality, but the majority of the greatest figures in the Western philosophical tradition, according to Ward, have been friends of religion, at least to the extent that they have endorsed a nonmaterialist conception of reality. Even Hume and Nietzsche, Christianity’s greatest philosophical critics, rejected the crude materialism that is thought to have made intelligent subscription to religion impossible.

In defense of this thesis, Ward has short chapters on Plato, Aquinas, Descartes, Berkeley, Hume, Kant, Hegel, Schopenhauer, and Nietzsche, and then concludes with a general resume of the arguments against materialism. In his final paragraph, he writes, “I think the God conclusion holds firm, and that it is
the best intellectual defense of the intelligibility of the cosmos.” At the same time, he acknowledges that “the important thing is that we should go on asking the questions.”

It is not entirely clear what readership this book is intended for. It seems to me unlikely that hostile philosophical critics like Daniel Dennett or Walter Sinnott-Armstrong would think they had been presented with much of a case to answer. On the other hand, the prominent philosophers who expressly acknowledge their religious commitment (a very large number now compared to forty years ago) are unlikely to think that Ward’s brief and broad-brush treatment has added much. So I surmise that the audience is a more popular one, perhaps the faithful who have been caused to falter by the high-profile attacks on religion by Dawkins, Harris, or Hitchens (none of them philosophers, of course). But if this is the intended context, it seems to me that treatments like Ward’s concede far too much. Making religious faith a matter of belief in “the God conclusion” for “the intelligibility of the cosmos” and interpreting the religious quest as an intellectual one of “asking the questions” plays into the hands of those who suppose that the key to faith and loss of faith in contemporary society is the “science/religion debate.” I do not suppose that Ward himself thinks this. Plainly his interest is in philosophy, not science. The back cover, though, gestures toward this broader context, and a popular readership is bound to take this little book primarily as ammunition for the fight: “A leading theologian has shown, against the assumptions of contemporary scientific materialists, that some of the greatest ‘minds’ human history has ever produced have been seriously religious.” This may be so, though I think that Ward’s treatment of Hume and Nietzsche is a little strained. But the problem, from my point of view, is that the figures who really matter—Moses, Jesus, Muhammad, the Buddha, Guru Nanak, and so on—were not “minds” in this sense at all.

Religiously speaking, there is more to be gained from Augustine’s Confessions than from his City of God. A striking feature of our contemporary spiritual malaise is the belief that there is no point in turning to the Confessions until the philosophical-cum-scientific issues underlying its presuppositions have been sorted out. Ward’s book is too slight to contribute much to that “sorting out” but is sufficiently well-informed and cogent enough to feed the intellectual prejudice that thinks in this way.

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Lewis Mudge

Humanity may be headed toward self-destruction, and the three Abrahamic faiths have a responsibility to save us from ourselves. The late Lewis Mudge takes on a massive theological project in his final book, promising to offer the reader “a theory for the praxis of inter-Abrahamic responsibility in and for the human world.”

Mudge’s project is driven by a fear that humanity is at risk of self-destructing from irresponsible use of our modern scientific, industrial, economic, and military capabilities. His solution: Jews, Christians, and Muslims must engage in a common theological project to create a “covenantal humanism” that responds to modernity’s self-betrayals. The tie that binds the faiths together is none other than their shared spiritual father, Avram/Abraham. Mudge challenges adherents of these faiths to follow Abraham’s example by adopting a transcendental, complex “responsibility.” This responsibility, which represents the theological core of the book, emerges from an exegesis of the Abrahamic narrative from the perspective of all three traditions that leads Mudge to read Abraham’s story in the following way: “Abraham comes to know that true obedience to God requires him responsibly to exercise the gift of discernment of what obedience requires.”

In other words, Abraham taught all who came after him that obedience to God requires a deep sense of responsibility, not necessarily to God, but to each other and to humanity. It is this shared sense of responsibility that has the potential to save humanity from itself.

The Gift of Responsibility engages philosophy, history, political analysis, and case studies on its way to illustrating its theological vision. The book’s style, frustrating at times to this reviewer, feels like an extended conversation a professor might have with a graduate student right after an energizing seminar discussion.

As a rabbi who works full time in an interfaith context, I am both inspired by and disappointed by Mudge’s theological call to arms. The lasting gift of the book is its grand challenge to the three Abrahamic faiths: Find a hermeneutical meeting place and get to work on healing the world. In many ways, the book is courageous. It puts a theological stake in the ground by articulating
Disasters indicate the complex peril of earthly existence. Suffering and risk are global realities. Yet, the biblical depiction of persons and communities as “earthen vessels” also suggests that vulnerable creatures can be strengthened to receive and bear the grace and glory of God. Culp demonstrates how vulnerability to devastation and transformation is the very basis for life before God. The glory of God may be witnessed in resistance to inhumanity and idolatry, and expressed in delight and gratitude for the good gifts of life.

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what a cross-faith interpretative framework might look like. It tests its own theological vision against the most intractable of Abrahamic conflicts, namely, the contemporary situation in Israel-Palestine.

Yet Mudge’s project is ultimately disappointing because it does not hearken to its own wisdom. When Mudge writes, “Any religious thinking we do today must somehow take the presence of the religious Other into account,” I say, “Amen.” But the book does not do justice to this hermeneutic challenge. For a theological project this grand, why did Mudge not engage Jewish and Muslim coauthors? Why not show us how to do deep theology in the presence of the other, rather than just telling us?

For theologians interested in developing shared theology across lines of faith, this book is an important work to which there must be response. Religious leaders, educators, and general readers will appreciate the work’s introduction, which provides a rich and concise overview of all the themes in the book, as well as the concise map of the field of interreligious studies that appears in chapter 1.

“I believe that the reading of ancient Abrahamic texts in three faith communities today legitimately opens up new directions of thought,” Mudge teaches. The core of the book’s grand theological challenge is a simple exhortation that all can follow: Interpret our traditions together by engaging in “parallel and interactive hermeneutics.” Jews, Christians, and Muslims interpreting their faiths side by side may be the best way to honor Mudge’s memory. Our shared, broken world is sorely in need of shared, constructive hermeneutics that emerge from and honor our particular faith traditions.

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Setting Words on Fire: Putting God at the Center of the Sermon

Paul Scott Wilson

Nashville: Abingdon, 2008. 293 pp. $27.

Wilson wishes to renew preaching in our age by recovering the historic practice of proclaiming and teaching. Both working together are necessary for good preaching. Teaching provides people with information about who God
is, while proclamation introduces people to God as a sacramental act so that through the preachers’ words set on fire by Holy Spirit, they encounter the living Lord speaking directly to them. Through his study of historic sermons, Wilson concludes that proclamation is founded upon good teaching about God.

The first section of the book focuses on teaching the Bible, theology, and social justice. Wilson’s examples from various historical and contemporary sermons show preachers how to use language so that biblical scenes and characters come alive, biblical images serve as a window into theological truths, typologies signify Christ, narratives point to God, and social ills are confronted in piety.

Before turning to proclamation, Wilson looks at what the gospel is that we are to proclaim, careful not to provide any one reductionist statement of the gospel: “Proclamation has a range of expressions, for God can say, ‘I love you,’ in a seemingly infinite number of ways.” Essentially, though, the gospel is centered in the life, death, resurrection, and anticipated return of Christ.

The third major section of the book focuses on becoming better proclaimers of the gospel. While proclamation depends upon good teaching about God, it moves from talking about God to having the living Lord talk intimately to us. Proclamation is not doctrine but “faith-awakening, faith-furthering, faith-wooing address.” Unlike others who see proclamation of the gospel as being only positive, Wilson argues that God’s confrontational word is also gospel in that it calls us to live more fully into God’s love by naming what prohibits that possibility, though this is what he deems a lesser gospel. Though Wilson wants to avoid preaching condemnation, why judgment is a “lesser gospel” is a theological curiosity. Does not the gospel of God’s love in Christ contain within it an implicit judgment of whatever hinders this love?

The book then shifts to a discussion of how preachers can shape language so that proclamation is more than just brief snippets of gospel promise uttered here and there in a sermon. A sermon should provide “a setting and context for the Spirit to utter words aflame with love.” Wilson calls these settings sub-forms or genres, where style, content, and form work together to offer Christ to people through a sermon. Taken from the Bible’s own literary genres, these genres of proclamation are divided into those that deal with the trouble God addresses (condemnation, lament, stern exhortation) and those that deal with God’s good news (testimony, prayer, nurturing exhortation, proclamatory statements, doxology, and celebration). Here is the payoff for the preacher who wants help in improving her own sermons—stellar examples from great preaching throughout history that can be emulated.
It remains unclear how prayer can be a genre of good news proclamation. By Wilson’s own definition, “prayer is speech addressed to God.” Proclamation, again by his own definition, is God speaking to us. By these definitions, a subform of proclamation cannot be prayer. I also take issue with Wilson’s theologically sloppy statement that “subforms bestow trouble (law) or gospel.” Do our words bestow anything, or is it God who bestows these through the offering of our best sermonic words? A nuanced quibble, perhaps, but an important one. Wilson’s high view of preaching has no check for the sermonic abuses of human language still steeped in sin. While Wilson acknowledges Eugene Lowry’s contention that preachers preach, but only God proclaims, he skirts the issue. He would do well to explore Lowry’s contention, lest the preacher become God.

The last part of Wilson’s book contains important discussions of authority, imitation, and plagiarism that critique Western assumptions regarding the ownership of oral speech. The accompanying CD provides an oral rendering of the book’s historical examples, which is helpful for teachers of preaching.

In what may be his best book to date, Wilson takes a shot across the bow of the New Homiletic with some laudable and lamentable results. True, many contemporary sermons shaped by the New Homiletic do not lead us into the presence of God, but that has been true in every age. Nonetheless, one appreciates his willingness to say that the emperor of contemporary homiletic theory may well be naked, for too often it does not seem as if there’s any Word from the Lord. This work promotes a renewal of preaching that leads into the presence of God—always a good thing.

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The Study of Evangelism: Exploring a Missional Practice of the Church

Edited by Paul W. Chilcote and Laceye C. Warner


Chilcote and Warner have assembled a marvelous collection of essays that express “concern for evangelism, not simply for the sake of institutional survival... but as a constitutive part of the church—as a missional practice of the
From Lawrence Cunningham, scholar, teacher, author, and Christianity editor of the forthcoming Norton Anthology of World Religions, comes this captivating collection of personal notes, memories, reflections, and daily epiphanies from the life of a beloved Catholic theologian and longtime editor of Commonweal’s “Booknotes” column.

Scholarly, popular, and personal in equal amounts, Things Seen and Unseen considers the legacy of such spiritual figures as Simone Weil, the interplay between religion and pop culture where Christmas and Easter are concerned, and the always-difficult balance between family and work. In all things, Cunningham inspires readers with his deep love for and steadfast devotion to the Catholic Church.

*Reading Cunningham is like listening to an exceedingly wise, articulate, provocative, funny and, above all, compassionate man who passionately wants you to meet the God he knows so well. Everything he writes is worth reading—often over and over. Highly recommended!*

Rev. James Martin, S.J.
Author of The Jesuit Guide to (Almost) Everything
they are equal in this concern throughout the collection, and they are equally clear about their rationale: “The complexity of our world and the dynamism of the human story confront the Christian community at every turn, pressing us to reflect upon our faith more deeply, to engage in dialogue more seriously, and to respond to crises more compassionately. Our claim, quite simply, is that all of this action bears directly upon our understanding of evangelism as a missional practice of the church.”

The introduction offers a fine overview of missionary councils and mandates in the twentieth century, from Edinburgh (1910) to Athens (2005). The editors touch a vital nerve when they assert, “The critical study of evangelism is developing...in a lively context...laden with promise and peril...a close but complex relationship between the scholars and practitioners of evangelism.” This being said, Chilcote and Warner locate themselves as “evangelical Wesleyans” and assert, “While evangelism is but one part of God’s larger mission in the world, it is the essence—the heart—of all Christian mission.” While this may not be a theological axiom affirmed by all the authors whose essays are included, all the essays in one way or another lend support to this frame of reference.

The contributors list includes names commonly connected with evangelism and mission (Abraham, Arias, Bosch, Costas, Guder, Newbigin, Robert, Sider, and Stott), as well as others that will pleasantly surprise (Hauerwas, Mugambi, Oduyoye, Russell, and Westerhoff). The contribution by Mercy Oduyoye is important at several levels, not the least of which is that she is a woman from Africa. (Her native Ghana has rapidly become “Christian” in the twenty-first century with respect to the percentage of the population.) Important also is her emphasis, found throughout the entire volume, on mission and evangelism as indissoluble from the church’s essence. I would, however, offer a slight quibble with regard to the history of the World Council of Churches (WCC). She is certainly correct that in recent decades the documents “Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry” and “Mission and Evangelism” view Christian denominational divisions as a scandal—“a lament on disunity, seeking urgently to transcend it for the sake of mission.” This, however, strikes a different note (perhaps even an accusing one) from the less-political tone of the WCC’s four-volume work from 1948, *Man’s Disorder and God’s Design*. Whereas the later documents seem to infer that institutional disunity is at the heart of “man’s disunity,” the Amsterdam volumes of 1948 see the essence of human disunity as rooted in sinfulness, for which the gospel is the only sure remedy. This theological emphasis is highly implicit in all that Oduyoye asserts in connection with baptism and
Eucharist, and connecting these emphases with the affirmations of the original 1948 documents, it seems to me, would only serve to strengthen her case.

In general, it would seem that the editors profess a bit much when offering on several occasions that the collection is “groundbreaking.” A similar comment could be made about this statement: “Those who work in theological, biblical and historical fields will find this collection invaluable.” Yet regardless of your perspective on the viability of evangelism in the twenty-first century, even if “groundbreaking” is not a superlative that you would connect to essays on evangelism, this is still a volume to be commended. The contributors are historically, biblically, and theologically informed, and they are methodologically rigorous. I commend Chilcote and Warner and highly recommend the books for all who care about a missional church in the twenty-first century.

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Trauma Recalled: Liturgy, Disruption, and Theology
Dirk G. Lange
Minneapolis: Fortress, 2010. 208 pp. $29.00.

The troubling observation with which this book begins is how quickly the “spirit-filled beginnings” of new religious movements become institutionalized—a reality that has plagued many a theologian and ministerial leader. One system eventually replaces another; new laws are inscribed. Ritual, “itself a manifestation of law,” participates in this process. “How can ritual break the violence of law when it embodies a form of law and imposes that form?” What kind of remembering and repetition of the Christ event resists the violence of law, especially when liturgy continually returns to and treats as sacred the event of a violent death?

“How can ritual break the violence of law when it embodies a form of law and imposes that form?” asks author Dirk G. Lange, formerly a faculty member at the Lutheran Theological Seminary in Philadelphia and now associate professor of worship at Luther Seminary. Is it possible to understand ritual “not as passing on violence but as pointing toward, as repeating, something inaccessible, something that breaks the cycle
of violence”? Lange offers a complex, passionate, and affirmative response to these questions. Through deep engagement with several writings of Luther, the trauma theory of Cathy Caruth (who employs trauma theory as a means of reading history), the poststructuralist writings of Jacques Derrida, and the early church document the Didache, Lange wrestles with the questions he has posed. He draws out powerful implications for understanding liturgy, for articulating how the Christ event returns in the celebration of the sacraments.

Luther’s writings lie at the heart of this venture (more precisely, a way of reading Luther’s writings); all intellectual roads lead from and back to Luther in this text. Lange contends that these writings reveal Luther’s turn to the liturgy, especially the sacraments, to disrupt the theology of his day and to write the events of his own life: “Through liturgy and liturgical language, Luther witnesses to a force that cannot be theorized but that continually returns in writing and in life.” Beginnings may always be beginnings, and events can disrupt again and again, because there is, in event, in experience, “something inaccessible,” an “absence,” “something that returns.” To read Luther is not just to read about events but to glimpse how Luther is confronted again and again with the disruption of events, with the failure of his own theological efforts to contain events (or God!), and how, at the very point of that failure, faith alone is left. This process of death (of constructed narratives and explanations as well as other dimensions of death) and resurrection happens again and again; this is the life to which baptism witnesses and calls.

The writings of Derrida aid Lange in articulating the necessity of repetition and liturgical structure while at the same time arguing against the idea that the Christ event is somehow channeled through properly administered sacraments—a guaranteed presence rather than, first, as an absence that disrupts. Trauma theory sheds light on “inaccessibility,” “absence,” and “the force that returns” and is instructive for Lange in naming the Christ event as traumatic. In relating insights gained from trauma theory to Luther’s view of the Eucharist, Lange writes that “the Eucharist is a literal embodiment of the trauma of the other.” In the closing chapters, Lange, in dialogue with Luther’s writings (and writings about Luther) and the Didache, suggests several implications for “writing disruption” and “rewriting promise” in liturgical theology today.

Although Lange does not specifically identify the audience he is most concerned to address, three audiences seem to be clearly in mind. First and foremost, Lange’s arguments will be of significant interest to liturgical scholars in general and Luther scholars in particular. With regard to that audience, there will be much to evoke and provoke conversation. He clearly identifies
some points of division among Lutherans concerning sacramental theology and addresses those in ways that are challenging in more than one direction. Luther scholars will likely want to engage him on several technical aspects of Luther scholarship (several of Lange’s arguments are highly technical, and presuppose significant knowledge of Luther’s works). Second, Lutheran pastors and seminarians will benefit from Lange’s way of wrestling with significant questions from such a deeply committed Lutheran point of view, even as they may wish for an additional chapter that ventures more direct reflections on the implications of his argument for liturgical practice. Third, all who are nagged by the questions Lange poses will find here a great deal that will both disrupt and illuminate their own reflections.

Lange’s work is not an easy read. Readers may experience disruption rather than just read about it. The book begins with lines from T. S. Eliot’s “Journey of the Magi.” Several times during my multiple readings of this text (each time finding different nuances, a slightly altered terminology in the repetition of ideas) brought Eliot’s “Burnt Norton” to mind—how words “Decay with imprecision, will not stay in place; Will not stay still.” Yet this book is well worth the read, and I suspect it will return to haunt understandings of liturgy and practices of liturgical leadership for all who long for “spirit-filled beginnings” to disrupt life together again and again.

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Pilgrims at the Crossroads: Asian Indian Christians at the North American Frontier

Anand Veeraraj and Rachel McDermott, editors

Research on diaspora Christianities in North America is burgeoning, and university presses are finding ready markets for studies on the faiths that immigrants bring with them. Authorized or not, immigration has changed the face of the church since the mid-1960s. Only now, however, are we catching up with the demographic fact that, overall, most immigrants are already Christian on arrival. While the book on diaspora Christianities has yet to be written
The Emergence of Judaism
CHRISTINE HAYES
“Marvelously clear and richly insightful... a panoramic view of Jewish history, culture, and religion from its origins until the end of its classical, formative period. Christine Hayes is a brilliant pedagogue and one of the world’s leading authorities on ancient Judaism. Her book is a splendid introduction to one of the world’s most important and influential religious traditions.” —RICHARD KALMIN
The Jewish Theological Seminary, New York

The Emergence of Christianity
CYNTHIA WHITE
White explores the emergence of Christianity in Rome during the first four centuries, from the first followers of Jesus Christ, to conflicts between Christians and Jewish kings under Roman occupation, to the torture of Christian followers, Diocletian’s reforms, and Constantine’s eventual conversion to monotheism. The text’s chapters integrate key pedagogy, including introductions, study questions, textboxes, photos, maps, suggested readings, and a glossary and timeline.

The Emergence of Buddhism
JACOB N. KINNARD
“The Emergence of Buddhism is a very suitable place to begin a quest for understanding Buddhism. Written with great clarity, it is more than a concise narrative of the development and decline of Buddhism in India. It is also a kind of compendium, with brief biographies of key historical figures, a gallery of images and reliefs reflecting the trajectories of Indian Buddhist sculpture, a useful glossary, and a suggestive bibliography.” —John C. Holt, Bowdoin College
that rectifies the misimpression that immigrants are predominantly Buddhist, Hindu, or Muslim—inadvertently fostered by Diana Eck’s *A New Religious America* (2001)—we are inundated with studies on the challenges of being differently Christian in America if one happens to be, say, Catholic from El Salvador, Presbyterian from Korea, or Pentecostal from Nigeria.

Christian diasporas from South Asia remain among the most unstudied. Most people suppose that immigrants from that region of the world are more likely to be of another religion, yet Christians arrive in numbers out of proportion to their population in the homeland (sociologist Stephen Warner observes that immigration is anything but random where religion is concerned). In the late 1980s, Christian immigration to North America was basically the monopoly of one scholar, Raymond Brady Williams; recently, Knut Jacobsen and Selva Raj drafted a cohort of cultural anthropologists who contributed to an informative volume, *The South Asian Christian Diaspora* (2008). All of this helps academically but has little to say practically to pastors and others who are of the diaspora and feel called into ministry on behalf of communities scattered across what is often called, from a South Asian Indian perspective, the “American frontier.”

North America is indeed a frontier for Christians who have come from a context (mainly in South India) where the plurality of religions is a fixture of life. The religious illiteracy found in the intensely religious American nation grates on persons who need to explain constantly that they are neither Hindu nor Muslim. America is also a frontier where the self is individuated in ways that defy received normative understandings from the cultural context of these immigrants. Worse still, caste-based identities (statuses distinct from class and largely unaffected by conversion) prove to be durable and portable across cultures. “I was promptly dropped from consideration,” writes a pastor reminiscing about a call that never materialized, “once the congregation . . . knew that I was not of their caste.”

Never mind that this is surely one of the most “successful” diasporas ever given the preadaptation to life overseas through an English education in science, engineering, medicine, and other remunerative professions. As a frontier is a place in-between—neither South Asia nor North America—no one has been in this particular cultural space before.

The year 2007, however, was a turning point. Twice that year, forward-looking diaspora pastors from the middle-Atlantic states met at Princeton Theological Seminary for conferences on the theme “Multiplying Asian Ministries in North America.” Sadly, apart from space, Princeton Seminary had
little to offer; its dominant models for being church were thought of as less relevant to the diaspora than they needed to be. Accordingly, the decision was made by the group to push on “with or without PTS.” Happily, though, these pilgrims at the crossroads, as they call themselves, chose to avoid the road that leads to dependence upon an institution; on their own, they have already planned a companion volume to the one considered here.

Despite some choppiness, repetition, and unevenness, this book has one unusual advantage: Rachel McDermott, a Barnard professor of South Asian studies. Her presence on the editorial team was a helpful addition to that of the prime mover, Anand Veeraraj. Truly, a scholar whose publications are devoted to the study of Hindu goddess traditions puts all of us to shame in theological education who cannot see beyond our noses far enough to pose the right question: “Should [Indian pastors] be organizing ‘enclave’ churches, where ‘authentic’ Indian Christianity can be experienced in American environments, or, by contrast, should they encourage integration into and adaptation to American church expectations?”

Though this is a book overwhelmingly by and for diaspora Christians, anyone in ministry whose eyes are not shut will appreciate the essay by Anita Milne, a PC(USA) pastor and the only other contributor not of South Asian origin or descent. Milne’s interests are born of necessity: her New Jersey church lies in the middle of West Windsor, one of the nation’s densest concentrations of South Asian immigrants.

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Religious Experience Reconsidered:
A Building-Block Approach to the Study of Religion and Other Special Things

Ann Taves

Ann Taves, a professor of religious studies at the University of California, Santa Barbara, was trained as a historian of religion with a special focus on Christianity in the modern era. Well versed in the study of religion from the humanistic side, she offers in this book an interdisciplinary approach to
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religious experience from a scientific perspective (i.e., naturalistic) and a subjective perspective (i.e., humanistic). This interdisciplinary approach—from religious studies, anthropology, psychology, sociology, and neuroscience—is visible in the content of the book.

Chapter 1 addresses the question of the object of study—religion as a contested phenomenon. The chapter starts with a critical analysis of two basic approaches in the study of religious experience, one in which the religiousness of the experience is understood to be inherent in the experience itself (sui generis approach) and the other in which it is viewed as ascribed to it (ascriptive approach). The author favors the second approach for three reasons. First, it forces us to sort out who is the subject of the religious experience. Second, it allows us to position experience not as something apart from all other forms of knowledge but as something simultaneously embodied and interactive. Third, it allows us to view religious experiences as a subset of ordinary things and behaviors that may be incorporated into the more complex formations we think of as “religions.”

The argument in chapter 1 builds on the definition of religion from Durkheim. Most scholars refer to Durkheim with regard to religious communities or churches. But for Durkheim, churches are complex forms of organizations based on “sacred things that are things set apart and forbidden.” Religions (nominative) are to be distinguished from sacred things (adjective), or, as Taves says, things special or set apart. Not all things special or set apart are religious. Religiousness implies a process of singularization of things special or set apart—for example, they are transformed in absoluteness and resist commodification. The subtitle of the book (A Building-Block Approach to the Study of Religion and Other Special Things) refers to the fact that things special or set apart are the building blocks for “religions” as we know them.

Chapter 2 focuses on the relationship of experience and representation. How do we get access to experience (our own and that of others), and how does meaning arise in the body and through interaction with others? Representations can be regarded as the articulation of experience and an expression of embodied behavior. The relationship between representation and experience is discussed with regard to several types of experience relevant for the study of religion: dreams, trance, possession, and meditation.

Chapter 3 addresses the question of explanation. People offer explanations why things happen as they do. For example, they say, “God gave me a new chance in life.” Explanation is about the attribution of causality to things deemed religious or behavior connected to it. Attribution is to be distinguished
from ascription of religious meaning to something. Attribution theory claims that experiences in a strong sense can be explained by language, tradition, and culture. The author is critical to a purely constructivist or “top-down” account of experience. She favors an interaction of a top-down (culture sensitive) and bottom-up (culture insensitive) processing related to particular experiences.

Chapter 4 addresses the issue of comparison. How can we set up studies that allow us to compare experiences across times and cultures? Taves favors making a comparison between religious and nonreligious subjects. This position is in line with her argument against a sui generis approach of the study of religion. With such an approach, the scholar has already found what he or she is looking for before starting the research. The chapter offers a sketch for comparative research not only for experimentalists but also for historians and ethnographers.

The book is very rich in drawing on theories and research in the social sciences and the study of religion. What makes the book enjoyable to read is the fact that the author is analytically very strong. This is often not the case in the field of the study of religion. Taves makes clear distinctions, strong categorizations, and good schematic summaries of her arguments without becoming formalistic. I think this is due to the fact that she is well informed by a humanistic study of religion.

In the preface of the book Taves says, “I have written this book primarily for humanists and humanistically oriented social scientists who study religion using historical and ethnographic methods.” But I think there is a strong case that theological scholars interested in the concept of religious experience should read the book. Why? Because the problem of a sui generis approach is also at the heart of theological discourse on this topic. Some theologians (in line with Schleiermacher) claim distinctiveness and uniqueness of religious experiences based on the idea that the origin of religion is unmediated by language or tradition. Other theologians (in line with Barth) claim distinctiveness and uniqueness for experiences of Christian believers. Theological scholars in a sui generis approach should read this book to be informed about the arguments against their position. And scholars who reject a sui generis approach should become well informed about a modern approach informed by the sciences and humanistic study of religion.

Finally, I also want to formulate some critical questions. First, the author promises to identify more substantive characteristics of things that tend to be set apart as special. Are the concepts of specialness and singularization sufficient to distinguish things deemed religious from things special or set apart?
What is meant by “mystical” or “spiritual” as markers of specialness? In short, what is this substantive criterion that distinguishes things deemed religious from things deemed nonreligious? Second, are all the distinctions in chapter 2 needed to construct a building-block approach toward religion? If strong theory should be parsimonious, would it be possible to reduce the number of distinctions in the building-block approach? Which distinctions then belong to the core of this theory? Third, what empirical data are connected to the category of experience? I know what values, representations, emotions, ascriptions, attributions, conscious behavior, and all the other terms the author uses to understand experience. Is experience maybe a container term without any reference to things that can be observed in humans as embodied minds? If this is the case, could you miss the term and still say everything you wanted to say? In theological literature the term “experience” often leads to mystification. With Taves this is never the case, because she is well informed about psychological and neuroscientific theories. But why stick to this term, if everything in the book could be said without the term “experience”?

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The Sins of the Fathers: The Law and Theology of Illegitimacy Reconsidered

John Witte Jr.

Witte describes this text as a “brief historical essay” designed to “retrace what warrants there are for and against illegitimacy doctrine in Scripture and tradition,” and that is indeed what the reader will find here. Prompted by his general work on law and religion and also by childhood experiences of religious intolerance toward and yet familial acceptance of an illegitimate child, the book contends that contemporary indifference to an epidemic of children born outside marriage continues—by omission—the problematic stigmatizing of such children no longer upheld explicitly by Western law or mainstream Christian theology. Witte writes, “The ancient angel’s description of Ishmael’s bane still seems altogether too apt a prediction of the plight of the modern illegitimate children.” He calls for stronger social and religious emphasis on parental responsibility, greater engagement of civil and religious communities
DID THE FIRST CHRISTIANS WORSHIP JESUS?

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James D. G. Dunn

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—CHRISTOPHER ROWLAND, Dean Ireland Professor of the Exegesis of Holy Scripture, University of Oxford

To answer the title question effectively requires more than the citing of a few texts; one must first acknowledge that the way to the answer is more difficult than it appears and recognize that the answer may be less straightforward than many would like.

Dunn raises some fascinating yet vexing questions with this work but readers are ably guided by this leading New Testament scholar.

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in familial support, more attention to adoption as a means of providing care and support when parents fail to do so, and “a more robust legal and cultural embrace of marriage as the best institution for having and raising children.”

While Witte acknowledges that both the Hebrew and Greek Testaments negatively depict illegitimacy, he believes that classical Jewish teachings limited the actual effects of illegitimacy on children and that early church teachings followed suit. He highlights church teachings on marriage and family to build a foundation for his later claim that marriage provides the best context for childbearing. He also traces theologies of spiritual adoption as a framework for endorsing actual adoption as a Christian response to the contemporary sufferings of illegitimate children. His discussion of the mutual influence of Roman law and Christian morality during the fourth through sixth centuries identifies the emergence of two categories of illegitimacy, “natural” and “spurious,” distinguished by the degree of sin associated with an illegitimate child’s conception. Children in the natural category could be legitimized, at times through adoption, whereas spurious illegitimate children could not.

Witte reports that the medieval church contributed to the heavy stigmatization of illegitimacy. By making judgments about children’s purity based on the spiritual and marital status of their parents at the birth, the church helped codify civil laws based “on a refined philosophy of hierarchy [and] also on a complex economy of sin and grace.” By contrast, English common law rejected morality-based distinctions and simply defined legitimacy and illegitimacy in terms of whether a child was born within or outside of marriage. Colonial America unsurprisingly echoed this approach. While Witte appreciates this simplification of civil understanding, he laments the refusal of English common law to permit the legitimization of children via adoption.

Postcolonial America saw the reinstatement of some aspects of civil and canon law from earlier eras. Illegitimate children could once again achieve legitimacy through their parents’ subsequent marriage or through adoption by others. New perspectives on children’s rights minimized obstacles to inheritance. In the middle to late twentieth century, international laws began prohibiting discrimination on the basis of illegitimate birth. Witte contends that the United States provided an early model of these more favorable views and of adoption as a means of protecting children’s rights when illegitimacy threatens their well-being.

Witte makes no secret of his intent to read the history of illegitimacy in relation to championing marriage and adoption as important factors in children’s opportunities for safety, health, and a good life. Whether one agrees that only
legal marriage can provide the stability and care children require—and civil law that limits marriage solely to heterosexual couples complicates such agreement for liberals—Witte’s exploration of the history of legal and theological views of illegitimacy is a fascinating read. Against this backdrop, his call for society and religious organizations to take greater responsibility for contemporary children born to unwed mothers and absent fathers is likely to garner ethical assent, and rightly so.

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