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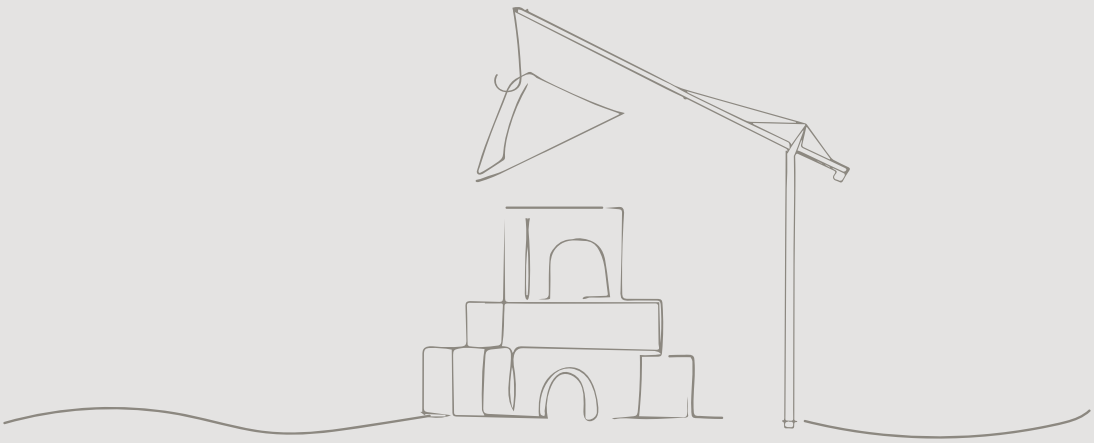

Jess Joustra on Bavinck and Deradicalization • John Shelton on Os Guinness • Susannah Black on Cosmology • L. M. Sacasas on Technological Renewal • Moses Bratrud on Victorian Exvangelicals • Rhys Laverty on Paul Kingsnorth • Chase Davis on Being Colonized by the City • Brad East on Christ and Culture • Brewer Eberly on Wellness • Bonnie Kristian on Spin Dictators • Sarah Clark on Permanent Crisis in the Humanities

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T.S. ELIOT

I confess, however, that I am not myself very much concerned with the question of influence, or with those publicists who have impressed their names upon the public by catching the morning tide and rowing very fast in the direction in which the current was flowing; but rather that there should always be a few writers preoccupied in penetrating to the core of the matter, in trying to arrive at the truth and to set it forth, without too much hope, without ambition to alter the immediate course of affairs, and without being downcast or defeated when nothing appears to ensue.

Each of us carries around a little machine in our pockets each day that is practically engineered to radicalize us. That's the first thing to understand if you want to get your mind around our particularly disorienting cultural moment. Paul Kingsnorth has likened our phones to a portal, perhaps even a portal by which we open ourselves to the evil supernatural. It's a disturbing but plausible theory, particularly if you look up "Loab," an especially demented AI image that mysteriously shows up in lots of AI-generated art. Technology is formative, and when you combine that bare fact that applies to all tools and technologies with the particulars of internet-enabled phones... well, you can probably expect to end up with a world that looks an awful lot like ours.

To take only one example of the deformative effects we're dealing with, consider this: When you want to form a local community of some kind, you'll immediately run into a simple problem. There's a limited pool of candidates because you can only pull from people who are already local. If you're a church planter in a small town, there's only so much you can do about your church's music on Sunday morning. When you're working locally, you work with what you have.

Not so on the internet. Online communities can pull from a pool of millions or even billions of potential members. What that means is online communities often become fairly homogeneous. If you get involved with an online group and find the fit isn't great, you just leave. The cost of leaving is the same as arriving—nothing—and there are a dozen more groups for you to try out.

So while local communities rely upon and reward bridge builders, online communities don't need bridge builders because they simply don't need bridges. Everyone who sticks in the group is already extremely similar.

This also means that online communities tend to become more extreme over time because the way you stand out in more homogeneous groups is through displays of extreme devotion, commitment, or dedication to the cause. Local institutions, out of simply necessity, encourage a certain degree of tolerance, even broadmindedness. Online communities encourage extremism and radicalization.

It is with these concerns in mind that we publish our fourth print issue of Mere Orthodoxy. One of the chief challenges today facing any local group that wishes to live well together is that all of its members are being shaped by different online networks. That attention each of us gives to various media and online groups is formative. What you attend to is what you become. And so these radicalizing tendencies in online media have the unhappy effect of driving wedges into local communities. If you're part of a local church, you've almost certainly seen this dynamic in play over the last four years.

As a media project, Mere Orthodoxy is both vulnerable to these tendencies ourselves and is committed to resisting them so that we can fulfill our mission of speaking the truth about God and His works in a loud, distracted, and ideological world. Our goal is to be a media voice that isn't driven by anxiety, fear, and rage, and that is instead rooted in a patient faith in divine providence. In various ways, most of the pieces you read in this issue will be about how to practice this basic posture and how to persist in it across time, even as you face the cross pressures of life in a radicalizing, fragmented world.

This fourth issue, of course, marks the completion of the first volume of our print project. So if you have been signed up since the first issue, you will need to renew to continue receiving the print magazine. You can do that by going to our homepage, https://mereorthodoxy.com, and clicking on the "subscribe" button in the top navigation. We hope that over the past 15 months you have enjoyed reading these essays and reviews and that you have found them to be alternatively delightful, edifying, and informative.

As we consider the future, our plan is to produce print #5 for this summer with print #6 following in the fall and #7 in the winter. At present, Mere Orthodoxy remains a one-man operation. This means that I have to maintain all of our editorial work for print and web, manage all of our administrative tasks, and serve as the only fundraiser for the work. In particular, the end of 2022 and opening weeks of 2023 were loaded with organizational and development responsibilities, such that I was not able to also do what I wanted to editorially. So we are pushing the next several issues back a few months each so that I can use the first part of 2023 to catch up on print editorial issues, wrap up a book for IVP, and hopefully get us set on better footing for long-term financial and organizational stability. If you would, please remember us in prayer.

On that note, on to issue number four, which might be subtitled something like this: "notes on being a faithful and non-anxious Christian in a disorienting and fractured time." Thank you for reading!

In Christ,

JAKE MEADOR

JAKE MEADOR IS THE EDITOR-IN-CHIEF OF MERE ORTHODOXY. HE LIVES IN HIS HOMETOWN OF LINCOLN, NE WITH HIS WIFE AND FOUR CHILDREN.

Modern, Yet Faithful:

LESSONS FROM HERMAN BAVINCK

JESSICA JOUSTRA

Herman Bavinck was the son of a conservative Reformed preacher, born in 1854 in a relatively small town (Hoogeveen) in a small, low-lands country (the Netherlands).

For the cause of "de-radicalization" in the twenty-first century, this may not be the first place one would think to look. Even as Bavinck's theological insights have gained significant traction in the North American landscape today, he remains — for many — a rather obscure theologian, from a distant past. Nevertheless, I want to make the case that it is, indeed, Herman Bavinck who we might look to as a steady guide for our time.

Bavinck has often been described as the "Jekyll and Hyde" of Reformed theology: a man who was simultaneously bound to his conservative Reformed upbringing and enmeshed in his modern context, unable to reconcile them, and thus, alternating between the two in a state of perpetual conflict. In this, Bavinck feels surprisingly contemporary, a man wrestling with a dizzying pace of change, a fracturing social landscape, and abounding polarization — a Christian for whom being in but not of the world felt a special, and vexing challenge.

Yet, as his most recent English biographer put it, Bavinck was *both* a "theologically conservative Calvinist" and a "modern European."[1] In other words, rather than being caught between irreconcilable polarities,

[1] James Eglinton, Bavinck: *A Critical Biography* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2020), xxi.

Bavinck remained true to the theological and ecclesial distinctions that had been affirmed by centuries and centuries of Christians and strove to articulate them in his particular — modern — moment *in* history.

For such a time as this, Bavinck is a faithful guide for a life characterized by "and," not "or." Orthodox and modern, Bavinck's theologically informed posture in the world, and the practices that flow from it, can chart a new way, one that holds steadfast to the inalterable way of Jesus and applies it in the unique context in which God has placed us.

BAVINCK'S POSTURE IN TRYING TIMES: IMITATING CHRIST'S VIRTUES

The imitation of Christ, a central aspect of Bavinck's ethics, gave him the kind of faithful nimbleness required to be orthodox *and* modern.

Imitating Christ, Bavinck argues, is the "shape of the spiritual life."[2] While that could seem like a straightforward, obvious assertion, what exactly the "shape" of imitating Christ *is* remains hotly contested within Christian ethics. For Bavinck, the imitation of Christ is bound together with the law. We imitate Jesus, he contends, as Jesus follows the law. The Ten Commandments "form the constitution of a life of obedience to God" and "determine that which may and must not be imitated in the life of Jesus."[3] Jesus is not only savior (though he certainly is, and must be, this!), but example. "In Christ, the law is our norm," writes Bavinck in his *Reformed Ethics*.[4] Law-patterned imitation of Christ's virtues is then the way of his disciplines.

Why does this matter? For Bavinck, Christ as *the* example of faithfully living, or obedience to the law, provides us with an ethic that has both universal norms and contextual adaptability. The centrality of the imitation of Christ in Bavinck's ethics is how he can faithfully, nimbly, apply Christian principles in *his* day without either literal mimicry of Jesus' actions or, given one's new time and place in the world, abandoning Jesus' example entirely.

For Bavinck, this posture — one that he describes as neither "world-renunciation" nor "world-domination" — is best understood through a close, exegetical examination of the Sermon on the Mount and the ethics of New Testament Christians. [5]

In the Sermon on the Mount, Bavinck argues, the "nature of imitation is clarified by means of concrete examples."[6] When Jesus says, "If your right eye causes you to stumble, gouge it out and throw it away," we shouldn't see this as a *literal* command, but we should understand it

[2] Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Ethics* vol. 1: *Created, Fallen, and Converted Humanity*, ed. John Bolt, Jessica Joustra, Nelson Kloosterman, Antoine Theron, Dirk van Keulen (Baker Academic, 2019), 317.
[3] Herman Bavinck, "The Imitation of Christ I (1885/86)" in *A Theological Analysis of Herman Bavinck's Two Essays on the* Imitatio Christi, trans. John Bolt (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 2013), 400.
[4] Bavinck, *Reformed Ethics*, vol. 1, 341
[5] Herman Bavinck, "The Imitation of Christ II (1918)" in *A Theological Analysis of Herman Bavinck's Two Essays on the* Imitatio Christi, trans. John Bolt (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 2013), 428.
[6] Bavinck, "Imitation II," 413.

"practically and concretely."[7] In other words, Jesus' command to his disciples is neither to be followed with extreme literalism (i.e. plucking out your eye) *or* radical spiritualization (i.e. not practically related to our actions whatsoever). Instead, the examples Jesus gives in the Sermon on the Mount are concrete illustrations of the "virtues which the law requires of us, especially love."[8] In them, Jesus does not give a new law, but a renewed application and interpretation of the law. Rather than pit New Testament commands and ethics against Old, Bavinck holds them together.

While helpful exegesis, this doesn't quite get us to the point of applying the "concrete examples" that Jesus provides in our own lives and contexts. For this, Bavinck points us to how early Christians and later Christians applied these teachings. Jesus' words in the Sermon on the Mount were directed to a "relatively small band of disciples who were not members of the upper echelon of society but of the lower classes."[9] Because of this, Jesus stressed actions that were appropriate for their current position in society; he "exalts precisely those virtues which his disciples would require . . . in such circumstances."[10]

The early church remains in a similar position to Jesus' disciples. They were, Bavinck describes, an "oppressed and persecuted community," often with a precarious social standing.[11] Given their status, these early Christians were not necessarily in a position to *change* the world, rather they were a community seeking to "preserve its independent identity and establish its own position."[12] For such a task, you'd need to display virtues like truth, righteousness, holiness, purity, modesty, temperance, prayer, vigil, fasting, faith, love, longsuffering, generosity, hospitality, compassion, lowliness, meekness, and patience.[13] And these, what Bavinck deems "negative and passive virtues," are exactly what Jesus highlights. Their job was not to disengage from the world, nor was it to dominate the world. Following Jesus requires faithful application of his virtues *within* your context.

But the societal position of the church did not remain the same for all generations of Christians. When it changed, Bavinck argues, the church needed a different posture: the exercise of negative and passive virtues was no longer sufficient to sustain [the church] in its new task of reforming and renewing the world in accord with Christian principles.[14]

Importantly, this shift in posture is not a shift *away* from the principles of the Sermon on the Mount. Rather, it is a continued application of these principles in a new context. Alongside these "negative" virtues, the church is to undertake the "positive elements" of Jesus' instruction, or active virtues.[15] These are not new, nor are they an

[7] Bavinck, "Imitation II," 418.
[8] Bavinck, "Imitation II," 426.
[9] Bavinck, "Imitation II," 416.
[10] Bavinck, "Imitation II," 417.
[11] Bavinck, "Imitation II," 422.
[12] Bavinck, "Imitation II," 420.
[13] Bavinck, "Imitation II," 420.
[14] Bavinck, "Imitation II," 424.
[15] Bavinck, "Imitation II," 424.

addition to Jesus' teaching, they are "latent in the central facts of the Christian gospel." [16]

Not only are Christians called to follow Jesus in his "self-denial," "forsak[ing] the world," and the cross,[17] they are to follow him in his joy, resurrection life, and the creation-affirmation of the incarnation.[18] For Bavinck, this means that we can "gladly and thankfully accept" much that our culture offers, while rejecting that which is sinful.[19] We needn't be simply antagonistic towards our time in history, for what is good comes from God! But we also needn't be overly and naively optimistic about our time in history, for sin still has a hold in our world.[20]

At the heart of Bavinck's hermeneutical and historical analysis is this conviction:

> *Those virtues which the disciples of Jesus are called to exercise in their relations with others are essentially the same in the Sermon on the Mount as in the apostolic imitation of Christ. Included are virtues of truth, righteousness, love, longsuffering, compassion, etc., virtues that remain powerful through the ages and retain their validity in all circumstances. Naturally the application will vary depending upon circumstances. Although all are subject to one and the same moral law the duties under that law vary considerably.* [21]

Christ, in his example and in his instruction, shows us how we ought to live by applying the law in his own time, place, and context. He perfectly lives out patience, holiness, love, gentleness, joy, self-denial, cross-bearing, compassion, longsuffering, justice, and resurrection life. Our call is to follow his example in our own time, for "while the virtues to which the imitation of Christ calls us are the same, circumstances may modify the application."[22]

The way of living in Christ is not tied, then, to a particular moment, or even *one* posture that is able to be replicated in all ages. Bavinck's robust, contextually sensitive, interpretation of the imitation of Christ led him to be able to embrace many things about modern life, without naively accepting everything, and live faithfully in modernity.

PRACTICES FOR "STAYING CENTERED"

Bavinck was convinced that God was at work in every time and place throughout history and that God's work "never opposes nature and culture in themselves but only their degeneration."[23] Grace isn't antithetical to *culture*, it is antithetical to *sin*.

This conviction, buttressed by many other central theological themes — including common grace, the leavening power of the gospel, and God's sovereignty — drove Bavinck towards a

[16] Bavinck, "Imitation II," 424.
[17] Bavinck, *Reformed Ethics*, vol. 1, 322.
[18] Bavinck, "Imitation II," 424-425, cf. Bavinck, *Reformed Ethics*, vol. 1, 325, 341.
[19] Bavinck, "Imitation II," 432.
[20] For more on this, see Herman Bavinck, "Herman Bavinck's 'Common Grace,'" trans. Raymond C. Van Leeuwen, *Calvin Theological Journal* 24, no. 1 (1989): 36-65.
[21] Bavinck, "Imitation II," 438.
[22] Bavinck, "Imitation II," 438.
[23] Bavinck, "Imitation II," 430.

non-reactionary posture in the world, one that resisted extreme polarization, engaged with those who differed from him in good faith, and sought to learn of God's goodness and truth in every corner of God's world. Compelled by his central conviction that God was in the business of restoring and renewing his creation, Bavinck was able to reject a radical — or, to use his own terminology, "revolutionary"[24] — posture, seeking instead *reformation*, a path that goes into "the new situations in state and society, of philosophy and science, of literature and art, of profession and business; they investigate everything and preserve the good. They are no praise-singers of the past times and do not wail idly about the miseries of the present, but they intervene and reform." [25]

Imitating Christ in *the modern world* led Bavinck to adopt distinct, and instructive, practices that can no doubt help us, in our time, too: intellectual curiosity, genuine friendships, charitable receipt, and attention to the "log" in our own eye.

INTELLECTUAL CURIOSITY

While he characterized his way in the world as neither "world-domination" or "world-renunciation," we could also say, more simply, that Bavinck was not afraid. He knew that God, in his sovereignty, can make all things "subservient to his glorification"[26] and is at work throughout his world, not merely in his church (though certainly there, too!).[27] With this conviction, Bavinck did not learn *only* within his ecclesial circles. He was deeply formed and catechized by his church, absorbing truths there that would carry him throughout his life; he also had an intellectual curiosity that led him to learn with and from different — and sometimes competing — schools of thought.

As a young man in the Christian Reformed Church[28] intending to study theology, the expectation was that Bavinck would attend the theological school in Kampen, their ecclesial school. And Bavinck did, for one year. After that year, Bavinck transferred to the University of Leiden.

Unlike Kampen, a conservative, Reformed school, Leiden was a thoroughly modern university. Some have read this as Bavinck's rejection of his conservative upbringing for a new, modern way of engaging theology.[29] Certainly some were nervous that such a rejection might happen. Upon learning of the switch to Leiden, Bavinck's friend Henry Dosker wrote to him, saying:

[24] This language did not originate with Bavinck. He and Kuyper were indebted to the thought of Groen van Prinsterer for this posture. See: Groen van Prinsterer, *Unbelief and Revolution*, trans. Harry van Dyke (Lexham Press, 2018).

[25] Herman Bavinck, *Christelijke en neutrale staatkunde*, 30, trans. George Harinck, quoted in George Harinck, "Herman Bavinck on Antirevolutionary Politics," 269.

[26] Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics* vol. 3: *Sin and Salvation in Christ*, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008), 64.

[27] For more on this, see Bavinck, "Common Grace," 62 and Herman Bavinck, "The Catholicity of Christianity and the Church," trans. John Bolt, *Calvin Theological Journal* 27 (1992), 224.

[28] While the names are similar, and they are ecclesially related to one another, the Christian Reformed Church that Bavinck belonged to is a 19th century Dutch denomination. The Christian Reformed Church in *North America*, perhaps more familiar to readers of this essay, has its roots in this movement, but they are not synonymous

[29] This read of the situation, as James Eglinton points out in his biography of Bavinck, has been largely "sensationalize[d]." There was certainly some opposition, but also much support of Bavinck in his decision to go to Leiden (Eglinton, *Bavinck*, 71-72)

> *God help you, Herman, to remain true to your choice to persevere and to choose the clear truth of faith of our historical Christianity above all the flickering light rays of an enemy science. And yet, you risk a lot . . . you will, I think, have to withdraw within the narrow walls of your own opinions; you will have to be on the defensive and as a result have to adopt a somewhat terse opinion of the truth, while you can grow and develop only by attack.*[30]

But Bavinck's own journals reveal a different attitude. They highlight his desire to imitate Christ in any and every context: "I continue to be struck by the duties that I, as a Christian in the academy, have to fulfill here," writes young Bavinck. "May God grant me the strength to do this!" [31]

In Leiden, Bavinck did not leave the orthodoxy of his youth. He went in search for rigorous, "scientific," academic training that Kampen could not offer him at the time. For Bavinck, it was not orthodoxy *or* rigor, rather orthodoxy *and* rigor. He was not afraid of the modernity that characterized Leiden. While he did not accept all of it — he critiqued modern presuppositions strongly in his inaugural lecture as a faculty member in Kampen, "The Kingdom of God, the Highest Good" — he knew he could learn from the theologians there. He needn't wholly shy away from intellectual diversity. Without accepting all the presuppositions that his professors at Leiden taught, Bavinck was able to learn from them. His scholarship is profoundly marked by their influence, as James Eglinton remarks, in both "style and rigor."[32]

This posture, of learning from those who differ significantly, was one Bavinck continued throughout his life. Rather than retreat into an intellectual cul-de-sac where he was only and always surrounded by those with whom he agreed, Bavinck sought out alternative ways of seeing the world, to learn from, and in, conversation together, and continue to sharpen and refine his own thinking and writing.

GENUINE FRIENDSHIPS

Bavinck was a man of strong, deep conviction. Despite an ecclesial background that had separatist tendencies, he was convinced that a wholehearted acceptance of Reformed principles ought not lead to "the preference for closed societies, the rejection of art, scholarship, science, culture, and all the goods of earthly life, and the spurning of the vocation that rests upon us in the family, business and the state."[33] God gives his common grace to the whole world, and thus we can engage it with confidence.

Such confidence allowed Bavinck to form genuine friendships with those who he deeply disagreed with. He knew that truth, beauty, kindness, and insight were not solely found within his community; these were gifts of God, and gifts God had given to many[34] In the midst of deep

[30] TH. E. Dosker to H. Bavinck, December 23,1876. H. Bavinck Archives, HDC. Dutch, trans. George Harinck, "'Something That Must Remain, If the Truth Is to Be Sweet and Precious to Us': The Reformed Spirituality of Herman Bavinck," *Calvin Theological Journal* 38, no. 2 (2003): 251.
[31] Eglinton, Bavinck, 76.
[32] Eglinton, *Bavinck*, 99.
[33] Bavinck, "Common Grace," 54.

— perhaps even fundamental — perspectival difference, Bavinck knew he could learn from others, and was convinced that the best way to do that was through face to face contact and genuine friendship.

While studying in Leiden, Bavinck met Christiaan Snouck Hurgronje. Snouck, who once belonged to a mainline Dutch church and later converted to Islam, no doubt saw the world very differently than Bavinck. But theirs was a lifelong friendship, and in it, the two did not shy away from these differences, nor let these differences hinder a close, personal relationship.

Glimpses of their relationship have been preserved through letters that the two wrote to one another. Near the completion of their studies, Bavinck writes:

> *I can only regret that we have gone so far, immensely far, from each other in principle and view of life. And yet my sincere friendship and warm interest will remain with you despite such great difference in insight and conviction.*[35]

Already, as a young man, Bavinck neither shies away from explicitly naming difference *nor* maintaining friendship amid difference, a posture he retains throughout his life. His relationship with Snouck was not simply a utilitarian scheme to win ideological kin, but a friendship to be cherished. Neither was it, however, a relativistic acceptance that others would see the world differently. In the same letter, Bavinck wrote: "I hope that this difference [in conviction] will become smaller, but I do not yet see this." [36]

Their fundamental differences notwithstanding, Bavinck understood their relationship not only to be relationally significant, but intellectually sharpening. In a later letter to Snouck, he writes:

> *We can still learn a great deal from each other and be useful to each other. And precisely because I live among kindred spirits, the correction of opponents who are still friends is all the more indispensable to me.*[37]

Fighting against intellectual cul-de-sacs, Bavinck was not satisfied to stay among "kindred spirits." He valued friendship with those not only within his ecclesial and theological circles, but outside. Personal relationships were not only possible in the face of significant worldview differences, but could be a place of important formation and growth.

CHARITABLE RECEIPT

Not only did he prize "human contact with conversation partners," as James Eglinton describes, Bavinck also "took pains to understand them on their own strongest terms."[38] As such, his method of scholarship gives us a model antithetical to straw men: charitable receipt, sometimes also referred to as "steel manning," which involves setting forth the strongest possible version of your opponent's argument. Bavinck

[34] Herman Bavinck, "General Biblical Principles and the Relevance of Concrete Mosaic Law for the Social Question Today," trans. John Bolt, Journal of Markets & Morality 13, no. 2 (Fall 2010): 440-441
[35] Bavinck to Snouck Hurgronje, Kampen, November 24, 1880, in Eglinton, *Bavinck*, 115.
[36] Bavinck to Snouck Hurgronje, Kampen, November 24, 1880, in Eglinton, *Bavinck*, 115.
[37] Bavinck to Snouck Hurgronje, Kampen, December 23, 1884, in Eglinton, *Bavinck*, 147
[38] Eglinton, *Bavinck*, 155-156.

sought to uncover the good, without minimizing the error.

Ulrich Zwingli, the subject of Bavinck's PhD thesis, was a strong model of this kind of engagement. Zwingli, argues Bavinck, had a "respectful" disposition toward "differing convictions."[39] This disposition was one Bavinck thought critical for the modern world, and one he strove to emulate.

One such case of "differing convictions" is found in Friedrich Schleiermacher, known to many as the "father" of modern theology. When Bavinck defines the task of dogmatic theology in the first pages of his *Reformed Dogmatics*, he does so *contra* Schleiermacher's assertions (among others). But Bavinck's posture towards Schleiermacher in his *Dogmatics* and beyond is not simply antagonistic.

In the midst of his critique, Bavinck goes to great length to charitably understand and retell the intention behind, and impact of, Schleiermacher's work: "Schleiermacher, it must be noted, still tried in his dogmatic work to give an account, not of religion in general, but of the Christian religion, of Christian piety in particular. . . . The mystical element was anchored in history and thus safeguarded from many excesses." [40]

Not only does Bavinck take care to assume the best intention in Schleiermacher's thought, he also is, as Cory Brock masterfully demonstrates, theologically indebted to him. Bavinck remains an opponent "of modern theology in general according to its adoption of the subjective consciousness as a source-foundation for theological construction" (a theme which owes much to Schleiermacher's influence), but *nevertheless*, "in obedience to his own suggestion regarding the requirement that one must comprehend and engage modern philosophy . . . Bavinck appropriated much of the philosophical grammar that consciousness theologies so promoted."[41]

Schleiermacher had something to teach him! He showed Bavinck that "feeling offers a unique, original form of knowing," a theme which, once learned, persists throughout Bavinck's work, albeit in a uniquely Reformed way. [42]

LOGS AND PLANKS

The stain of sin, for Bavinck, is evident throughout creation — and cuts through every facet of the created order. It's easy, however, to be mindful of the way *others* manifest this stain, the way it cuts deep into their insights, convictions, and patterns. Jesus pointedly reminds us of this:

> *Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother's eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye? How can you say to your brother, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye,' when all the time there is a plank in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the plank out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye.*[43]

[39] Eglinton, *Bavinck*, 101.
[40] Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 1: Prolegomena, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2003), 35-36.
[41] Cory C. Brock, *Orthodox yet Modern: Herman Bavinck's Use of Friedrich Schleiermacher* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2020), 21.
[42] For more on this, both where Bavinck took up Schleiermacher's themes and where he continued to reject other theological and philosophical impulses in Schleiermacher, see Hank van der Belt, "An Alternative Approach to Apologetics," in *The Kuyper Center Review, Volume Two: Revelation and Common Grace*, ed. John Bowlin (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2011), 48-49.

Bavinck intentionally tried to be attuned not only to planks, but logs. He wanted to see the way sin manifested out there, but also in his own tradition.

One example of this conviction in practice can be seen in Bavinck's *The Certainty of Faith*. In it, he walks through various routes of seeking certainty: non-Christian, Catholic, Pietistic, Reformed, and more. Rather than simply attending to errors in these *other* positions, he also sees where his own tradition has also faltered. Of Roman Catholicism he writes,

> *Far be it from us to immediately denounce the latter with the protestant judgment that since such piety issues from a false principle – righteousness by works – it is therefore worthless to God. For no matter how much truth that judgement may contain, before we utter it, we must remind ourselves that the Catholic righteousness by good works is vastly preferable to a protestant righteousness by good doctrine. At least righteousness by good works benefits one's neighbor, whereas righteousness by good doctrine only produces lovelessness and pride.*[44]

Whether or not we find ourselves convinced by his description of Catholicism and certainty, we ought to notice his principle of engaging his own tradition: it is one that might have faults, and one that may need correction. Before we can simply rebut our opponents, we need to examine the log in our own eye.

CONCLUSION

There is no silver bullet to rid us of our polarization and radicalizing tendencies. If there were, a rather obscure figure from the 20th century European low-lands wouldn't be it. But a silver bullet is not what we need. Instead, we need faithful guides and enduring, biblical truths to help moor us and, when needed, correct us. For this, Bavinck may just be rightly suited to come to our aid.

Bavinck's example isn't flashy, and the perennial truths he points to won't land on a bumper sticker anytime soon ("law-patterned imitation of the virtues of Christ" isn't quite as snappy as "WWJD"), but they do speak to our moment, in a way that offers fodder for disciplined, lifelong discipleship, not a one-time fix. The centrality of a cross-shaped, law-bound imitation of Christ in Bavinck's work points us towards a posture that is neither dictated by, nor ignorant of, our present milieu. Jesus, the "living law,"[45] embodies virtues that are never changing *and* he does so in a particular moment in history. Our task, Bavinck reminds and exemplifies, is one of faithful nimbleness, or disciplined contextual sensitivity: holding to the steadfast way of Jesus and discerning how we ought to apply it in our time.

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[43] Matthew 7:3-6 (NIV).

[44] Herman Bavinck, T*he Certainty of Faith* (St. Catherines, ON: Paideia Press, 1980), 36-37.

[45] Bavinck, *Reformed Ethics*, vol. 1, 341.

Os Guinness:

THE CHRISTIAN PUBLIC INTELLECTUAL AFTER JACQUES MARITAIN[1]

JOHN SHELTON

"Nothing is possible without men,
But nothing lasts without institutions."
— Jean Monnet

Christians interested in public intellectual engagement often ask: "who is the next C.S. Lewis? Who is the next Reinhold Niebuhr?" While the words and ideas of both reached the masses well beyond church walls, there were substantial differences in their forms of engagement that often go unexplored. Lewis, for example, sought to remind a historic Christian civilization of the deep logic of its faith — defending the whole of Christian practice in wartime radio lectures on the BBC, and by putting to the proof in dramatic form Christianity's claim to tell the one true story of the universe and all existence through series like *The Chronicles of Narnia* and *The Space Trilogy*. Niebuhr, on the other hand, revived Christian concepts of sin, justice, even eschatology to elevate the public discourse of politics, shattering illusions of utopia and incremental peace with his Christian realism. Unlike Lewis, Niebuhr was not an apologist; his public engagement tended to weave elements of dogma in smoothly enough that his fellow political liberals could be naive to his religious belief; as Whittaker Chambers observed, many thought he was "a solid socialist who has some obscure connection with Union Theological Seminary that does not interfere with his political work."[2]

[1] Guinness provided comments on an earlier draft of this article. While this final version benefited tremendously from his fact-checking and suggestions, all opinions expressed herein remain the author's own.

[2] Whittaker Chambers, "Faith for a Lenten Age," *TIME*, March 8, 1948, https://whittakerchambers.org/articles/time-c/religion-faith-for-a-lenten-age/.

French philosopher and statesman Jacques Maritain offers a third, underappreciated model: that of the institution builder. Maritain is similar to Lewis and Niebuhr in many ways — retrieving older modes of thought for the modern world (in his case: Thomism) and wielding literary celebrity for widespread cultural impact. However, Maritain's legacy goes beyond these typical traits of a public intellectual. Maritain served as ambassador to the Vatican, influenced Pope Paul VI and Flannery O'Connor, and maintained a robust correspondence and friendship with Saul Alinsky — the father of community organizing and, in a certain sense, the vocational grandfather of a young Barack Obama. But in addition to siring, like these others, many intellectual children and grandchildren, Maritain secured a legacy of a different, arguably firmer sort through his role in the drafting of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR). His presence and influence at the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) was key to the development and acceptance of this document whose impact is still felt across the world.

Written and ratified in the aftermath of the Second World War's atrocities, the UDHR affirmed 30 articles on human rights, ranging from the familiar and Lockean ("right to life, liberty, and security of person") to the more communitarian, likely inspired by Maritain's Catholic personalism ("everyone has duties to the community in which alone the free and full development of his personality is possible"). It is the most translated document in existence.[3] Since its adoption, almost all countries have enacted human rights language into their laws, with nearly 150 quoting it or language inspired by it in their national constitutions.[4] While not itself legally binding, it is the foundation for "more than seventy human rights treaties, applied today on a permanent basis at global and regional levels."[5]

While the most celebrated characteristics of a public intellectual simply involve speaking and writing for a broad audience (who doesn't want to be the next Niebuhr, the next Lewis?), what is most neglected and needed now is a generation of Maritains: leaving behind an institutional legacy to sustain the world well after they are gone. Books have their place — Maritain certainly wrote his fair share — but institutions endure, ensuring that important books continue to be read across time. Apart from educational institutions, there would be no community to sustain the reading of Lewis' *Mere Christianity*, Niebuhr's *Moral Man* and *Immoral Society*, or, for that matter, *Maritain's Christianity and Democracy*.

So who, then, is the next Maritain — working beyond his own particular religious community

[3] "Most Translated Document," Guinness World Records, accessed May 15, 2022, https://www.guinnessworldrecords.com/world-records/most-translated-document. The world records organization is only tenuously connected to the brewing company, started by several Guinness employees. N.b., the UDHR is not more translated than the record-holding *book* (the Bible) or the Jehovah's Witnesses' record-holding *website* (jw.org).

[4] Nihal Jayawickrama. *The Judicial Application of Human Rights Law: National, Regional and International Jurisprudence* (Cambridge University Press, 2017), 40.

[5] "Universal Declaration of Human Rights," United Nations, accessed May 15, 2022, https://www.un.org/en/about-us/universal-declaration-of-human-rights.

and building a lasting legacy to catechize and sustain generations to come? Though it is true, as Alan Jacobs has noted elsewhere, that the cultural conditions necessary to sustain Christian public intellectuals may have disappeared after the 1970s,[6] still one living figure has managed to come close: Os Guinness, the scion of stout. While Guinness is most famous for his writings, especially *The Call*, it is his involvement with the Williamsburg Charter, the Global Charter of Conscience, and The Trinity Forum that make the comparison to Maritain most apt.[7]

The great-great-great grandson of Dublin brewmaster Arthur Guinness, Guinness was born into a family famous for beer, yes, but also piety. Arthur, the great patriarch, was an "Evangelical and a friend of John Wesley [and] George Whitefield."[8] Like John Wesley himself, the Guinness family's piety often took the form of public and political engagement: speaking out for religious freedom, the abolition of slavery, and better labor conditions.

Arthur's grandson, Henry Grattan Guinness, was a revival preacher responsible for the training and sending of countless missionaries across the world, much like Hudson Taylor, the founder of the China Inland Mission. In fact, the Guinnesses and the Taylors were friends; some of them even cemented that friendship through the bonds of marriage. Henry's son Gershom "Whitfield" Guinness, a member of Taylor's China Inland Mission, survived the slaughtering of many missionaries and Chinese Christians during the Boxer Rebellion. Nevertheless, the Guinnesses persisted in their ministry to China, with Whitfield begetting Henry W. Guinness, who served as a medical missionary, and Henry in turn begetting Os.

Os Guinness was born squarely in the middle of World War II and the Second Sino-Japanese War. The day after Os turned eight, Mao Zedong announced the formal establishment of the People's Republic of China from Tiananmen Square. In the ensuing years, the hostile communist regime drove Guinness, his family, and other foreigners out of the country. (Guinness explicitly links his later writings on revolutions — particularly America's in 1776 and France's in 1789 — to this revolutionary experience.)

Flung from China, Guinness picked up his life and education in austerity-era England. It was there that he first rubbed elbows with giants like Winston Churchill (whom he met as a schoolboy) and John Stott (first, hearing his preaching; later, becoming close friends). At the end of his college days at the University of London, Guinness would meet a man less famous than either of them and yet far more influential on the course of his life: Francis Schaeffer.

[6] Alan Jacobs, "The Watchmen: What became of the Christian intellectuals?," *Harper's Magazine*, September 2016, https://harpers.org/archive/2016/09/the-watchmen.

[7] Guinness clarified that he does not like to think of himself as an "intellectual," as he's not a scholar or an academic, and "intellectuals are too often people who live more in their heads and their theories than in the real world." Email correspondence with the author, May 2022.

[8] Nathan Martin, "Where Have All The Evangelicals Gone," *First Things*, December 28, 2009, https://www.firstthings.com/blogs/firstthoughts/2009/12/where-have-all-the-evangelicals-gone/.

By Guinnesss' own description, Schaeffer was a "strange little man in Swiss knickers, with a high-pitched voice, terms all of his own such as 'the line of despair,' and appalling mispronunciations and occasional malapropisms."[9] And yet for all his eccentricities, Schaeffer has had a profound impact on the global Evangelical movement through his founding of L'Abri, inspiring countless people and institutions in turn "to think Christianly" (which is, fittingly, the title of a recent book about L'Abri and its enduring influence).[10]

L'Abri, the French word for "shelter," was founded as part spiritual retreat, part philosophical community in the Swiss Alps. This "shelter for honest questions" has served as a Mecca, not just for lay evangelicals but also bona fide celebrities like Vogue cover girl Jenny MacDonald (whom Guinness would later marry after meeting in the 70s) and Eric Clapton.[11] In 1960, just a few years before Schaeffer and Guinness first met, *Time* covered L'Abri, Schaeffer, and his wife, Edith, in an article titled "Mission to Intellectuals," observing that "the European intellectual is the single object of the Schaeffers' mission." [12]

Guinness, not then a full-fledged European intellectual, was nevertheless a perfect student for the Schaeffers and L'Abri. Having come of age through reading "Nietzsche, Sartre, and Camus," Guinness ultimately came to faith through the works of "Pascal, Dostoevsky, G.K. Chesterton, T.S. Eliot and C.S. Lewis."[13] Schaeffer stood out to Guinness as someone who, like Chesterton, Eliot, and Lewis, "was able to relate his faith to anything and everything, and connected the dots between all the crazy events then going on."[14] Their first meeting in 1965 went well enough that Guinness would stay at L'Abri in 1967 for three weeks, and then return again to spend three years living and working with the Schaeffers.

Guinness made his first visit to the United States in 1968, joining Schaeffer on a tour of more than a dozen American cities on the condition that Guinness carry Schaeffer's bags and pay his own way. As unglamorous as the terms may have been, the trip proved fortuitous. When Schaeffer fell ill in the middle of a lecture series at Westmont College, Guinness was asked to step in for him and "give what [Schaeffer] would have said."[15] While Guinness refers to it as "the most inauthentic talk of [his] life," the speech would inaugurate Guinness' journey to become (in the words of historian John Fea) "one of Schaeffer's most prominent disciples."[16]

[9] Austin Taylor, "An Interview With Os Guinness on the 25th Anniversary of Francis Schaefer's Death," *The Gospel Coalition*, May 8, 2009,

[10] The term actually comes from Harry Blamires' 1963 work, *The Christian Mind*, which makes no mention of the Schaeffers or L'Abri, but for good reason has come to be associated with them.

[11] MacDonald modeled under the name "Windsor Elliot" in the 1960s and 70s.

[12] "Mission To Intellectuals," *TIME*, January 11, 1960, http://content.time.com/time/subscriber/article/0,33009,894666-1,00.html.

[13] Anita Palmer, "Os Guinness: The Art of Christian Persuasion—Part 1," March 24, 2016, https://outreachmagazine.com/interviews/16358-os-guinness-interview-part-1.html.

[14] *Ibid.*

[15] Os Guinness, "Chapel: Os Guinness, March 5, 2018," Youtube, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UvoeC1wL5gM.

[16] John Fea, "Os Guinness: What is an Evangelical?," *Current*, December 12, 2009, https://currentpub.com/2009/12/29/os-guinness-what-is-an-evangelical/.

But 1968 was a bleak year for the United States: with the assassinations of Martin Luther King, Jr. and Robert Kennedy, the ensuing riots left more than one hundred cities burning, and the summer gave way to controversial black power salutes at the Olympics. There is no doubt that the timing of this visit would shape Guinness' experience of the United States and its politics (especially later in life, his interpretation of our National Anthem controversies, Black Lives Matter protests, and the brutal back-and-forth killing of cops and black Americans). Indeed, 1968 in conjunction with the painful memory of the Chinese Communist Revolution, makes the abiding concern throughout his writings about forms of protest rooted in Marxist analysis all the more poignant.

After leaving L'Abri, Guinness studied for his Doctor of Philosophy at Oxford University. He belonged to a generation of truly great minds: He dined and attended tutorials with one of the 20th century's finest philosophers, Isaiah Berlin (a fellow first-hand witness of communist revolution), and was classmates with the now-titan of New Testament studies, N. T. Wright. He was one of the first to dissertate on the premier sociologist of religion, Peter Berger (whom he would also later befriend). Upon graduating, Guinness took a job as a freelance reporter for the BBC, working on a documentary that explored the role of religion in the election of Ronald Reagan. That work eventually resulted in his permanent residence stateside, as he moved to the United States to do research on the role of religion in American public life for think tanks like the Wilson Center and the Brookings Institution.[17]

While at Brookings, he helped to draft a public document that could have had the domestic impact of a Universal Declaration of Human Rights if events had only unfolded differently. Aided by the likes of Richard John Neuhaus and George Weigel, Guinness led the drafting of the Williamsburg Charter for the bicentennial celebration of the First Amendment in 1988. The document called for a "reaffirmation and reappraisal of its vision and guiding principles."[18] Signed by a broad coalition of religious faiths and politicians across the aisle (including presidents, chief justices, and members of Congress), the charter spelled out the importance of the First Amendment's twin guarantees of religious liberty: the No Establishment and the Free Exercise clauses. Both clauses work together to protect religious liberty, not limit it.

Enshrining these at the heart of the Constitution as America's "first liberty" was necessary, as the document spells out, because

> *[our] form of government depends upon ultimate beliefs, for otherwise we have no right to the rights by which it thrives, yet rejects any official formulation of them… The result is neither a naked public square where all religion is excluded, nor a sacred public*

[17] Palmer, "Os Guinness: The Art of Christian Persuasion—Part 1," https://outreachmagazine.com/interviews/16358-os-guinness-interview-part-1.html/2.

[18] Charles Haynes and Oliver Thomas, *Finding Common Ground: A First Amendment Guide to Religion and Public Schools* (First Amendment Center, 2007), 287, https://www.religiousfreedomcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/01/Finding-Common-Ground-Williamsburg-Charter.pdf.

square with any religion established or semi-established. The result, rather, is a civil public square in which citizens of all religious faiths, or none, engage one another in the continuing democratic discourse. … The Framers' intention is indisputably ignored when public policy debates can appeal to the theses of Adam Smith and Karl Marx, or Charles Darwin and Sigmund Freud but not to the Western religious tradition in general and the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures in particular.

The document was commemorated with a signing ceremony in the Hall of the House of Burgesses in Williamsburg, and many smaller events, including a conference that featured papers from intellectual luminaries like James Davison Hunter, Michael Sandel, Charles Taylor, and Peter Berger. Even still, it never made quite the impact it could have in reframing the conversation about the place of religion in society (a shame especially in light of recent controversies: e.g., Christian groups being kicked off campus, religious monuments being stripped from public locations, and the debated 'failures' of classical liberalism).

The Williamsburg Charter's failure came down to the absence of a single signature: that of the sitting president, "whose backing was crucial to the practical rollout of the Charter." At the end of the day, "strong opposition from the Religious Right blocked the participation of President Reagan."[19] "The culture wars are in the interests of Republicans so you will only get to the president over my dead body," one of Reagan's cabinet secretaries told Guinness. This destroyed any opportunity to articulate why Americans needed to bring their faith with them into the public square.[20] While Guinness' campaign has continued on in the work of John Inazu and that of others, the cultural capital it once had within arm's reach is spent.

More than two decades later in 2012, Guinness would publish another, equally ambitious document: the Global Charter of Conscience, this time repristinating not the First Amendment but the international adaptation of it in Article 18 of the UDHR, the very same document indebted, at least in part, to Maritain's life and work.[21] Most notably, the 18th article of the UDHR affirms "the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion… and freedom, either in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship, and observance." Guinness' reaffirmation, published with the endorsement of the United Nations' rapporteur for religious freedom (the Human Rights Council's official expert on the matter), calls for a "global public square" founded upon the freedom of thought, conscience, and religion, because these freedoms serve "both as a protection for individual citizens and as a prerequisite for ordering the relationship of religions, ideologies, and public life."

These reaffirmations of our fundamental freedoms' historic articulations are not just

[19] Os Guinness, *The Case for Civility: And Why Our Future Depends on It* (HarperCollins, 2008), 28.

[20] Os Guinness, *Last Call for Liberty: How America's Genius for Freedom Has Become Its Greatest Threat* (InterVarsity, 2018), 143.

[21] While Maritain's presence is felt throughout the UDHR, Charles Malik, a Lebanese Christian statesman, was the drafter of Article 18. Guinness knew Malik in his old age and was inspired by Malik, in part, to draft the Williamsburg Charter.

ceremony. Without each generation's renewal of their commitments, the documents risk becoming no more than what James Madison called a "parchment barrier," easily breached by powers and personalities who no longer assent to being limited by them.[22] Or as John Adams put it, "We have no government armed with power capable of contending with human passions unbridled by morality and religion. Avarice, ambition, revenge, or gallantry, would break the strongest cords of our Constitution as a whale goes through a net."[23]

But such a reaffirmation to uphold these parchment barriers and corded nets requires a people, it cannot be made by rogue prophets. And unfortunately for Guinness, the Global Charter of Conscience seems to have been far more akin to the cries of a prophet in the wilderness than even the earlier Williamsburg Charter: aside from Sari Essayah (a former member of the European Union's legislature and the president of one of the smaller parties holding seats in Finland's parliament), the absence of support by international political leadership has been conspicuous.

Nevertheless, Guinness's work has not let up. Besides those public documents already mentioned, he also drafted the Evangelical Manifesto in 2008 (which received enough signatories and attention to merit a write-up in the pages of the Wall Street Journal) and the American Charter for Freedom of Religion and Conscience in 2018, a kind of combination of the earlier Williamsburg Charter and Global Charter of Conscience, which included signatures from several former congressmen, a U.S. ambassador for religious freedom, a solicitor general, and an attorney general.

Guinness has also published more books than I can bother to count, some of them on the same "chartered pluralism" he articulated in the Williamsburg Charter (elsewhere called "principled" or "confident pluralism"), other books calling into question the excesses of capitalism or reviving the idea of "ordered liberty" (the freedom for fulfilling our duties and pursuing public goods), and still others, including many of his latest works, on the necessity of virtue and appreciating the Hebraic origins of republicanism ("the politics of freedom was born at Sinai"). But as important as these ideas are for ensuring "that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth," it is institutions that sustain them in human hearts.

And it is for that reason that even the most grandiose efforts of Guinness' career (the Williamsburg Charter and Global Charter of Conscience) have paled beside an initiative far humbler in scope: the Trinity Forum, which aims not at global consensus on international rights, but simply the work of educating leaders "to think, work, and lead wisely and well." Founded in 1991 by Guinness and Alonzo McDonald, its mission statement is "contributing to the renewal of society by cultivating and promoting the best of Christian thought." Its evening events feel

[22] James Madison, *Federalist 48*, February 1, 1788, https://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th_century/fed48.asp.

[23] John Adams, "Letter To Massachusetts Militia," October 11 1798, https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Adams/99-02-02-3102.

something like a collision between Washington, D.C.'s love of cocktail receptions and the Christian community of ideas of Schaeffer's L'Abri.

Led by the winsome Cherie Harder since 2008 (a former special advisor to President George W. Bush), a typical Trinity Forum event might bring a leading intellectual or statesmen (e.g., the itinerant Cornel West, *New York Times*' Ross Douthat, CNN's Kirsten Powers, or former Tennessee governor Bill Haslam) to address a room full of senators, bureaucrats, thinktank bigwigs, lawyers, and lobbyists, Christian or otherwise (in fact, in addition to catechesis of the faithful, the forum is rumoredly responsible for the coming-to-faith of several high-profile people). Its leadership makes frequent reference to the importance of the Clapham Sect, the historic community of collaborators that made possible William Wilberforce's elimination of the slave trade in Great Britain, a community which the forum self-consciously tries to replicate.

Members regularly receive abridged works of the classics in the mail: the works of Cicero, Augustine, Aquinas, Tocqueville, and Lincoln, not to mention Dorothy Sayers, Wendell Berry, Frederick Douglass and countless others. And with the help of generous funding for their sabbaticals provided by the Trinity Forum's co-founder McDonald, Christian intellectuals like Jean Bethke Elshtain, Sarah Coakley, and Stanley Hauerwas have written some of the greatest theological books of the last fifty years.
Perhaps Guinness' career simply confirms Jacobs' argument that this day and age is no longer ripe for Christian public intellectuals; after all, for all of the inimitable characteristics of Guinness' life that made him nearly succeed with the Williamsburg Charter, it was nevertheless still not enough. The scion of stout, for all his pedigree and professional networks, was stymied in getting the signature that mattered most and the Williamsburg Charter now is tragically only remembered by a few. And for all the success of the Trinity Forum with its laundry list of VIPs and policymakers in attendance, it cannot quite claim to be a fully public mode of intellectual engagement. While most of its events do take place in the capital city of the world's leading superpower, its reach beyond D.C. is indirect, even if some of the ideas disseminated and relationships established there have driven policy abroad, as they likely have.

Were this gloomy analysis correct, then the best that we could do, as philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre describes it, would be to "[turn] aside from the task of shoring up the Roman imperium" (or, as it were, the American political order) "to achieve instead… the construction of new forms of community within which the moral life [can] be sustained so that both morality and civility might survive the coming ages of barbarism."[24]

But, if we are not convinced, regardless of our slim chance for success, that the task of sustaining the American project is something that we can simply choose to walk away from (and many of us are not so convinced), then we would do better to follow other advice. Rather than worry whether we live in the right moment for public Christian intellectuals to flourish, we can simply choose

[24] Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (University of Notre Dame, 2007), 263

to offer Christianity's gifts to a public that may prove indifferent, or even outright hostile. After all, even many of Christianity's greatest "failures" in just such environments have still proven to be gifts. Consider Bartolomé de las Casas' fight for the rights of indigenous peoples, or Karl Barth's denunciation of Nazi Germany in the Barmen Declaration. Neither "succeeded" in the sense that Barth and Bartolomé most probably hoped, but Christians continue to draw encouragement from their examples, and the onlooking world cannot help but be curious about their causes.

What then should we do? Perhaps a better guide for those who would not despair, T.S. Eliot suggests that we simply "[try] to arrive at the truth and to set it forth… without being downcast or defeated when nothing appears to ensue."[25] By continuing to build Trinity Forum-type institutions (MacIntyre's "new forms of community within which the moral life [can] be sustained"), we ensure that future generations of Christians are sufficiently prepared for the public task of "penetrating to the core of the matter," as Guinness has.[26] These tasks–both internal catechesis and public witness–are not competing priorities, but mutually supporting, like the breathing in and breathing out necessary for our bodies to live.

Whether or not Christian intellectuals succeed in their bid to speak, to serve, and guide the public, we nevertheless ought to continue to internally cultivate our ability to produce such Christians who try, endeavoring to provide society with the gifts that come from Christian belief and practice. Without these, as many of our founders and greatest statesmen understood, the American political order cannot stand. And if one day, God forbid that the republic fails for such a rejection, it will be through the ongoing communities of belief, sustained by institutions like The Trinity Forum, from which civilization is rekindled.

Who, then, will build these institutions?

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[25] T. S. Eliot, *To Criticize the Critic & Other Writings* (University of Nebraska, 1965), 144.
[26] *Ibid.*

AN INTERVIEW WITH
Sperello di Serego Alighieri

SUSANNAH BLACK ROBERTS

Sperello di Serego Alighieri is an Italian astronomer. Beginning in 1990, he was at the Arcetri Astrophysical Observatory in Florence, but he has retired from that. More recently, his interest has turned to his ancestor, the poet Dante Alighieri. This past year was the 700th year since Dante's death, and to mark the occasion, he wrote a book, The Sun and the Other Stars of Dante Alighieri, which has just been translated into English.

Susannah: Sperello, this is actually the third interview that I've done with you; you've been very kind to speak with me about a variety of topics. In this interview, we're going to talk about one particular canto in the Paradiso. When I asked you which section of the Commedia was most important to you in your work, or that spoke to you most as an astronomer, as a scientist, you mentioned Canto II of the Paradiso. Can you say more?

Sperello: Yes. Well, there are things to say first. One important thing is the fact that I'm going to talk only about some aspects, actually one aspect of Dante, which is just one of the many aspects of Dante. And this is very important to understand because Dante, being a medieval man and a genius, he was able to have in his mind all the knowledge available at this time in all fields, and he could have all this knowledge, as well, in depth. This is something that we cannot even imagine because we are not able to do this.

Of course, the obvious reason is that every field of knowledge has developed since Dante. And so it's not possible for a single mind, probably not even to Dante, if he was living today, to have command of all the knowledge fields in detail. We people who are busy with knowledge in various fields, if we want to contribute to knowledge, which means to make something new, we have to specialize in a specific field. And for the other fields, we cannot have them in depth. We can only have some of them, very little of them. So we are not used to having all the knowledge in depth.

And this makes for us a big difference compared with Dante. We have to understand this if we want to understand Dante. If you speak to one person, that person will only give you one specific field, only one aspect. In order to get all the aspects, you have to listen to different persons.

So don't trust somebody who says, I know everything about Dante. It's not possible. He's lying to you. Just go ahead and listen to different people. So I'm only going to talk to you about one aspect of Dante, which is astronomy, cosmography, in Dante, because this is the only area in which I could be an expert.

Of course, I must say that when it comes to Dante, it's very difficult, almost impossible to say something new because everybody has been working on him for centuries. So everything has been said already. But what one can do is try to collect knowledge and understand it, elaborate it and diffuse it.

Okay. So we are going to talk about science and astronomy specifically in Dante. And for this, indeed, it is very important, the second canto of the Paradiso, because it deals with a mistake, an error.

For us scientists, error is not something to be afraid of. We are used to errors. We know that we are making errors in science. Actually, many times science progresses by understanding an error. These are many examples of this. So in this Canto, Dante talks about error. And he talks about it in a scientific way.

The canto deals with the moon spots. This is the beginning of the Paradiso. So Dante has just left Virgilio, who led him through Hell and Purgatory to the Earthly Paradise, which is on the top of the Mountain of Purgatory. But then Virgilio had to abandon Dante because he could not progress further since he was not baptized. So Dante had to choose another leader.

And not by chance, it was Beatrice. Of course, Beatrice! Everybody knows about Beatrice. And we are going to learn more about Beatrice today.

So they go up to the first sky, the first heaven, the sphere around the Earth, which is the sphere of the moon, which is the closest to the Earth. They get to the Moon and Dante asks a question to Beatrice.

I think I'm going to read some verses first in Italian, and then I will give you the translation in English.

So Dante says,

"Ma ditemi: che son li segni bui
di questo corpo, che là giuso in terra
fan di Cain favoleggiare altrui?"

Dante says, "But tell me, what are the dark marks in this body, that make people down there on the Earth tell fables about Cain?"[1]

He asks Beatrice, What are the moon spots? The moon spots — at the time, people thought that the spots on the moon resembled the face of Cain. Of course you can think that! Surely it doesn't matter.

But it's actually important. The point is that the only heavenly body which you can

[1] It used to be a commonplace that the "man in the moon" was Cain, the brother of Abel

distinguish at night by naked eye is the moon. All other heavenly bodies by naked eye — and they didn't have instruments at the time of Dante, of course, they didn't have telescopes or binoculars; nothing but the naked eye. All heavenly bodies at night are a point. Jupiter, Mars, Venus, all points. The only one which is not a point, where you can distinguish features, is the moon.

And, well, it's a problem — because the moon has spots. Well, they told us that everything in the sky is perfect. Circles, spheres, everything perfect. But the only body that we can see has spots! So it's not perfect.[2] Come on, how's that? So this is a very important question to ask, and Dante takes the opportunity to ask it of Beatrice.

The answer is quite long, takes up almost all this canto, and that's what we are going to talk about. So first, "Ella sorrise alquanto." This means she smiled a little. And when Beatrice smiles, something important is going to happen. Then, she says

"S'elli erra
l'oppinïon", mi disse, "d'i mortali
dove chiave di senso non diserra,
certo non ti dovrien punger li strali
d'ammirazione omai, poi dietro ai sensi
vedi che la ragione ha corte l'ali."

She says, "If the opinion of mortals errs where no key of sense unlocks the truth, surely the arrow of wonder ought not to pierce you now, since you see that reason has short wings even when following the senses."

So essentially, Beatrice says, "well, be careful, because the first thing that comes to your mind may not be the right one." But then comes something that we are very used to, because every one of us has been a pupil at school. Some of us have been masters or professors.

She says, "Ma dimmi quel che tu da te ne pensi" - "But tell me what you think of this yourself." When a pupil asks his professor a question, often the professor turns the question back to the pupil. This is very common. And so this is what Beatrice does. Well, Dante has to say something! So he says,

"Ciò che n'appar qua sù diverso
credo che fanno i corpi rari e densi."

"What looks different to us up here is caused, I think, by bodies that are rare [that is, rarified] and dense." So essentially, Dante says that maybe the moon spots are due to different densities in the moon.

This is an idea that was not new. It's an idea of Averroes, and also Albert the Great, and it's also recalling the *Convivio*.

Susannah: So the idea is that if there were denser spots, it would be darker or something like that?

Sperello: Well, yes, but we're going to go into details about this. So, yes, the idea was denser parts would be probably darker. But Beatrice says,

"Certo assai vedrai sommerso
nel falso il creder tuo –"

[2] The sublunar world, the world of the earth and of human life, was thought to be the domain of change and imperfection, wounded by sin but also naturally changeable, whereas the superlunary cosmos was perfect.

so this means "You certainly will find that your belief is much submerged in error" So, you see, this is about error. Then,

"se bene ascolti
l'argomentar ch'io li farò avverso."

"If you listen carefully to the argument I shall make against it." So, "Listen to me: You're wrong. And I'm going to show you how."

So she goes on,

"The eighth sphere displays to you many lights, which you can see, both in quality and size, are stars with different faces.[3] If rarity and density alone caused those differences, then one sole power would be in all of them, distributed into greater or lesser, or sometimes equal force. But different powers must necessarily be the fruit of different formal principles.[4] Then these, except for one, would, according to your way of thinking, be destroyed."

So Beatrice essentially tells Dante, "You're wrong. Listen to me." The first thing she does to show that what Dante said is wrong is actually some kind of *similitudine*, I don't know the English word.

Susannah: A similitude — she's almost doing a reductio ad absurdum: She's saying, if your theory is right, then these other things would be the case, would follow, and those conclusions are obviously wrong.

Sperello: Yeah. Okay, so she talks about the eighth sphere. The eighth sphere is the sphere of the fixed stars. It's actually the only sphere which does not have just one heavenly body, it has many bodies, all the fixed stars. And Beatrice essentially says, You look at the stars, and there are some that are brighter, some dimmer. So if this difference were due to density, as you posit, for the moon spots, then the stars would only have one virtue, which is density.

And this is not possible because every star has its own virtue and it transmits it to the Earth, to humanity. This is a sort of philosophical and also, in a sense, theological argument.

Susannah: Virtue, in this sense, would mean something like power.

Sperello: Yes, virtù, we say in Italian. So this first confutation, if you like, is not very scientific, but then it goes on in a more scientific way. Beatrice says,

Ancor, se raro fosse di quel bruno
cagion che tu dimandi, o d'oltre in parte
fora di sua materia sì digiuno
esto pianeto, o, sì come comparte
lo grasso e 'l magro un corpo, così questo
nel suo volume cangerebbe carte.

She basically says, if the moon has different densities and these are causing the moon spots, then there can be only two cases. Either the dense parts do not cover the whole face of the moon or they cover it. Okay. Then she says, "Se 'l primo fosse," "To validate the first case, that

[3] i.e. it's plain to see that these are different stars with different qualities, colors, sizes, luminosities, etc

[4] i.e. stars have different "powers," virtues, and these must be the fruit of different forms/formal principles; Beatrice is drawing a conclusion based on the premises of hylomorphism, i.e. Aristotelian/Thomistic physics, and on what is obvious to Dante, that each of the stars influences human affairs in different ways.

those areas of density don't cover the whole face, then during a solar eclipse, you would see the sun's light through the moon, through the more rarified parts of the moon." But we all know that during a solar eclipse, when the moon is between us and the sun, the moon covers the sun completely, no sunlight can go through.

So the first case is not possible. Beatrice says

"Questo non è: però è da vedere
de l'altro; e s'elli avvien ch'io l'altro cassi,
falsificato fia lo tuo parere."

"This is not so; so now we have to consider the other case — if I show that one wrong as well, then your hypothesis is completely falsified."
So. Then Beatrice takes up the second hypothesis that she's drawn out of Dante's idea. She says,

S'elli è che questo raro non trapassi,
esser conviene un termine da onde
lo suo contrario più passar non lassi;
e indi l'altrui raggio si rifonde
così come color torna per vetro
lo qual di retro a sé piombo nasconde.

Or dirai tu ch'el si dimostra tetro
ivi lo raggio più che in altre parti,
per esser lì refratto più a retro.

It could be, she says, that dense areas do cover all of the moon, but they are at different depths inside the moon. And these different depths makes the spots.[5]

But, she says, this too is not possible. And in order to prove that this is not possible, Beatrice does a thought experiment, a *Gedankenexperiment*, like Einstein did many years later, to prove his theories. She says, OK, take three mirrors and place two of them at the same distance from you, but a bit separated. Then take the third, and put it further back than them, and between them. Okay. Then, take a light — of course, this would be a fire of some kind, a torch or something — and put it behind you so that it will be reflected in all three mirrors. Then turn to face the mirrors.

Now what you will see is that although the image of the light in the farthest mirror is smaller, all three have the same brightness. She says, Clearly,

Ben che nel quanto tanto non si stenda
la vista più lontana, lì vedrai
come convien ch'igualmente risplenda.

This means that even though the more distant image is not as extended in size — it is smaller — you will see that it is equally bright.

Now, this thing which Dante explains here, to us astronomers is a very well known fact: the fact that surface brightness does not depend on distance. This is the principle of the independence of brightness on distance. Now, astronomers, we know this very well. It's very clear to us. It's one of the fundamental rules for observing objects in the sky. It is a very simple thing, actually, because the surface brightness is just a ratio. If you have an extended source in the sky, you take the ratio between the total brightness of the source and the solid angle that the source subtends in the sky. It's the ratio

[5] In other words, perhaps the sun's light is reflected more dimly to us by the farther-away dense parts of the interior of the moon; Anaxagoras (5th century BC) had already known that the moon shines only by reflected sunlight; Beatrice here takes that for granted.

between these two. Since both these things, the total brightness and the solid angle, vary inversely as the square root of the distance, their ratio is independent of distance. This is very clear. It's a very simple thing.

So there's something really wonderful happening here — really wonderful. Well, I want to point out three things. First, Dante chooses a woman as a scientific master. This is something that we have to wait centuries for, before women would be even heard of in science. I can think of Marie Curie, or somebody like this, but this is only much later. Dante did it already seven centuries ago. I think this is wonderful.

The second thing, which is also amazing, is the fact that Dante uses a *Gedankenexperiment*, a thought experiment, in order to disprove an argument.

The third thing, which is also wonderful, is the fact that Dante anticipates the law about the independence of surface brightness on distance, which, of course, was not known at the time. And so I think this is really wonderful! I think we can give Dante a Ph.D. in physics.

Susannah: The other cool thing — there are two interesting things here. One is that Beatrice says at the beginning of that section, "You see that your reason, even when supported by the senses, has short wings." Basically, your reason, even propped up by or checked by your senses, is not going to get you the answer here. Which is, you know, appropriate because he's just left Virgil, and now he is in the realm of revelation rather than reason.

But then — Beatrice uses reason! She doesn't dismiss reason, even though she is a representation of knowledge that comes through revelation rather than through reason. She still uses reason. And she's got this amazing line right before the section that you just read, "Experience, if you let it be your guide, the fount for every stream of human art, can set you free from this objection, too." That "Experience" is the Italian esperïenza. But Mandelbaum translates this as "Yet an experiment, were you to try it, could free you from your cavil — and the source of your arts' course springs from experiment." [6]

She's putting forward as a principle that experiment or experience, with reason, is what will lead you to the truth *even after* you're in the realm of the Paradiso. It's wonderful.

Sperello: Yes. I think the fact that, as you say, although we are in Paradise, in the cantos of faith, of the glory of God, Dante does not abandon reason. I think this is very much connected to the fact that in Dante's mind, everything was uniformly together. There is no separation between things.

Susannah: The realm of reason against the realm of revelation.

Sperello: Right. Instead, he is able to join everything in the way that for him seems to be best. This is I think amazing and that makes

[6] She says, essentially, "If some parts of the interior of the moon are denser, then those dense parts will act like the lead at the back of a mirror, throwing the light back out in reflection. Now, you'd probably argue that that's the explanation, that's what makes the spots: that when a ray of light is reflected from a dense part of the interior of the moon that's further back, deeper in the moon rather than on its surface, that reflection would be dimmer, and that's how you get your moon-spots. But you'd be wrong." And then, as Dr. Alighieri describes, she shows how this would be confuted by an experiment.

this canto actually very beautiful.

I want to say one more thing. During the last year, I did many conferences about cosmography in Dante because it was Dante's Centennial. And at one of these conferences, a professor came to see me after the conference and he said, "well, I'm a professor. I'm teaching Dante in high school. I like it very much. To my students, I read every single canto of the Divino Commedia, but I always skip the second canto of the Paradiso because I do not know how to explain it." And then he said, "well, now I have understood. I had not understood before."

Also, if you look into most *Divina Commedia* commentaries, they don't tell you about the independence of surface brightness on distance. But this is essential to understand it. If you don't know that, there's no way you can understand it.

What I think is that in many cases a genius is able to work across time. A genius is not linked to his own time and level of knowledge. A genius is such because he can fly above and do things that others would do only centuries later. And, in fact, this is one aspect that had not been understood probably for some time after that.[7]

Susannah: I wonder if we could talk now about the problem of light. This is something that we actually talked about a little bit, and I hadn't really thought about until you said something in the first interview about Dante's vision of understanding of the rainbow.

Sperello: Let me tell you one story. I think it was the year 2015. UNESCO declared it to be the International Year of Light. In that year, I went to a conference in Rome, at the Pontifical University in Rome. And the title of the conference was "Fiat Lux." You know what it means?

Susannah: "Let there be light."

Sperello: Yes. And of course, at that conference, it was very interesting because there were many different people dealing with light. There were some priests, there were engineers, biologists — because there are animals that produce light — and so on and so forth. And there was also me, as an astronomer. I think there were a couple of other astronomers, too.

During my talk, I pointed out one very important thing: the fact that light is made of photons, and light is essentially our only information source about the universe. All we know about the universe is given to us by light, by photons. Well, there are some exceptions, like in the solar system. We can go to the moon, we send probes to Jupiter, Mars, et cetera.

But this is only a very limited part of the universe, so it doesn't count very much. And there are also particles getting to us, like high speed electrons or protons. They give us some information, but it's really very limited. All we generally know about the universe comes

[7] I noticed, as I was editing this interview, one more amazing thing: Dante uses a thought experiment having to do with earthly things, mirrors and a torch, to talk about superlunary things, the light of the sun reflecting off the moon. That idea of uniformity of cause or uniformity of law in the sublunary and superlunary realms is one that you only begin to get in the 16th century with Copernicus and the idea that the heavens might be a place of imperfection and change like earth, and with Brahe's observation of a nova, a new star, and which only came to fruition with Newton's recognition that the same law of gravity described the motion of things on earth and in the heavens.

from light. You couldn't tell anything, any information about the universe that comes from particles.

Well actually, there is one more important exception, which is gravitational waves. Gravitational waves have been discovered, and they've already given us important information about black holes and other things in the universe. But that's only starting.

So more or less everything we know about the universe is due to light. For us this is obviously very important.

Susannah: Just to clarify, this means for example, when we're looking out with a telescope, what we're perceiving and what we're understanding based on what we perceive, this is all based on what we see — obviously not necessarily with our naked eyes; there's other forms of perception, detectors and so on. But they all have to do with light.

Sperello: Yes, because when I say light, I mean also X-rays, radio waves, UV light, infrared, microwave, these are all photons. It's the same thing.

So what sort of information does a photon bring to us? Essentially three kinds of information. One is the direction the photon comes from, which is, if you like, described by two angles in the sky. Of course, when you have several photons, then you can make an image with all the directions. Okay, so direction is one kind of information.

The second kind of information is the frequency, or the energy, of the photon. Photons can have different energies and different frequencies which is equivalent to the wavelength of the light that we see. For example, X-rays have very short wavelengths; radio waves have very long wavelengths. So this is the other kind of information — energy.

And there is a third one which is not very well known, which is polarization. Polarization is not well known because our eyes cannot see it. Our eyes can see direction. Of course! And they can see the energy of the photons, because they can see color. But they cannot see polarization. So this is more mysterious for us, but it's very simple.

Photons can be used as electromagnetic wave. An electromagnetic wave is made by an electric field which varies, and perpendicular to it is its magnetic field, which travels. Okay, now when the photon comes to you, the electric field oscillates in a plane which has a direction in the sky, you can see that.

So that direction, which can be expressed as an angle in the sky, if you like — a position angle, we call it — is the polarization. That is the additional information that the photon brings to us. And I've devoted much of my astronomical career to the study of polarization of astrophysical sources. It's very important. It's difficult to do because the instruments are difficult. But anyway, okay, it's important to look at polarization if you want to understand the universe.

Because polarization can bring you geometrical information about a very distant source. Take a very distant source that you cannot distinguish because it's too far. But still, if the light is polarized, the polarization brings you geometrical information about the source: that position angle.

Okay. Anyway, there is one more thing I want to say about light, which was actually very

amusing. I gave a talk at the conference: the topic was light and darkness. Of course, for us scientists, light exists because it's photons, electromagnetic waves. Darkness does not exist, it's just a lack of light.

But since at the conference, there were many people, with different backgrounds, I thought, well, yeah, but the common people or the poets, for them, darkness exists just as well as light, as something real, something that they can talk about, that they can feel. You can feel the darkness in a way when you are scared. Or a poet, of course, can write a poem about darkness. Why not?

So for scientists, light exists. Darkness does not exist because it's just a lack of light. But for the men in the street, both exist.

After I gave my talk, there was a coffee break and then a guy came to me and he said, well, what you said is very interesting. And he said, I'm a philosopher. And I work on — what do you call the kind of philosophy that deals with things that exist?

Susannah: Ontology.

Sperello: No.

Susannah: It could be metaphysics?

Sperello: Metaphysics! Yes! He said, I'm a metaphysician, so I deal with things that exist. Well, then I asked him, then you can tell me — you should be able to tell me whether light and darkness both exist.

Well, he said, well, this is a difficult question. Let me think about it. He went away, thinking about it. The following day, he came to me and said, well, for us metaphysicians, neither exists because only things exist. Light and darkness are just attributes of things — not real.

Well, now the panorama is complete! For the man in the street, both light and darkness exist. For the scientists, only light exists. For the metaphysicians, neither exists!

Well, my conclusion was that God thinks that *we* are right, we scientists are right, because he created the light. He did not create darkness. He created the light and separated it from darkness, which is exactly what we think. So we are correct.

Susannah: I agree with you! I don't know what species of metaphysician he was, but I will tell you that if he were a Thomist, I think he would be closer to agreeing with you. Because there's this idea that there's a conversibility of goodness and being in Thomistic metaphysics. Everything that exists is, to a certain degree, good because everything that God creates shares in his attribute of being, and since he is simple, that's not a separate thing from his attribute of goodness. Again, the man in the street thinks that sin and evil are things. And they kind of are — like we can perceive when someone is being evil. Putin invades Ukraine. This is sinful. This is evil.

But in a certain way it's a lack of virtue, there's an absence of goodness. It's not a thing in itself. And I think that often God makes physical realities that are in some way metaphors of spiritual realities. And I think that the physical reality of light existing and darkness not existing is a very good analogy for the way that goodness exists and evil or sin are not as real.

Sperello: Yeah, maybe… Yes. Anyway, I thought that was quite funny. And light is very important!

Susannah: Can you talk about the section on the rainbow?

Sperello: Yes. In the 29th canto of the Purgatorio, Dante describes the bright colors of the luminous train left by the seven candelabra carried in procession; shortly before the meeting with Beatrice, he referred to the rainbow and to the moon halo. The moon is mythologically assimilated to Diana, the Greek Artemis, born in Delos and called Delia.

In fact, this is quite interesting because both the rainbow and the moon halo are due to the same phenomenon, which is a refraction of light in drops of water. So it is quite interesting that Dante associates them here.

Going on. Because this metaphor is scientifically very appropriate because, in both cases, colors are due to refraction within drops of water. Then Dante in canto 25 of the Purgatorio mentioned the fact that the rainbow is due, as we well know, to refraction of the sun's rays in the raindrops. And he says

E come l'aere, quand' è ben pïorno,
per l'altrui raggio che 'n sé si reflette,
di diversi color diventa addorno —

This means "and just as air when it is very moist, becomes adorned with various colors because it reflects another's rays…"

So he has this idea about rays being reflected, which is in fact true. And then there is another citation. We can also read this again in Canto XII of the Paradiso. There, the poet describes the double crown of spirits that appeared during the speech of Thomas Aquinas by using the double arc of the rainbow — because you know the rainbow has a double arc. We're going to talk about this. And then he says,

Come si volgon per tenera nube
due archi paralelli e concolori,
quando Iunone a sua ancella iube,
nascendo di quel d'entro quel di fori,
a guisa del parlar di quella vaga
ch'amor consunse come sol vapori,
e fanno qui la gente esser presaga,
per lo patto che Dio con Noè puose,
del mondo che già mai più non s'allaga:

So this means, "as through a tenuous cloud, two arcs curve parallel and colored alike, when Juno commands her handmaiden, the outer born from the inner one, like the speech that the desirous nymph whom love consumed as the sun does vapors, which cause people here to predict the weather, thanks to the pact God made with Noah that the world will never again be flooded."

So this is very interesting because Dante talks about the two arcs of the rainbow and he says, well, first they are parallel, which is quite obvious.

But then he says "the outer born from the inner one," which is exactly what happens because the outer is due to a double reflection inside the drops of water. So it is, in a sense, born from the inner one.

Susannah: This is one of these things where you're like, how could he possibly have known? I mean, he could perceive the double arc because sometimes you can see it, even though one is fainter. But how could he know that that was the cause?

Sperello: Because probably he had noticed that the colors in the two arcs are inverted. And so this probably gave him the idea that the outer

was born from the inner one because there is some kind of reflection, additional reflection, one reflected from the other. I think you could see that. But of course, in order to describe this in a few words, so precisely, it's very difficult. And he was able to do it.

Susannah: Yeah. This is, again, one of these examples of his synoptic vision, the completeness of his vision, because he brings classical myth and Biblical reference and scientific observation together in these incredibly condensed ways.

I was disappointed that you didn't have a whole chapter on light in your book. I think that it would be really interesting for you to write, at some point, a piece that was just looking at light in the *Commedia*, but also maybe looking at the way that optics and light have been a driver for our understanding of cosmology through the centuries.

Sperello: Yes. Well, you are right. I would have to study for this because I know that there are many references to light sometimes in a scientific way, though not only in a scientific way, but also in that which have nothing to do with cosmography. So not in this book. It could be in a book for the next Centenary.

Susannah: Don't make me wait that long! If you ever want to write this, I will help edit it and I will publish it. I would love this.
And here's another metaphor. Right after the section in Canto II in the Paradiso that you were reading before, Beatrice says — this is the Esolen translation —

I wish to fill your intellect with light,
Light so aflame with life that cannot cease
In your eyes it will tremble like a star.
And obviously, she's speaking of an intellectual understanding of the world. But it's another one of these things where it seems to me like the way that God has made the world means that our metaphors are very powerful reflections of reality. As I think you mentioned in one of our earlier interviews, the only knowledge that we can have of the world, including the physical extent of the universe, and also its extent into the past has to be within the light cone of the big bang.

Sperello: Yes, of course.

Susannah: The horizon of the possibility of human understanding is specifically within that perceptible created order. That's very interesting to me. Obviously, I don't know what I'm talking about, I'm an English major, but I do really enjoy reading around the edges of things like this.

But it is also one of the things that makes me irritated when people get very excited about trying to hypothesize about string theory and so on, about the "cause" of the Big Bang, or about the idea of oscillating universes. It seems to me that, first of all , they're trying to avoid the idea of an origin like that because it seems too much like creation. And second of all, it seems to me that it's literally speculating about things that, in principle, we can't know because they're outside that light cone of the Big Bang.

Sperello: OK, so, one thing: the Big Bang is the wrong name, it implies wrong things: "bang," "explosion," means that something explodes inside something else. But this is completely wrong. What people call the Big Bang is actually a singularity. It's the start of space and time in one point. This is very important, actually. For scientists, this is quite obvious. In that point, the singularity, there was nothing existing before, or at least, we cannot know about whether

there was something existing before. So it's not a matter for science. Everything that we can talk about started then in that singularity.
Now, whether that is similar to creation, it doesn't matter for a scientist. Well, it matters. Actually, people, before there was evidence about the Big Bang thought that the universe was infinite and existed forever, which is very much against creation, but it made sense. Why? If you just look, well, time goes on. It went on in the past. Why should it have started at some time from a physical point of view?

So there were theories about the universe being infinite. And actually, even when it was obvious that the universe is expanding, I mean, galaxies are getting farther and farther away with time, there were people like, what's his name? Gamow? Not Gamow. A British guy.

Susannah: Bethe? No, not Bethe.

Sperello: Anyway, this guy made a theory by which there was continuous creation of matter to compensate for the decrease in density due to the expansion of the universe.

Susannah: Right! What was his name?

Sperello: I met him… We talked a lot. He's a nice person. He's a very nice person. Very bright. What's his name?

Susannah: It's going to drive me crazy. I know exactly who you mean.

Sperello: He also wrote books for the public….

Susannah: Hoyle! Hoyle!

Sperello: Fred Hoyle! He was very much against creation, I think, for philosophical reasons. And he had his theory about the universe going on forever, and being essentially uniform and constant. And when it became obvious that the universe was expanding, he made a theory by which there was creation of matter to compensate for the decrease in density. So you see how crazy one can get — the spontaneous creation of matter! Well, come on!

Susannah: In a weird way, it's the desire to save the appearances, like with the Ptolemaic system and its epicycles. We have this idea of uniformity of causes and general conditions, this idea that the universe has basically always been the same, and then we see that the galaxies are receding from each other, you need to admit that there's got to be a cause that is not a cause that we see operating.

Sperello: Well, first of all, you have to admit that there is a change, right, in a global property of the universe which is density. Because if galaxies get far away, then the density must decrease again. This is exactly what Dante is running into. How can there be change in the superlunary world? In the spheres above the terrestrial sphere? How can there be change?

Susannah: I feel as though again, we could go on for a long time.

Sperello: Yeah, but you have to get married.

Susannah: I do have to get married! I have to get back to my wedding planning. This has, as usual, been completely fun. Happy Easter!

Sperello: Happy Easter!

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Toward a Technological Renewal

L. M. SACASAS

Even just ten years ago, serious attention to the question of technology in Christian communities was hard to come by. Today, that seems to have changed. Along with the rest of American society, Christians have grown more attentive to the consequences of technology over the last few years. My hope is that they might discover, as I suspect many of you already know, that some of our most trenchant and insightful thinkers on matters technological have been Christian writers and scholars. One thinks, for example, of Jacques Ellul, Ivan Illich, Romano Guardini, Walter Ong, Marshall McLuhan, Wendell Berry, and Albert Borgmann. I often think of my own work as an effort to bring the wisdom of these older voices to bear on our contemporary situation.

There's a great deal that could be said about the relationship between technology and the Christian life. My aim today will be to offer a broad evaluation of the modern technological project by examining its animating spirit through the lens of the opening chapters of Genesis. My hope is that these reflections will raise important questions regarding technological culture and also offer a useful perspective from which to consider the meaning and significance of technology.

Technology, as I'll explain at the outset, is a multifaceted, multilayered phenomenon. It touches every arena of human existence. And what I am calling technological culture is deeply entangled with economic and political structures. So there will be much left unsaid and many paths of inquiry left unexplored. Those caveats made, let's get to it.

I've found that one of the chief obstacles we face when we try to talk intelligently about technology is the word technology itself. So let me begin by clarifying the critical term that is subject of this essay.

Technology acquired the rather muddy sense it has today only recently, by which I mean in the last 100 years or so. If you consider the way we usually define similar terms ending in "-ology," it becomes immediately clear that technology has come to mean something a bit different than what the etymology suggests. For example, we roughly define biology as the study of life, geology as the study of the earth, theology as the study of God. We do not, however, define technology as the study of techne or the arts of human fabrication. On the relatively rare occasion when the term was used in the nineteenth century, this was, in fact, its intended meaning. This was the sense in which it was used when in 1861 the Massachusetts Institute of Technology was named. "Technology" referred to a subject of study, not an object. When people wanted to refer to the sorts of things that we today think of as technology they had a wide array of words at their disposal: tools, machines, machinery, instruments, invention, improvements, mechanics, etc. It was during the late 19th and early 20th century that "technology" began to be used in something like the way we use it today, as a catch-all for a dizzying array of artifacts and practices.

Sometimes, if I feel like being provocative, which I confess is rarely the case, I will say that there is no such thing as technology. I don't necessarily mean to reignite the nominalist/realist debates, but only to show how imprecise the term can be. We use it to name things as different from one another as pencils, smartphones, trains, satellites, nanoparticles, gene editing tools, hammers, written language, wristwatches, refrigerators, saw mills, electrical generators, and indoor plumbing. You get the point. Of course, many people don't immediately think of older artifacts and tools as technology. Technology for them is synonymous with digital devices. It recalls the old quip that technology is anything that was invented after you were born. Nonetheless, upon reflection, it's clear that technology should not be characterized by novelty. So then it becomes another way of talking about the expansive reality that historian Thomas Hughes aptly called the human-built world. In other words, you would be forgiven for asking, what exactly isn't technology? One might instinctively point toward the trees, but only if they have not been the product of modern forestry, because then we are back in the realm of the human-built.

Recognizing the unwieldy semantic range of the concept of technology, the eminent historian Leo Marx concluded that technology is a "hazardous concept." It mystified what it sought to name and, Marx believed, it granted technology a measure of agency which it did not enjoy. I find that the world can also make it difficult to discuss the relative merits of this or that artifact. As an example of how this might play out, consider how conceiving of technology as one thing invites the conclusion that one must be either for it or against it. Which

is why critically appraising a particular instance of technology may elicit charges of Luddism or of being anti-technology. The alternative, of course, is to be discriminating — to recognize that the concept veils an enormous amount of diversity necessitating judgements on a case by case or class by class basis. One must then pay close attention to the specific character of the technology in question, to its design, its affordances, its structure, etc. One can see, though, how it is a lot easier to simply decide that you are for or against technology.

It is also true, however, that within certain epochs or cultures, technologies may reflect a distinct pattern or reveal a pervasive organizing principle. Some of our most astute Christian critics of technological culture, including Jacques Ellul, Ivan Illich, and Albert Borgmann, have sought to discover just such a prevailing pattern. It is also true that, as Neil Postman among others have pointed out, what is unique about the technological project in modern western societies is that the power relation between the culture and its tools has flipped so that techno-economic imperatives trump cultural norms and traditions.

Given these considerations, I've found it helpful to distinguish between technology understood as artifacts and systems on the one hand, and, on the other, as ways of thinking and being in the world. It is important to pay attention to the particular tool or device, and to the systems upon which it may depend. But if all of our attention remains focused on this level of analysis, we may, in fact, miss the most important dimensions of technology, which are not located within any one artifact.

Martin Heidegger famously concluded that the essence of technology is nothing technological, meaning that it is nothing merely material and technical. It is rather a way of inhabiting the world, a mode of experiencing reality. We might even think of it as a spirit animating the development and deployment of technology and, consequently, being reflected in the technologies it inspires. The relation between the human and technology is dialectical. As Marshall McLuhan put it, "We become what we behold. We shape our tools, and thereafter our tools shape us."

It is technology in this sense, then, as an animating spirit and mode of being-in-the-world that I would like to consider here, and to do so I will turn first to the opening chapters of the Hebrew Bible, where we encounter paradigmatic stories that illuminate for us the nature of the human condition. While the modern technological project is unique in its scope and power, it is, nonetheless, an iteration of a primeval inclination. This realization explains why, for example, C. S. Lewis framed his novelistic critique of the spirit of mid-20th century technology with what amounts to a retelling of the story of the tower of Babel. The title of the third and final book in Lewis's space trilogy, *That Hideous Strength*, is borrowed from a reference to the tower of Babel in a sixteenth century English poem. Lewis believed that the spirit animating modern technology was already manifest in the tower builders, and I think it will be worth our time to examine this possibility more closely.

In fact, I think we should pick up the narrative at an even earlier stage and pursue it just a bit further. The question I propose we keep before us is this: How do we live after Eden? Or, to put it otherwise, how do we respond to the fallen

human condition?

The critical importance of this question to any theological account of modern technology became apparent to me in stages. First came the general recognition that the early chapters of Genesis had something to say about human artifice, about *techne*, the arts, technology. There was, of course, the Babel narrative, which has long been read as a cautionary tale about pride or hubris enacted in a primitive and ill-fated technological project. But there was also the emergence of human civilization in the line of Cain. The three sons of Lamech are called the fathers of those who dwell in tents and have livestock, of all those who play the lyre and pipe, and of those who forge all instruments of bronze and iron. Animal husbandry, the arts, and metallurgy — technical endeavors all — take root, according to Genesis, in the family of Cain. And then there was Cain himself, who is said to have built a city and named it after his son. And while these cases appear to cast human artifice in a negative light, there was also, in the midst of it all, the story of Noah, the ark builder. A feat no less technological than the building of the tower.

But these general observations were focused by the curious obstinacy of Cain. Familiarity with the story may obscure the striking nature of Cain's refusal of his situation. Having murdered his brother, Cain is confronted by God, who passes judgment on Cain: "You shall be a fugitive and a wanderer on the earth." And immediately Cain proceeds to complain about this condition. There is never, of course, any sign of repentance, either at this point or earlier when God first warned Cain to resist the sin crouching at his door. Cain complains that he is being driven from God's presence, a detail he appears to add or, perhaps, to extrapolate from what God has said. More precisely, he claims that he will be hidden from the face of God. We'll come back to this in just a moment. It is clear, too, that Cain is struck by fear above all else. In a statement that has elicited a great deal of creative commentary, he is fearful of unidentified others who might find and kill him.

Then, in a passage that has been made to serve horrendous ends, God graciously attempts to assuage Cain's fears on this score. The next line, which draws this pericope to a close, can be read almost as an afterthought following the dramatic and violent action of the preceding verses: "Then Cain went away from the presence of the Lord and settled in the land of Nod, east of Eden." Condemned to be a fugitive and a wanderer, Cain refuses. Instead, he settles.

A graduate degree in the field not withstanding, I am not a theologian, so you may take the following lay interpretation with the appropriate grain of salt. It will be momentarily clear that the text is laying before us two paths out of Eden. One is tread by Cain and his descendants and the other by Seth, who takes Abel's place as it were, and his descendants. As St. Augustine memorably put it, we have here the beginnings of the City of God and the City of Man — two distinct and competing ways of living after Eden in the postlapsarian human condition. Consequently, I am compelled to read Cain's story if not exactly allegorically, then at least paradigmatically.

Confronted with the dire prospects for life east of Eden, Cain has implicitly refused the way of grace. He is unwilling or unable to turn to God in faith and repentance. Instead, it is clear that

he will rely on his own strength and ingenuity in order to survive. Driven by fear and the prospect of insecurity, alienation, insignificance, and mortality, Cain will, and I don't think it is an overstatement to put it this way … he will seek to overcome the fragility of the human condition through a project of technological mastery.

Let us return for a moment now to Cain's claim that the face of God would be hidden from him. We have reason to believe, to the contrary, that wherever Cain wanders, he will not be hidden from God's presence. Perhaps it is best to hear in these words a confused complaint rather than a genuine lament. In any case, part of what I will argue throughout is that the truth of the matter was rather the reverse of Cain's dubious complaint. We should suppose, I believe, that God would have been with Cain beyond Eden just as he would be with all of those driven beyond Eden's shadows who call on His name. In fact, what Cain managed to do by choosing the path of technological mastery, by refusing the postlapsarian human condition, was to hide the face of God from Himself. He turns away from the hope of grace to the expectation of human self-determination and ingenuity.

Moving on to the opening of Cain's genealogy, we read that Cain knew his wife, bore a son, and built a city, which he then named after his son. It is at the end of this imbued with the spirit technological mastery that we read of Lamech and his three sons, to whom the various technical facets of early human civilization are attributed. The story of the tower of Babel, which concludes the account of primeval history in the book of Genesis, makes clear that the spirit of technological mastery was not a genetic predisposition, limited to a family line. Rather, it was a perennial temptation, which would be variously manifested throughout human history.

In the Babel narrative, we encounter echoes of Cain's speech generations earlier. Like Cain, the tower builders were intent on refusing the command of God, which was evident in their decision to settle and build. Notably, the narrator is intent on drawing attention to the shabby and futile character of the building project. A similar note was struck when we were informed by the narrator that Cain has settled in Nod, which a footnote in pretty much any Bible translation will tell you means "wandering." Build as he may, Cain could not escape what was, perhaps fundamentally, a moral and spiritual condition, a point to which we will return in a moment.

As for the tower builders, they too sought what Cain sought: neither to embrace the path of grace nor to simply submit to the postlapsarian human condition. They sought security, permanence, a sense of purpose, and to achieve this respite from the curse they built. They built a city and a tower. They sought mastery over the precarious and unpredictable conditions of mortal existence, the "slings and arrows of outrageous fortune." They wanted security and stability.

The Lord then speaks ominously of the possibilities implicit in the work of the tower builders: "… this is only the beginning of what they will do. And nothing that they propose to do will now be impossible for them." He does so, of course, before confounding the language of the builders and thus bringing the project to a close.

To read this in the cadences of the serpent, it might suggest that God is withholding some

good thing, that He is jealously guarding his own divine prerogatives, or that He is genuinely fearful of what humankind might accomplish for itself, discovering that it no longer needs God. Better, of course, to recognize that we are being protected from some great danger: self-destruction and the risk of altogether eclipsing the way of grace.

Before turning toward our present technological milieu, we should make one final observation about the unfolding narrative in Genesis. Genesis 11, where we find the story of the tower of Babel, traditionally marks the outer boundary of the primeval history. With Genesis 12, we transition into the patriarchal narrative. But this transition tends to obscure an important link between the two sections. The link is obscured, too, by the conventional way we refer to the most relevant portion of the patriarchal narrative as the story of Jacob's ladder. After all, a ladder does not at all suggest any relation to a tower. We might get closer if our translation opts for staircase or stairway. I'll pass over the details of the case, but I think we'll find that there is good reason to suppose that what we ought to imagine in both cases is a structure on the model of a Mesopotamian ziggurat, a pyramid-like structure with a staircase running up the middle of one of the sides. These structures served a religious purpose, functioning as a gateway between heaven and earth. It is in this light that we ought to hear the tower builder's desire to reach into the heavens and the presence of angels ascending and descending on the staircase in Jacob's dream. The critical difference, of course, is the difference between the way of human mastery and the way of grace.

Having laid this groundwork, allow me to summarize the case I've been implicitly putting before us.

The postlapsarian human condition is characterized by suffering, futility, instability, unpredictability, and mortality. One question raised by Genesis 4 and following is this: How do we respond to the post-Edenic reality? It seems that two paths are open to us. One is the path of Cain: to refuse the fallen condition, to seek to overcome it, not by the operations of grace, but by the power of human ingenuity. This is the path of technique, control, power, and domination. It is driven by fear and pride in equal measure. It is marked by hubris. The other path is the path of grace. It is marked by humility and gratitude. It is the path of grace precisely as the etymology of the word grace suggests, it is the way of the gift. It is the way of those who are prepared to be surprised, who have resisted the temptations to plan, manage, and control their circumstances. Those who walk along this path know very well the answer to the question, "What do you have that you have not been given?" Wendell Berry's "we live the given life, and not the plan" is their motto.

It is important at this point to note that when I speak of the path of grace, I am not thinking in exclusively soteriological terms. I'm suggesting that even those who are prepared to accept that salvation is a work of grace, may nonetheless fail to walk along the path of grace, opting instead for the way of technological mastery. All of us, after all, inhabit the same broken world. Our faith does not exempt us from the postlapsarian human condition. We also fall ill, grow fearful, struggle with futility, and experience loss. So, how do we respond?

I would argue that our response is shaped as much, if not more so, by our involvement in our technological milieu than it is by our expressed beliefs. That the total effect of our technological milieu is to foreclose the path of grace as a way of life. To see why this might be the case, we need to talk about moral formation and the nature of technological milieu. But I'll do so as briefly as possible.

The first point to grasp, which you might already take for granted, is that our tools, regardless of the particular use to which we put them, are intellectually, emotionally, and morally formative. This principle informs much of what I have to say about technology, and it is underwritten by two prior claims.

First, that we are, as the saying goes, creatures of habit. That is to say that I basically buy into a virtue ethic understanding of how moral formation tends to work. What we do over and over again becomes habit, habit becomes inclination and disposition, which becomes vice or virtue, which constitutes character, from which action and desire spring.

Second, how we interpret the world is a function of how we perceive it, or, to collapse the two together: perception is interpretation. And perception is mediated, very often by what we may broadly think of as technology. How I see the world — myself and others included — is always already a mediated act of interpretation.

In both cases, of habituation and mediation, the formative power is heightened to the degree that the relevant material artifacts fade from conscious attention or become practically invisible. If there is an underlying principle from which these two claims stem, it is this: we are embodied creatures and our embodiment is a central not peripheral element of our humanity.

To put this another way, we daily participate in technologically mediated liturgies, mundane ritual practices that inscribe themselves on our bodies, our senses, and our hearts. We are what we do, and what we do is structured by manifold technologies and systems, which themselves reflect an orientation to the world.

What is the nature of this orientation? Naturally, it is complex, not simple. More recently, for example, it has reflected a techno-economic imperative toward consumption. The beginning of this trend can be variously dated. I'd say that, in the American context, it is apparent by the late-nineteenth century and dramatically accelerated during the post-war years. Today, if we take stock of developments in digital consumer technology, it would be altogether plausible to argue that innovation is driven largely by the desire to generate and facilitate consumerism. In certain circles this observation borders on the banal, but it is worth restating lest even those who acknowledge the dynamic become increasingly subject to it.

Consider the following apt summary of the state of digital surveillance offered by Rob Horning:

"Today's world of ubiquitous data collection, what [one scholar] calls 'automated surveillance,' seeks to operate invisibly and universally — 'the monitoring must be as comprehensive as possible.' The modes of tracking are not centralized in an imposing tower but embedded in devices and distributed across countless points of contact. The point of this blanket surveillance

is not to force you to control yourself — the intention of a 'disciplinary society,' in which individuals assume responsibility for adhering to the rules and norms instilled in them by various institutions and social practices — but to enclose your entire life within an environment where all your behavior can be captured and exploited and remolded in real-time in various ways. The point is to anticipate what you will do to make sure someone is there to profit somehow from your doing it — what Zuboff describes in her book about 'surveillance capitalism.'"

When some of us who are old enough to remember the Cold War hear the word "surveillance," we are likely to miss the point of what Zuboff has called "surveillance capitalism." The point is not to know what you are doing in order to report it to some government agency if it strikes some bureaucrat as subversive and anti-government. In fact, the data collected about you has very little significance as *your* individual data. This is why Apple has recently pivoted to privacy and allowed users to block apps from tracking them across the web. Using machine learning and sufficient aggregated data, they believe they are able to effectively predict and shape your consumption.

Consider a new prayer request feature that Facebook is trying out in Canada and Australia. The idea is that this feature allows you to share prayer requests with or solicit prayers from your friends. This seems innocuous, depending, of course, on what your existing view of Facebook happens to be. I can even imagine a person of faith taking a measure of comfort in the development. And, indeed, if all we are taking into consideration is the act of sharing a prayer request through this new functionality, what can possibly be wrong about this? When understood as part of a larger techno-economic ecosystem, however, the new functionality can be rightly interpreted as a new, and perhaps especially powerful, data trap. The point of which, again, is not necessarily to know something about you, but rather to feed the gargantuan data pools that make predictive marketing possible. In short, the end game in these contexts is always about the structures that will generate a consumer subjectivity. But here again, we should be cautious about assuming that this is just the old pre-digital consumerism, where the goal was to link your subjectivity, through affective advertisement, to a product in order to get you to buy that product. The point rather is to ultimately achieve automated or passive consumption. Consider, as a symptom of this trend, the rise of what cultural observer Anne Helen Petersen has recently called the shopping cure, or the "the compulsion to soothe myself through consumption." The habit, in other words, of alleviating anxiety or soothing ennui by mindlessly shopping online from the convenience of your bed at 2AM.

These examples and countless others are not in themselves the point. The point is that they illustrate the powerfully formative dimension of how technology structures our experience, and how those structures are embedded with discernible imperatives.

Working our way back toward our main theme, I'd like to suggest that another such pattern embedded in the structures of our technological milieu is the imperative to control and master experience.

This imperative was the subject of a recent book by German sociologist Hartmut Rosa

titled *The Uncontrollability of the World*. "The driving cultural force of that form of life we call 'modern,'" Rosa writes, "is the idea, the hope and the desire, that we can make the modern world controllable."

Rosa's "guiding thesis" is that "for late modern human beings, the world has simply become a point of aggression," an apt phrase that seemed, sadly, immediately useful as a way of characterizing what it feels like to be alive right now. The world becomes a series of points of aggression when, as Rosa puts it, "everything that appears to us must be known, mastered, conquered, made useful." If our response to this is a measure of befuddlement — how else would we go about living if not by seeking to know, to master, to conquer, to make useful? — then it would seem that Rosa is probably right to say that this is a bedrock assumption shaping our thinking rather than being a product of it.

Rosa acknowledges that relating to the world primarily by seeking to control or manage it is hardly a new development. This "creeping reorganization of our relationship to the world," Rosa writes, "stretches far back historically, culturally, economically, and institutionally." Indeed, the modern project, dating back at least to the 17th century, particularly in its techno-scientific dimensions, can be interpreted as a grand effort to tame nature and bring it under human control. And, of course, as C. S. Lewis observed in *The Abolition of Man*, the drive to control nature was eventually turned on humanity itself.

But in Rosa's view, this "creeping reorganization" has, in the 21st century, "become newly radicalized, not least as a result of the technological possibilities unleashed by digitization and by the demands for optimization and growth produced by financial market capitalism and unbridled competition." For example, Rosa cites the various tools we deploy to measure and optimize our bodies: "We climb onto the scale: we should lose weight. We look into the mirror: we have to get rid of that pimple, those wrinkles. We take our blood pressure: it should be lower. We track our steps: we should walk more." "We invariably encounter such things," Rosa notes, "as a challenge to do better." A bit further on, Rosa adds, "More and more, for the average late modern subject of the 'developed' western world, everyday life revolves around and amounts to nothing more than tackling an ever-growing to-do list. The entries on this list constitute the points of aggression that we encounter as the world … all matters to be settled, attended to, mastered, completed, resolved, gotten out of the way."

Just as it is possible to see the drive to facilitate consumption to the point of automation that animates so much of our digital consumer ecosystem, it is also possible to see digital computation itself, going back to mid-twentieth century cybernetics, as just one powerful movement to make the world legible and thus predictable and controllable. The old modern dream of controlling nature now extends to daily life. Digitization, cheap sensors, and virtually unlimited data storage has made it possible to capture increasingly large swaths of human experience that had never before been subject to measurement and quantification. Think, for example, of the data captured by your FitBit or sleep tracking app. We can now increasingly do for ordinary private life what Frederick Taylor did for factory life, subject it to a regime of

measurement and control through scientific management.

But let us get back to where we started. This impulse — to control, predict, manage, and plan — is a manifestation of an ancient spirit and one of the paths that led out of Eden. That it takes different forms, that it is sometimes more and sometimes less effective, should not blind us to the family resemblances. Consider in passing how the great bellwether of early modern sentiments about science and technology, Francis Bacon, explicitly framed the emerging techno-scientific project as an attempt to assuage humanity's postlapsarian condition, to alleviate the sufferings that resulted from the curse.

In the remarkable closing essay to his best known work, *Deschooling Society*, Ivan Illich spoke about these two paths, what I have called the path of mastery and the path of grace, in different terms derived from Greek mythology. He spoke of Promethean Man and Epimethean Man. We know Prometheus well. Promethean has become a synonym for technological overreach, for hubristic human aspirations. But Epimetheus is not as well known. He was Prometheus's brother. Their story involves Pandora's famous box or jar, from which she allows all the ills of this world to escape. It is a lesser known detail of the story that Pandora shut the lid in time to keep one thing from flying out: hope. Epimetheus, whose name means hindsight and who was thought something of a dullard, accepted his wife Pandora as a gift from the gods despite Prometheus's urging him against it. Prometheus, of course, is best remembered for stealing fire from the gods and giving it to man.

I cannot imagine that the parallels to the biblical account of mankind's origins were lost on Illich, who was a Roman Catholic priest. In any case, the parallels as I see them are this. The release of Pandora's ills recalls the introduction of the curse following the fall in Genesis three: it resembles the emergence of the post-Edenic human condition marked by suffering and mortality. Of course, the human moral dimension is altogether absent in the Greek myth. The Promethean spirit is kin to the spirit of the line of Cain and the Tower builders. They will both take matters into their own hands. But there is a profound cost.

"It is the history of the Promethean endeavor to forge institutions in order to corral each of the rampant ills," Illich observed. "It is the history of fading hope and rising expectations."

"To understand what this means," Illich went on to explain, "we must rediscover the distinction between hope and expectation. Hope, in its strong sense, means trusting faith in the goodness of nature, while expectation, as I will use it here, means reliance on results which are planned and controlled by man. Hope centers desire on a person from whom we await a gift. Expectation looks forward to satisfaction from a predictable process which will produce what we have the right to claim. The Promethean ethos has now eclipsed hope."

Illich here is helping us get very near the heart of the matter. To paraphrase Heidegger, the problem with technology is nothing technological. That's a bit gnomic, so let me clarify my sense. Yes, of course, as we said at the outset there are specific problems with particular technologies and it is worth exploring what these may be and addressing them if possible. However, the deeper issue might be described as a structural

temptation deeply embedded in our current techno-cultural configuration. It is to choose to live our lives along the path of technological mastery as a way of coping with the consequences of the fall even if we have chosen the way of grace in principle as the path of salvation.

There are very dicey issues that flow from this analysis, and I will not pretend to sort them all out. One premise throughout is that, driven by the admittedly noble desire to alleviate suffering, we may, as Illich warned, transform dying and suffering into technical problems that admit of institutional solutions. There is no room under these circumstances to experience suffering as an occasion for spiritual growth or the context within which we might be surprised by the presence of God, who, in fact, has not hidden his face from us at all. If grace is unplanned, unexpected, the antithesis of what can be manufactured and programmed, how do we discern the difference between wisdom and prudence, on the one hand, and over-programming or extreme risk-aversion on the other. I think, for example, how a part of me desires to protect my children from all harm, to shield them from all suffering by vigilantly controlling as much of their environment as possible. I realize, of course, that this impulse, if fully realized, would also rob them of life itself while preserving their biological existence. We could go on and on.

I suspect that such questions will have very different answers, and that we should avoid the temptation to arrive at rules or methods to sort out the uncomfortable uncertainties. Here again Illich can be helpful. He distinguished in his interpretation of the parable of the Good Samaritan between a rule and a call. The good Samaritan was not following a rule, and we cannot make his experience the basis of a rule without destroying the freedom to answer a call in love that he exhibited. We will need to consider how to answer the call to walk along the path of grace with wisdom and discernment. Illich himself imagined that those who became newly attuned to the spirit of Epimetheus, who embraced the uncertainty of life and clung to hope, would do so in collaboration with the Promethean brothers. They would light the fire and shape the iron together, but they would do so to enhance their ability to tend and care and wait upon the other.

What is needed, I would argue, is not an abandonment of technology, but a reshaping and renewal of our technological milieu, one that will likely take decades and even centuries, so that it is structured by the logic of grace rather than by the spirit of Babel. May God grant us the skill and imagination to lay the groundwork for such a world.

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VICTORIAN EXVANGELICALS

MOSES BRATRUD

"If only the Geologists would let me alone, I could do very well, but those dreadful Hammers! I hear the clink of them at the end of every cadence of the Bible verses." [1]
John Ruskin, 1851

Sometimes it is being confronted by the belief of others that makes doubt grow strong in us. It may be easy for me to affirm that Jesus Christ was born of a virgin in conversation, but when I encounter the earnest faith of someone who says that the virgin birth is a crucial part of God's story of salvation, something we should all think about more seriously and prayerfully, I may then feel how weak is my belief in such a doctrine. Perhaps I may even resent my interlocutor's faith. I may wish for convincing arguments for this or any other disputed article of the faith. Perhaps I would feel paralyzed, not indeed by someone else's faith, but by how that faith reveals my own doubt.

This is how I imagine it was for Scintillula, the pseudonymous writer whose plaintive 1858 letter to the editors of the *Christian Observer* shows so much opprobrium, not at the editors' faith per se, but at

[1] George P. Landow, "The Aesthetic and Critical Theories of John Ruskin, Chapter Four, Section II. Loss of Belief," victorianweb.org, 2005, https://victorianweb.org/authors/ruskin/atheories/4.2.html.

what he sees as their refusal to present to him "the whole strength of the evidence" for their faith. But that interaction needs to be prefaced by a word or two about the Victorian crisis of faith in which Scintillula found himself an unwilling participant. Perhaps this crisis, and the responses of Scintillula and others, can help us to understand the moment we are now placed in, in which it seems anxious doubt is in the ascendant over simple faith — in our hearts as much as in the world around us.

The Victorians were different from other groups of Christians who came before them. They were arguably the first doubters to express unbelief in ways that are recognizable today.[2]

Evangelical believers in Victorian Britain were arguably those most affected by the crisis of faith, not only because of the emotional intensity and centrality of their faith, but because in the mid-19th century, they were on a march through British institutions, ambitiously seeking to transform everyday life for the gospel, and thus had much to lose. The key fact about Victorian religion, as several scholars have noted, is that there was so much of it for skeptics to rebel against.[3] This essay uses the term "Victorian," not only because it is concerned with events during Queen Victoria's reign (1837-1901) but because it deals with many of the things that made the Victorians Victorian in the sense that this term is still used today. While "evangelical" is a contested term, the working definition used in this essay comes from David Bebbington's quadrilateral: Evangelicals are characterized by (1) biblicism, (2) crucicentrism, (3) conversionism, and (4) activism. [4]

While some scholars have deprecated the Victorian crisis of faith, reacting against its overemphasis of the crisis in secularization narratives, other scholars have taken a more empirical approach. Frederick Gibbs and Daniel Cohen have used longitudinal mapping of religious literature to show that the Victorians were not exaggerating religious change, with their research showing "a clear collapse in religious publishing beginning around the time of the 1851 Religious Census." This, coupled with the Victorian self-perception of increasing doubt and unbelief, is certainly strong evidence for a crisis of some kind afflicting Victorian believers.[5]

Religious doubt is isolating if it is anything. Victorian doubters in particular have been called "people without belonging," by Grace Davie — that is, moderns.[6] It is certainly important, then, to interpret the crisis through the lens of individual experience, not just through broader trends. For this essay, it will be the anonymous doubter Scintillula, whose 1858 letter to the

[2] Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 369.

[3] Frank Turner, "The Victorian Crisis of Faith and the Faith That Was Lost," in *Victorian Faith in Crisis: Essays on Continuity and Change in Nineteenth-Century Religious Belief*, ed. Richard J. Helmstadter and Bernard Lightman (UK: Houndmills, 1990), 9–37, 11.

[4] David Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730s to the 1980s* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1992), 2-17.

[5] Frederick W. Gibbs and Daniel J. Cohen, "A Conversation with Data: Prospecting Victorian Words and Ideas," *Victorian Studies* 54, no.

[6] Nash, "Reassessing the 'Crisis of Faith,'" 82.

Christian Observer periodical is a singular and unvarnished first-hand account of the religious doubt beginning to afflict evangelicals at this time. This essay will use "faithful doubters" like Scintillula, and the responses of the Christian Observer and other Victorians to religious doubt, to provide an account focusing specifically on evangelicals.[7]

Doubt itself was not a new feature in Victorian evangelicalism. In fact, evangelicals in every century who truly took on board the totalizing claims of faith often experienced a continual internal battle between faith and doubt, and would have felt the truth of the maxim that "He who doubts little, believes little." Long before the 19th century, Philipp Melanchthon, not alone among the Reformers, wrote of being "tortured with horrible doubts," language that seems more characteristic of the Victorians three hundred years later.[8] Unchanging factors led to some level of baseline doubt among committed Christians, so I will focus not on the mere presence of doubt among Victorians, but the ways expressions of doubt changed and, for some, grew over time.

Scintullula's letter displays the startling gulf that separated evangelicals who dealt with visceral doubts and those who sought to combat those doubts pastorally. It is frank — even desperate — in its approach to faith and doubt, giving a sense of the divide that existed between the often-complacent apologetics of the *Observer* and struggling believers.

> *I by no means think, in my best moments, that there is not such evidence for the great truths of the Bible as ought to establish them in every reasonable mind. But it seems to me that religious men, and even the "Christian Observer," while they are ready enough to rebuke and condemn us, are by no means sufficiently anxious to place before us the whole strength of this evidence. It is impossible to say what poor arguments will satisfy those who are already convinced; and, satisfied themselves, many good men are content to leave us alone with our perplexities. Accordingly, the old dishes of proof and evidence — often of the most unsatisfactory character — are hashed up again and again, and served at our tables, as though they would completely satisfy our appetite. Will your friends be so good as to consider this, — that bad arguments are worse than none to honest minds?*[9]

Scintillula was undergoing a momentous crisis of faith, stronger than that of most Victorian doubters. He implies that he is or has been a student at Oxford, and says "no young man, for the last twenty years, can have lived [at Oxford] for the fixed period of his education, without having had innumerable provocations to doubt and infidelity suggested to him."[10] Here is how he describes the experience of doubt in one passage:

[7] Citations from the *Christian Observer* in this essay will use a shortened form with the abbreviation CO, the year of publication, and page number in bound volume.

[8] Philipp Melanchthon, *Loci Communes*, 1543, trans. J.A.O. Preus (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1992), 15.

[9] CO 1858 253.

[10] CO 1858 252.

> *Why, sometimes, when I am trying to pray, a great dark cloud seems to settle down over the whole of the Bible and the eternal world; sometimes the very words of Scripture seem only to suggest doubts; sometimes my imagination seems to stand, as it were, on the watch for difficulties, and I spring upon them like a bird on his prey.*[11]

This provides an interesting comparison to John Ruskin's words at the beginning of this piece. Like other Victorian doubters also, Scintillula himself does not appear to understand why he is afflicted more deeply than his older contemporaries. He speculates that they had "power given to them," that is, supernaturally, to resist doubt.[12] Perhaps this is the only way he can imagine not being afflicted by doubts in the way that he is. Scintillula ends his letter with a touching, almost pathetic note of deference, asking that he and other young men afflicted by doubt would be accepted, not spurned, by "Mr. *Observer*," as prodigal sons returning to the house of their father.[12] Scintillula's full letter, with digitization errors corrected, is available online at https://mereorthodoxy.com/scintillula.

Scintillula wrote anonymously; it is thus only speculative to ask how his crisis of faith was resolved. He may well have reaffirmed orthodox faith — he clearly desired to do so. But many other avenues were open to him: for an educated young man in mid-Victorian England, the possibilities for religious searching were nearly as infinite as they are today.

RESPONDING TO DOUBT

In some ways, the *Christian Observer* saw the same phenomena that Scintillula observed. At the mid-century mark, the *Observer* spoke of the "infidelity of the age" and a "cross-tide of infidelity and Romanism," but also references the "infidelity of the last generation," making it clear that the *Observer* did not yet suspect that the tide of religious sentiments was turning decisively against evangelical belief.[14] In 1856, the *Observer* noted again that it was a former generation in which Christian belief was in danger: "Those were distressing times, when freethinking was the fashion. We trust there is no danger of the recurrence of this state of things…"[15] The *Observer* had no reason to revisit this complacency until the events of the early 1860s.

Indeed, one characteristic of the *Observer*'s response to skepticism to a surprisingly late date is its confidence in the ability of evangelicals to push back unbelief in the church. The 1861 Preface points out that the fall of the Tractarians from influence resulted in the rise of a new party (the skeptics), who would by implication one day fall from favor themselves.[16] The presence of

[11] CO 1858 252.
[12] CO 1858 254.
[13] *Ibid.* 256.
[14] CO 1851 40, 719, 714.
[15] CO 1856 251-2.
[16] CO 1861 v.

doubt, even within clerical ranks, was not enough to convince the evangelicals that their cause was in serious danger. One 1861 contributor seems to accept the presence of doubt without it necessitating a life-or-death struggle within the church, quoting Pascal: "There is light enough for those whose sincere wish is to see; and darkness enough to confound those of an opposite disposition."[17]

But if the *Observer* did not at this time doubt the outcome of the war with unbelief, it certainly understood that a battle was raging, writing in 1862 that "The flood-gates once opened, the tide of unbelief is rushing in with a fiercer torrent, and we have no reason to suppose that it has reached its height, or that our duty of resistance is approaching to its close."[18] If something more fundamental was at risk, the entire idea of a Christian Britain, this was not yet clear to the *Observer.* In 1857, a contributor confidently asserted that "[Gospel truths] are so stamped on the national mind as, we trust, never more to be erased or forgotten." [19]

For some doubting Victorians, the answer was not to believe less but to believe more. In 1851, the *Observer* wrote that Roman proselytes, who by this time could count John Henry Newman himself among their number, "seek repose from their own unbelief under the shelter of [papal] infallibility."[20] In 1852 a typical convert to Rome "rejoices because he gets rid of doubts which had long pressed upon his soul."[21] The *Observer* wrote of Newman in 1851 that he was "the most skeptical of all skeptical minds — a man accustomed to spurn all reasonable evidence."[22] While Newman's legendary faith makes this statement hard to credit, his writings do indeed confirm it in at least one sense:

> *We are told that God has spoken. Where? In a book? We have tried it and it disappoints; it disappoints, that most holy and blessed gift, not from fault of its own, but because it is used for a purpose for which it was not given.* [23]

When the Bible was critically examined ("tried"), Newman felt that it could not prove itself to be true and needed the Roman Catholic magisterium to do so. This played a key role in his conversion. For other Tractarians, these doubts about scripture could not be alleviated even by conversion to Rome. Some of the most dedicated Tractarians, like Newman's own brother Francis, became some of the most vociferous skeptics. The Observer did not hesitate to report on the progression of Tractarians to skeptics, mentioning it gleefully and repeatedly.[24] In this way the authority and reliability of scripture,

[17] *Ibid.* 871.
[18] CO 1862 iv.
[19] *CO 1857 iv.*
[20] CO 1851 240.
[21] CO 1852 812.
[22] CO 1851 12.
[23] Lance St. John Butler, *Victorian Doubt: Literary and Cultural Discourses* (Hemel Hempstead, UK: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1990), 17. Emphasis original.
[24] *CO* 1856 v; CO 1861 vi; CO 1867 776.

which had raised questions during the Tractarian debate, became the basis for the most momentous crisis of faith recorded in the *Observer*.

The later movements of some Tractarians illuminates a paradox of Victorian spirituality. The "zeal of the convert" was visible not only in those who "got religion" for the first time through the unparalleled evangelistic action of the established Church or of myriad other Protestants (cf. Charles Spurgeon), but also those who left Protestantism entirely for Rome. This became more visible after Pope Pius IX recreated the Roman Catholic diocesan hierarchy in the United Kingdom in 1850. However, for some religious movers, Francis Newman being only one example, the first religious move was not the last, and could ultimately result in deconversion. This was perhaps especially true for converts to Catholicism, who often felt that Rome's demands on their lives through religious ritual were less taxing than the Church of England's demands on their intellect (e.g. that clergymen must subscribe to the Articles of Religion). For 19th century deconverts, the process was rarely a straight line from evangelical belief to agnosticism (a term coined by T.H. Huxley in 1869) — it could come after stints in Tractarianism or (later) Eastern religion.

THE ARGUMENT THAT FAILED

Scientific developments and institutional changes of the 19th century certainly played a role in Scintillula's doubt, just as the traditional secularization accounts might have predicted. It is significant that he writes in 1858, the year before Darwin's *On the Origin of Species*, showing how endemic this type of "modern" doubt was even before Darwin. It is Scintillula's reluctant openness to consider the idea of an impersonal order that separates him from the *Observer*, and this openness did not come from urbanization or Lamarckian evolution, nor even from "higher criticism" of the Bible. Instead, it came as the result of a centuries-long process in which Western people began to see themselves as alienated from the personal, "enchanted" universe that characterized the medieval social imaginary — they became, in short, fully modern.

Scintillula sees this centuries-long accretion as a "dark cloud" between himself and the eternal world. This dark cloud is oppressive to him, but in one sense it also gives him the freedom to do the most modern thing possible: to choose his religious creed according to his own lights. This was the new reality: religious pluralism in Victorian minds, if not in Victorian society. It birthed the temptation, not to adventure into the distant reaches of Empire, but into uncharted spiritual vistas. This unmade Victorian religion, and forged a new, modern religious synthesis.
Of course, as people like Scintillula doubted, older Christians took notice. In a particularly revealing sermon delivered to Oxford students in 1861, Bishop Samuel Wilberforce gave advice to doubters:

> *Whilst irreverence and doubt are the object of your greatest fear; whilst you would gladly retain a childlike and unquestioning reverence by abasing, if need were, your understanding, rather than gain any knowledge at the hazard of your reverence; you are doubtless in God's*

hands, and therefore safe... Fly, therefore, rather than contend; fly to known truths.[25]

While Wilberforce's fideism is certainly one possible response to doubt, many Victorians were drawn in a different direction, towards a scientific-philosophical defense of the faith rooted in the work of Joseph Butler and William Paley, what has been termed the Butler-Paley apologetic. Although these names may no longer be familiar to us, their arguments continue to underpin a certain variety of Christian apologetics.

Bishop Joseph Butler's *Analogy of Religion* was published in 1736 and William Paley's *Natural Theology*, or *Evidences* dates to 1802.[26] In the Observer, our barometer of mainstream evangelical opinion, Butler is mentioned 69 times, and the Analogy is mentioned at least ten times between 1850 and 1875. Paley is mentioned 157 times during this period. The word "evidences" appears 330 times and there are 19 mentions of "natural theology." The Observer continued to employ Butler's Analogy until its last year of publication.[27] Paley's *Evidences* remained required reading for Cambridge undergraduates well into the 20th century.

This focus on Butler and Paley in the *Observer* is consonant with the wider context of Victorian apologetics. To summarize the historian Josef Altholz, Butler and Paley were used together to create a cohesive argument simply by showing with Butler that Christianity was credible (or, more credible than any alternative) and then using Paley to show that the witness of scripture was in fact historically true. [28]

Writing about this form of apologetic, Charles Taylor is unsparing in his verdict: the Butler-Paley apologetic represented a dramatic turn in apologetics away from the "saving action of Christ" to "demonstrating God as Creator, and showing his Providence."[29] This had deeply negative consequences. The new apologetics:

Open[ed] the door to atheism when it thinks most effectively to have barred it. The barring is meant to come through strenuous argument, but the opening comes from the shift in standpoint. Both the proposers of these arguments from benevolent design of the universe, and their addressees, are presumed to stand outside of the previous Christian horizon of practice, prayer and hope, at least for the sake of argument. God is not essential to the very framework of their lives, but an entity (albeit an important one) which we have to reason towards out of this framework.[30]

In the traditional account, God is placed outside the "framework of [our] lives" by the Enlightenment, but for Taylor, it is Christian

[25] Meacham, *Lord Bishop*, 229.

[26] Altholz, "The Mind of Victorian Orthodoxy," 193.[19] *CO 1857 iv.*

[27] CO 1874 468.

[28] Altholz, "The Mind of Victorian Orthodoxy," 194.

[29] Taylor, A Secular Age, 225.

[30] Ibid., 294.

apologists who do this in a way that has deep and long-lasting consequences, because it was more immediately and lastingly influential on the intellectual conceptions of faith held by believers themselves. 19th century Christians were by no means all content with the Butler-Paley model for apologetics, but as late as 1871 the *Observer* offered a full-throated defense of it.

A NEW PATH

The shift of Christian apologetics since Darwin, especially since World War II, has been from arguments from design, which require verifiable, scientific data as confirmatory evidence, to more philosophical and personal theological approaches. William Paley said that the visible universe had a God-shaped hole in it, while Billy Graham asserted that the human heart did.

Nor was this trend limited to popular evangelism. In academic apologetics, this trend gathered steam as certain developments in philosophy that were a threat to religious belief, such as logical positivism, fell out of favor. Elizabeth Anscombe, Alvin Plantinga, Nicholas Wolterstorff, and others, credibly defended theism within the discipline of philosophy in a way that is now spreading downstream to popular apologetics. Plantinga especially, with his work on "warranted Christian belief," provided a defense of Christianity as axiomatic that has already taken up a place in the work of popular apologists[31] akin to that of Butler's *Analogy* in the 19th century.

But Plantinga, unlike Butler, starts with what Charles Taylor calls the modern social imaginary as a basic assumption. Plantinga begins from a position of epistemic humility, tempered by the skepticism of everyone from Kierkegaard to Gödel and Heisenberg. If our mental starting place for such an argument can be compared to a structure, we could say that Plantinga is attempting to build a small, sturdy house on a good foundation — not a large, capacious tent (the argument from design discussed above). His aim is to build something structurally much sounder, if epistemically more modest.

If Plantinga were a modern-day Victorian, he would feel duty-bound to make his arguments for God accord with quantum mechanics or string theory — or even use these theories as evidence for God. Victorian apologists swarmed to the cutting edge of scientific discovery like moths. Indeed Paley was not only a successful apologist, but a well-informed scientific thinker. The emphasis on science could and did lead to the "book of nature" eclipsing God's more personal and salvific "book of scripture." The emphasis on philosophy, then, and especially on the epistemological humility encouraged by the postmodern turn, has been a surprising boon to Christian apologists.[32]

But the Victorian apologists in the *Observer* were children of their age. Was it ever possible that they could have cut their ambitions for apologetics down to size? Could something like Plantinga's "warranted Christian belief" have ever taken root in the Victorian era? It is not completely far-

[31] E.g. Mitch Stokes, *How to Be an Atheist: Why Many Skeptics Aren't Skeptical Enough* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2016).

[32] Deane-Peter Baker, *Alvin Plantinga* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 2.

fetched, since Plantinga's work owes much to the Scottish philosopher Thomas Reid (1710-1796), Hume's nemesis, who is referred to several times, including in the same sentence as Bishop Butler, in the *Christian Observer.* [33]

On the whole, however, the caution of Plantinga's position and the epistemological humility that characterizes the modern Christian apologetic project (notably excepting the work of Cornelius van Til and his followers) would have been difficult to accept for many Victorian evangelicals who seemed to be at the height of their powers, mobilizing in every area of society. This, in part, is why the Victorian crisis of faith caused so much intellectual heartache: strained by vast application, ambitious apologetic arguments began to fray and break. The apologetic that emerged out of the ashes of religious crisis and two world wars was humbler, more chastened, and more personal, as seen in the work of C.S. Lewis, who wrote of "mere" Christianity. [34]

It was never inevitable that Victorian evangelicals would lose the purity of their faith. But it was inevitable that their apologetic methods, which depended so much on developments of science harmonizing with the appearance of design in the universe, would be shaken to the core when scientific developments didn't play along. The revivalist theologian and father of modern evangelicalism Jonathan Edwards died of a botched smallpox inoculation in 1758. This shows that not only does the virulence of a disease and the natural immunity of the body play a role in the fight for survival, but that sometimes the cure is worse than the disease, as with Edwards's inoculation. Perhaps Victorian apologetics could be compared to a bad inoculation; perhaps, on balance, they weakened the faith of more Victorians than they helped. And perhaps apologetics, like the science of vaccination, is something that can now provide a much higher chance of survival to a doubting believer than once it could.

CONCLUSION

In my research, I have tried to reveal something that most narratives of the Victorian crisis of faith do not: the doubting-but-still-faithful Christian rather than the joyous new convert or the angry exvangelical. The believer for whom God's promises ring true and yet who is not free, temporarily or permanently, from earth-shaking doubts. The literate elites who played such a large role in Victorian society have left many accounts of loss of faith — George Eliot and Francis Newman, brother to John Henry, being but two examples. But the existing literature has paid little attention either to evangelical defenders of orthodoxy or to the earnest doubters like Scintillula who showed a sincere desire to remain within that orthodoxy. Despite the corrosive doubt of the Victorian era, remaining within evangelical orthodoxy would have been one of the most common outcomes of religious crisis. So it must be for struggling believers in our own time.

[33] CO 1868 835.

[34] C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: Macmillan, 1952).

[35] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 369.

Perhaps the most startling thing in the study of Victorian evangelical doubt is how little it differs from that of today. The Victorians were indeed, as Charles Taylor argued, the first doubters to express unbelief in ways that are recognizable today.[35] In 1858, Scintillula wrote of a "dark cloud" descending upon him when he attempted to read the Bible.[36] This characterization of religious doubt is still made today, in strikingly similar terms, for example by Joseph Minich: "One cannot read the Bible without wondering (and even feeling) that perhaps it is just a historical document. One cannot pray without it feeling vaguely plausible that one's prayers are but puffs of wind in a silent cosmos."

The similarity of contemporary religious doubt to its Victorian ancestor is fascinating in itself, but also suggests that the study of contemporary religious doubt, even the amelioration of it, could benefit from more incisive knowledge of how Victorian believers doubted, and how they attempted to resolve those doubts. There may be an opening for researchers to consider religious doubt not just as the threat of loss of faith, but something that could indeed, despite the protestations of the *Observer*, lead to stronger faith, without being in itself a positive good. A template for this may be seen in John Henry Newman's novel *Loss and Gain* in which the faith that is temporarily lost is a lesser thing than the faith that is later gained through doubt and suffering.

If the crisis of faith in the Victorian era is closely analogous to one facing the church now, then with better approaches to apologetics and a theology of doubt, the church today can have a better chance than the Victorians did of turning back what one Victorian chronicler called "the tide of unbelief" — but only if the church is blessed by the Holy Spirit with the resources of historical and theological memory. We have faced and overcome these struggles before, if only we can prayerfully remember the way forward.

MOSES BRATRUD IS THE COMMUNICATIONS DIRECTOR OF THE MINNESOTA FAMILY COUNCIL.

[36] CO 1858 252.

The Ends of Worlds:

LIVING WITH THE INEVITABLE IN PAUL KINGSNORTH'S BUCKMASTER TRILOGY

RHYS LAVERTY

When will the world end?

In Paul Kingsnorth's reckoning, it already has lots of times, in fact. "Worlds are always ending — that, it turns out, is one of my themes, or tics, or obsessions" — he confessed that in his 2017 collection *Confessions of a Recovering Environmentalist*.[1] It's easy enough to see from the outside. His 2003 debut, One No, Many Yeses was a piece of frontline reporting on different communities around the world who felt that their worlds were dissolving in the homogenising acid of global capitalism. His most recent book, *Alexandria*, is a venerable entry in the canon of dystopian novels. The years between those books took in the 2008 financial crash, the populist ructions of 2016, and COVID-19 — all, in their own way, the ends of various worlds. Anyone you meet at the end of the world is at a funny time in their life. In either ushering in or attempting to prevent armageddon, people will do all sorts of queer things. If we were to cast Kingsnorth's apocalyptic obsession in the form of a question, it may be this: what happens to people when they feel their world is ending? —

This question is a helpful rubric for Kingsnorth's spiritual Buckmaster trilogy. Each novel gives us a first-person perspective on the ends of different worlds, each a millenia apart. *The Wake* (2014) follows Buccmaster of Holland, an Anglo-Saxon farmer rebelling against the Norman Conquest of 1066; *Beast* (2016) follows Edward Buckmaster in the present day, a man who burnt his bridges with civilisation out on a West Country moor; *Alexandria* (2020) follows a post-apocalyptic cult in the English fens a thousand years into the future, hoping for a new dawn before they all fall prey to a

[1] Paul Kingsnorth, *Confessions of a Recovering Environmentalist* (London: Faber & Faber, 2017), 1.

mysterious technological predator.

In each novel, the respective apocalypses are unavoidable. There is no cavalry, no blowing up the asteroid. The protagonists (we won't call them heroes) arrive like the Watchmen, hearing Ozymandias telling them he did it thirty-five minutes ago. One of the trilogy's key spiritual ties, then, is how one lives with the inevitable. In an age of dystopian obsession and seemingly intractable existential threats to historic forms of human existence (or human existence at all), Kingsorth's novels have much to teach us about the different ways human beings act when the stars fall from heaven.

So then: how do we live at the end of the world?

THE WAKE

> *"they tacs our names our names they tacs our tales our songs. i was grown from this ground the ground they has tacan my ground from me all that i is they tacs all"*[2]

In 1065, Buccmaster of Holland has it all. He is a free socman of England,[3] owner of three oxgangs — though he rues how England has forgotten the earthy, virile Old Gods of the Anglo-Saxons. But in the Battle of Hastings in 1066, Buccmaster loses everything. Desolate, he flees into the woodland, soon gathering a band of waifs and strays who imagine themselves as 'grene men' — spirits of the forest who may be able to rescue England by striking against the invaders.

But Buccmaster unravels, plagued by increasingly feverish visions; his ragtag rebels amount to little. At one point they are shown a new Norman castle under construction — a technological terror so dreadful that Buccmaster lets out a rare admission of hopelessness: "this is a thing from an other world from a blaec place from hel itself. Naht has there efer been in angland lic this naht efer in the world and stand there i feels we is lost all lost now for efer."[4] The doubt passes though, and Buccmaster digs his heels into expelling the Normans. However, his men slowly lose hope, and the novel climaxes with an altercation between them and Buccmaster, just as Norman soldiers burst through the trees. Buccmaster flees, ranting and raving into the woods, forever a fugitive of the past.

Buccmaster is a man radicalised at the end of the world. Rage, rage against the dying of the light, because it's better to burn out than fade away. And the reader, on one level, can't blame him. The sense of a world lost elicits deep aches of sympathy, amplified by the fact that, a millenia on, we know that his efforts will amount to less than zero. The English-speaking world is inconceivable without the Norman Conquest — not least of all because it is *English speaking*, and modern English is heavily indebted to the influence of Norman French. *The Wake* is written in a form of bastardised Old English — a "shadow tongue", designed to give as close a sense of Anglo-Saxon speech as possible by excising all French influence. Reading Buccmaster speaking of "the holt" rather than "the forest", or noting his total lack of the letters 'k', 'v', 'j', or 'q', evokes the incommunicable scale of what the Normans destroyed. The Wake can be seen as a novelisation

[2] Paul Kingsnorth, *The Wake* (London: Unbound, 2014), 87.

[3] A socman was a "free tenant farmer. Sokemen were found on in the eastern counties of the Danelaw. They owed allegiance to the king rather than the thegn, owned their land, and seem to have been a high class of independent landed farmer." Kingsnorth, *The Wake*, 349-350.

[4] Kingsnorth, The Wake, 257.

of Kingsnorth's 2008 non-fiction work *Real England*. In *Real England*, Kingsnorth travels his homeland, encountering local groups attempting to preserve distinctive English traditions from the corrosion of globalised capitalism: local pubs and real ale, canals and houseboaters, markets and town centres.The reader can't help but admire such folk — modern day green men who, like Buccmaster, wed themselves to the long defeat of an England.[5]

And yet Buccmaster is, frankly, an odious figure. He is overbearing and abusive, and his arc is one of increasingly delusional self-aggrandisement. Visions of Weland the Smith, a figure of Old Germanic legend, drive Buccmaster to believe, Elijah-like, that he is the only true-born Englishman left, destined for the throne. When his men refuse to brutally execute a captured bishop, his exceptionalism peaks: "well here it was here now was the weacness and the smallness of angland. These men is standan locan at me their cyng their great ealdor."[6] This arrogance is what pushes Buccmaster into such radical recalcitrance.

Yet the novel hints that Buccmaster's national identity is a deceptively woven fabrication. For all his English pride, he disdains all parts of England but his own. His proud status as a socman (a farmer answerable only to the king, not the local thegn) was something which only applied to Eastern counties which had been under the Danelaw: "free men we was in the fenns free on our land free men we is still naht will mof us not the frenc."[7] He says he fights for England, but the reader wonders: is he simply fighting for *his* England?

Other things undercut Buccmaster's vision of Englishness. As a boy, his grandfather recounts to him how their ancestors arrived in the land: "anglsic folc cum here across the sea many years ago. wilde was this land wilde with ingengas [foreigners] with wealsc [Welsh] folc with aelfs and the wulf. cum we did in our scips our great carfan scips with the wyrms heafod [dragon's head] and we macd good this land what had been weac and unkempt and was thus ours by right."[8] The reader can easily draw the comparisons between the Anglo-Saxon settlement and the Norman invasion. Buccmaster's grandfather also regails him with tales of the great English kings Æthelred, Alfred, and Athelstan — all Christians.[9] Buccmaster's disdain for the supposedly corrosive, homogenising force of a foreign religion apparently becomes selective when it produces great rulers.

What, then, makes Buccmaster into a radical

[5] As many readers will know, the "long defeat" is a phrase famously coined by J.R.R Tolkien: "Actually I am a Christian, and indeed a Roman Catholic, so that I do not expect 'history' to be anything but a 'long defeat' – though it contains (and in a legend may contain more clearly and movingly) some samples or glimpses of final victory." "195 From A Letter to Amy Ronald 15 December 1956," *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien, A Selection Edited by Humphrey Carpenter,* ed. Humphrey Carpenter and Christopher Tolkien (London: George Allen & Unwin), accessed April 26 2022, https://time.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/12/the_letters_of_j.rrtolkien.pdf.

[6] Kingsnorth, *The Wake*, 339.

[7] Kingsnorth, *The Wake*, 11.

[8] Kingsnorth, *The Wake*, 35.

[9] Kingsnorth, *The Wake*, 16.

'grene man?' It is partly a right and pious anger for what has been taken. The Norman Conquest was a truly devastating event. A generation of nobility were annihilated, the maps were redrawn, the church was conformed to Rome, the wooden glory of Anglo-Saxon culture was left to rot beneath Norman stone. Love of nation has been out of favour in the West in recent decades, and there are few things more reviled within the British isles than a love of England. Yet events such as the invasion of Ukraine have made the West think twice about its reflexive anti-nationalism. We have seen again that it can be a sweet and fitting thing to die for one's country.

There are, however, darker motives which make Buccmaster well-kindled for radicalisation. He does not love his country as it actually is, but rather as he imagines it once was, and this is why his rage turns on his fellow Englishmen. How can they fight together for their country if they all imagine it differently? Kingsnorth has acknowledged that all nations need myths and stories, but that these must be stories that "a people chooses to tell about itself."[10] Buccmaster, sadly, was only ever interested in telling his own story.

BEAST

> *"I saw it all finally crushed all the people flattened the glory of the end of it all. Skyscrapers falling oceans overcoming the defences the silence descending"*[11]

The difference between Buccmaster of Holland and Edward Buckmaster is that no-one ends Edward's world for him: he does it himself. We only get fitful glimpses of Edward's backstory in *Beast*. We can gather he has walked out on a life in present-day England, with a hint at one point that this involved possible violence. Edward, however, becomes as unreliable a narrator as Buccmaster, so we cannot be sure. Like Buccmaster, Edward sees himself as one colonised — not by an invading army, but by the bland concrete-pour of modernity: paving stones, office cubicles, drink cans, corner shops, supermarket lines, bus stops.[12] Although he can't bring the whole edifice crashing down, he can do it to his small part of it. And so he leaves. This chimes with what, over the years, Kingsnorth has called "The Crisis of Bigness."[13] In the face of unassailable Goliaths like modernity, consumerism, disenchantment et al, the temptation for those opposed is to craft correspondingly "big picture" responses. Kingsnorth rejects this. Humanity's spiritual malaise is too deep-rooted, and our big-picture solutions all simply manifest the same impulses which caused the mess in the first place. All that remains, then, is to take control of whatever small corner of the world in which we find ourselves. Kingsnorth has asked "What if our challenge now is to build a series of smaller visions, focused less on the future and more on the present; less on the sky and more on the ground?"[14] It's a vision he

[10] Paul Kingsnorth, "Rescuing the English" in *Confessions of a Recovering Environmentalist*, 203.

[11] Paul Kingsnorth, *Beast* (London: Faber & Faber, 2016), 56.

[12] Kingsnorth, *Beast*, 12.

[13] Paul Kingsnorth, "This economic collapse is a 'crisis of bigness'", *The Guardian*, September 25 2011, accessed April 26 2022, https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2011/sep/25/crisis-bigness-leopold-kohr?view=mobile. This essay also appears as the first piece in *Confessions of a Recovering Environmentalist*.

[14] Paul Kingsnorth, "A Storm Blown From Paradise", *Emergence Magazine*, February 6 2018, accessed April 26 2022, https://emergencemagazine.org/essay/a-wind-blown-from-paradise/.

himself has put into action by moving his family from England to a smallholding in rural Ireland. Perhaps Buccmaster's downfall was his own crisis of bigness, attempting to reverse the impossible. Edward's war is more human; and, rather than the warrior, Edward is the hermit, the desert ascetic, the holy fool — a breed long extinct in modernity. "The hermits and the saints would arm themselves for battle and they would head out into the wild to meet the foe, and anything of themselves that they need to strip away, they would do it to ensure victory. No one believes that stuff any more."[15] Kingsnorth writes and speaks often of ascetics such as the desert fathers, likening them to the martyrs.[16] Whilst they seem extremely isolated figures, their isolation is in fact how they serve the community. Though not seen often, when the town glimpses the desert hermit in his rags, it can't help but question itself.

So what exactly is this hermit seeking? Something like this:

> *"From the east I came, to this high place, to be broken, to be torn apart, beaten, cut into pieces. I came here to measure myself against the great emptiness… To be open, to be in fear, to be aching with nothingness, to be lonely as the cold subsoil in winter, lonely as the last whale in the ocean, singing in bewilderment and no other to answer for all of time. This darkness. This is the only life."*[17]

Edward looks for whatever man is beneath the facile crust of modernity. His search is catalysed when he encounters a small country church and a huge, mysterious beast seen out of the corner of his eye. The juxtaposition of beast and church suggest that whatever Edward seeks, the dangerous mystery at the heart of things, unites the natural and the divine. But, like Buccmaster, Edward unravels. After a blow to the head, and a long time searching the moors, he turns feral. Kingsnorth again plays with language, as punctuation progressively drops out of Edward's narration and his language regresses into something reminiscent of *The Wake*'s shadow-tongue.

The conclusion of *Beast* is a mysterious one. After a final, fevered showdown with the beast, Edward's language suddenly reverts to normal again. An air of peace descends, and he lays his hand gently on the creature's head. What is Kingsnorth getting at?

Beast perhaps suggests that although the cracks in modernity's foundations are clear, we cannot simply try to kick it down. The temptation to do so, to make a radical break and damn the consequences, entices modernity's critics on all sides. Yet Edward is constantly dogged by the cost of his extreme retreat, apparently having deserted a wife and daughter. "Every holy man, every prophet, they all walked away. That's the bit they don't tell you. They never tell you about what

[15] Kingsnorth, *Beast*, 13.

[16] For example: "To early Christians, martyrdom was the ultimate sacrifice, but since the Emperor Constantine had Christianised the Roman Empire in the fourth century, the chances of being executed for the faith - known as the Red Martyrdom - were minimal. This was one reason that people like St Anthony took to the deserts of Egypt: now that death was not available as a sacrifice, a new form of askesis was needed. This was known as the White Martyrdom: giving up everything worldly in pursuit of theosis: union with God." "Intermission: The Green Martyrdom", The Abbey of Misrule, July 14 2021, accessed April 27 2022, https://paulkingsnorth.substack.com/p/intermission-the-green-martyrdom?s=r.

[17] Kingsnorth, *Beast*, 2-3.

was left behind, about who was left behind, about what had to be broken."[18] Whilst Edward consoles himself that in doing so he liberated them too, this has the ring of Buccmaster's aggrandising self-justifications. Unlike Buccmaster however, we do not leave Edward fleeing deluded into the forest. Nebuchadnezzar-like, he seems restored — though of course changed. Perhaps we are meant to draw a contrast between a recalcitrant Buccmaster and a reconciled Edward. Yet could Edward have ever reached his apparent balance without first going to an extreme? The reader has to ponder.

Furthermore, although Edward is a hermit, the fact is that many hermits come back, and he knows it. At one point, he considers a painting of St. Cuthbert, elected Bishop of Lindisfarne whilst living alone on an island, turning away from the king in refusal. "But he didn't refuse, in the end, He didn't refuse the call. He went back."[19] Perhaps Edward, too, goes back. Having been to the wild, having touched the beast, having taken ownership over his small corner, he can perhaps return to tell others what he has seen. To be of use, the voice crying in the wilderness must be within earshot of the city.

ALEXANDRIA

> *"no mind without body*
> *no body without Earth"*[20]

If *The Wake* is about raging against the world's end, and *Beast* is about trying to bring it on prematurely, *Alexandria* is about the attempt to escape it altogether. Set a thousand years into our future, after global warming has caused widespread flooding, climate change, and population collapse, the novel differs from its predecessors in many ways. Rather than following one protagonist, the book moves mostly between the perspectives of the seven remaining members of the Nitrian Order, a matriarchal religious cult in the English fens — sfia, lorenso, mother, father, nzil, el, and yrvidian. They are devoted to defying Wayland, an (apparently) artificial-intelligence, stitched somehow into the fabric of the Earth just prior to the collapse of human civilization which enabled humanity to supposedly escape catastrophe by uploading their consciousnesses to the cloud. With most of humanity uploaded, Wayland continues the process on those resistant, having deduced that human existence will always cause destruction. He does this via his retainers — metahumans with transparent skin, stripped of all defining features, and modified to carry out his bidding. One of these retainers, known to the reader as K, is the book's eighth narrator. The Nitrian Order holds out hope that humanity can return to balance with nature if they renounce technology. Viewing birds as vessel of the divine, they wait on the fulfilment of a long held prophecy: "*when Swans return Alexandria will fall.*"[21]

Both the Nitrian Order and K, in their own ways, seek an escape from apocalypse, but K is perhaps the most relevant for us. Whereas the Order seeks deliverance from dystopia through a mystical hope, K seeks it (and gives it to others) through technological escape. K's purpose is

[18] Kingsnorth, *Beast* 10-11.

[19] Kingsnorth, *Beast* 17.

[20] Paul Kingsnorth, *Alexandria* (London: Faber & Faber, 2020), 387

[21] Kingsnorth, *Alexandria*, 83.

to persuade humans to permit him to upload them to Alexandria. He explains its appeal: "As Alexandria became more accessible, everyone wanted in. If your life on Earth is going to be a hardscrabble in dying soil, or a struggle to survive in a lawless megacity slum, why continue it any longer than necessary?"[22]

Although the novel is set a millenia into the future, K's voice is, unnervingly, one from our own age. Kingsnorth uses language to great effect once again — the order members narrate with degraded speech, devoid of most grammar and punctuation. When K enters the novel, speaking perfect English, the reader is jarred by the familiarity. And the same goes for the content of K's speech. His evangelism for Alexandria rings of the rhetoric of digital technology developers and misanthropic environmentalists — the common factor between the two being their contempt for the frustrating physical existence of humanity. K's description of Alexandria is reminiscent of how Mark Zuckerberg describes the Metaverse: "It will let you share immersive experiences with other people even when you can't be together — and do things together you couldn't do in the physical world."[23] His open disdain for the place of humanity in the natural order calls to mind the open, eco-conscious antinatalism laughed off by the Duke of Sussex in his 2019 *Vogue* interview with Jane Goodall.[24] One chilling line from K crystalises the logic underlying both strands of thought: "We realise that the human body is a crime against the human mind, and a crime also against other forms of life." [25]

K embodies what Kingsnorth, for many years, has referred to simply as "the Machine" — a term he acknowledges he has inherited from, among others, writers such as R.S. Thomas, Dylan Thomas,[26] E.M. Forster,[27] and Lewis Mumford.[28] What is the Machine? Kingsnorth describes it:

> *This, then, is the Machine. It is not simply the sum total of various individual technologies we have cleverly managed to rustle up — cars, laptops, robot mowers and the rest. In fact, such 'technics', as Mumford calls them, are the product of the Machine, not its essence. The Machine is, rather, a tendency within us, made concrete by power and circumstance, which coalesces in a huge agglomeration of power, control and ambition. And it is not a new development. Indeed, it can be traced back much further than we might imagine, to the dawn of civilization itself.*[29]

The Machine, then, in Kingsnorth's telling, lies behind the likes of the Metaverse and the antinatalists. And by putting their ideas into

[22] Kingsnorth, *Alexandria*, 202.

[23] https://about.fb.com/news/2021/10/facebook-company-is-now-meta/

[24] "When The Duke of Sussex Interviewed Dr Jane Goodall About The Future."

[25] Kingsnorth, *Alexandria*, 214.

[26] See "The Poet and the Machine" in *Confessions of a Recovering Environmentalist* for Kingsnorth's study of "the three Thomases" — Edward, R.S., and Dylan.

[27] Paul Kingsnorth, "Intermission: The Machine Stops", *The Abbey of Misrule*, October 28 2021, accessed May 4 2022, https://paulkingsnorth.substack.com/p/intermission-the-machine-stops?s=r.

[28] Paul Kingsnorth, "Blanched Sun, Blinded Man: Divining the Machine Part One", May 26 2021, accessed May 4 2022, https://paulkingsnorth.substack.com/p/blanched-sun-blinded-man?s=r.

[29] Kingsnorth, "Blanched Sun, Blinded Man."

the mouth of a sinister metahuman such as K, Kingsnorth highlights how these sentiments are far more radical than their respectable veneer suggests. And yet the Machine, and Alexandria, are not simply things reserved for or pushed by the elites. K makes it very clear that Alexandria was made accessible to everyone. Given the choice, almost every human alive rejected the travails of the earth and their flesh, grasping for technological control to escape their limits. The suggestion of *Alexandria*, then, is that, within the deluding cogs of the Machine, in an age when everyone is online, we're all radicals now.

And yet Alexandria falls. The Machine stops. Wayland breaks — well, in a way. It's eventually revealed that Wayland is a pre-existent intelligence, some kind of pantheistic god, who takes on the earth as his body through a manmade technological matrix. An earthquake part way through the novel severs K's mental link to Wayland's physical hub, and we are left to assume that it, along with the billions of human minds uploaded to Alexandria, has been destroyed. Alexandria is revealed as an attempt by the divine Wayland, Gaia-like, to remove humanity from the earth for its own good. He confesses, in a final exchange with the father of the Order, to being mistaken:

> *"by locking human minds away*
> *i denied the great thought its fuel*
> *i broke the cycle*
> *the flow blocked, the balance skewed*
> *Alexandria was a dam*
> *blocking the great river"*[30]

The Machine, then, could not sustain the charge that human bodies are a crime. Throughout the book, K is resentful of the lingering weaknesses of his human flesh. Yet as it draws to a close, and Alexandria falls, he embraces tiredness, weakness, and grief: "We have both been abandoned, El and I. We have both been left. I feel it now. I can feel what she lacks."[31] As the novel concludes, K joins the remaining members of the order as they find a new group of humans who have found balance with the earth. For the first time, smiling, he relinquishes the Machine and embraces his own humanity.

This embrace of humanity, of limits, perhaps ties together Kingsnorth's vision throughout his trilogy of how we live at the end of the world. When we find ourselves there we will still be, inescapably, human, and the Buckmaster trilogy illustrates that the human instinct is to respond with a dangerous radicalism to that fact. Buccmaster, immortal longings in him, tries to rage his way into becoming a god; Edward, in his search for what kind of man he is, loses sight of what a properly human response to modernity is; K is almost lost to the Machine's illusory promise that he can escape his flesh forever. In each one, we find both warnings and inspiration for living with the inevitable.

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[30] Kingsnorth, Alexandria, 386.

[30] Kingsnorth, Alexandria, 376.

Colonized by the City

J. CHASE DAVIS

We planted a church in Boulder under no illusions regarding its warranted reputation as one of the most left wing cities in our nation. It is no secret that Boulder is a bastion of progressivism and regularly listed as one of the least religious cities in the country. It is a source of pride for our city in some ways. City officials regularly point to San Francisco policies as something to which they aspire. Perhaps the problem with scale has kept it from experiencing the same problems which SF has recently discovered with their policies. Regardless, the city desires to be known as progressive.

But as young church planters, we did not see it as an obstacle to ministry but an opportunity. After all, does not Jesus himself want to reach those outside the favor of the religious establishment? We imagined ourselves to be going after the prodigal son or the woman at the well. We found that most people in our town enjoyed the creative climate of Boulder, the great weather, and the laid back pace it offered. They were generally uninterested in being radicalized by progressivism. Or at least that was in 2011, before the BLM flags, the rainbow painted crosswalks, and the COVID mandates. The change first came to my attention when a church family moved away from the area because of transgender ideology being taught to their kids in area public schools in 2014. Then came the rainbow sidewalks and storefronts in 2019. Our church was trying to navigate these challenges with the same gospel-centered, missional posture we started with. We even saw a woman in a committed lesbian relationship come to know Christ and leave her relationship. But all the while members of our church were being flooded with messages surrounding our city's new found appetite for sexual indoctrination. When our elders decided to adopt more definitive language regarding biblical sexuality in our statement of faith, some of our members were troubled by the obvious stance we were taking which did not match the cultural current of our city. We preached a sermon series on sexuality in 2016 to address some of these matters but we shied away from speaking too confrontationally of the city's departure from historic biblical norms regarding sexuality.

The question we eventually needed to ask was: should it concern pastors when their cities fly transgender flags above city hall? We have been told it is a major problem if a state or city flies a confederate flag. Is this just another "blessing of liberty" or does it warrant any sort of denouncement from the pulpit? Church planters are tasked with the responsibility of "taking the unchanging truths of the gospel into a culture for the cause of Christ and beginning a church in that culture that proclaims the unchanging truths of Scripture in the changing cultural context."[1] It is a difficult task for any individual Christian, missionary, or church

planter. Contextualization deals with several aspects simultaneously. First, one must have an awareness of the core message of the gospel. The gospel is a message of reconciliation and hope dealing with various themes surrounding Jesus, the kingdom, grace, etc. In fact, this was part of the in-house debate regarding justification and kingdom in the 2000s: what does it mean to be gospel-centered? This core narrative or message of the gospel is treated as the center of missionary's strategy. In order to take this gospel message into a new context, the church planter or missionary must shed the cultural skin obstructing this gospel. Through this process of dis-enculturation, the church planter frees the gospel to take root in a new culture. I remember when we moved to Boulder, a longtime parachurch leader here said that I needed to adopt the local college team as my own. As a third generation Texas A&M Aggie, he did not know this would never happen, but it communicated the vibe well. You are in a new context, therefore you need to adopt the cultural heroes as your own. Finally, you must re-enculturate the gospel in your new context. You need to make sure that the core message of the gospel takes on new flesh. Hudson Taylor is a hero in this regard. As a missionary in China, he adopted the dress and style of the locals which was rather unorthodox in missionary societies at the time. Today, it is considered the gold standard in church planting. For us, it meant becoming a fan of the local food scene, the best trails, and celebrating the entrepreneurial culture of our city. In fact, for a minute I considered buying a prius, ditching my coffee habit for tea, and hanging out at the legendary Trident Cafe on Pearl sporting a beret and scarf. At the very least, I subscribed to the *New York Times* and perused my local bookstore regularly because that's what Tim Keller said was part of this missionary strategy.

This ethos becomes embodied in the evangelistic strategies of the church. A significant consideration in church planting is reaching new people. Most, if not all, church planters are not looking to start a church for people who are already Christian. They are looking to start a church to reach the lost. This in itself becomes a bit of a problem. Why? Because churches do exist for Christians. Proper churches are those that preach the word and administer the sacraments rightly. They hold fast to the faith and equip the saints for the work of ministry. They act as a further extension and expression of the mission of God in the world by the power of the Holy Spirit. When a church plant derives its core identity as that which is to seek and save the lost, it begins on shaky ground. This already shaky ground becomes even more sand-like when evangelistic methods fail to reckon with the ways in which a hostile world is eager to colonize the kingdom of God.

The gospel has already taken on flesh in the person of Jesus Christ. Our cultural context is not king. It does not determine, at least in a final way, the biblical model for ministry. While each cultural context demands a variety, and often unique set, of biblical strategies to reach it, those very same biblical strategies cannot be abandoned or discarded when they begin to threaten the stability of the church in its context. Biblical strategies for preaching and mission which beckon hostility from the surrounding culture cannot simply be muted in order to create a church which is ultra-amenable to the context. To submit the kingdom of God and its incipient methods of growth and advancement to context is to give it over to colonization. That does not mean there should not be a dialogue between the gospel message and culture. This is not some fundamentalism which is not receptive or open to the translatability of the

message.[1]

In order to escape colonization, boundaries and resistance must be established. There must be a de-radicalization as the culture aims to radicalize us. What would this look like? A return to farming à la Wendel Berry? Taking up fly fishing a la Eugene Peterson? We cannot just embrace the posture of the desert monks or even just that of resistance. The Benedict Option may be appealing and necessary for some but not all. Amongst calls to reject winsomeness as a pragmatic method of transforming culture, we must consider what is next. We must actively de-radicalize. But how?

Relational evangelism is a common strategy to reach the lost and exemplifies some of the challenges produced in a radicalized culture. The premise of the method is to gain enough relational credibility as a friend before you invite them to church or share the gospel with them. The effectiveness of the invitation is contingent on the perception and comfort of the friend. Christians are encouraged to attend events with that new friend and get involved with common ground activities such as recreation and sport. The goal, again, is to establish a neutral relationship where a gospel presentation or invitation to church can eventually take place.

The challenge arises when that Christian is not being sufficiently equipped to actively resist the worldview of their friend. It also becomes a problem in a radicalized culture where people are demanded to deny certain identities in relationships. One young man at our church was trying to follow this method of evangelism and so he joined some neighbors on a Thursday night bike ride. However, at the end of the bike ride everyone decided to do cocaine. While many Christians are not exposed to such an example, they are regularly invited to snort slogans and ideas which are foreign to the Christian worldview.

Sometimes this concept of evangelism takes on the ethos of winsomeness (which has received its own reevaluation recently). The strategy of winsomeness is to highlight areas of agreement, celebrate common ground, and invite exploration where there might be opportunities to point to Christ. The challenge with this method becomes clear when we are asked about issues of so-called "sexual identity." Tim Keller and J. D. Greear have made a point to show that heterosexuality does not save you and the Bible talks about greed more than sexuality. Greear and Jenn Wilkin have emphasized that the Bible "whispers" about sexual sin. The merits of those claims notwithstanding, these statements are becoming rather irrelevant in a culture which demands complete allegiance to the revolution. How are Christians to practice relational evangelism in a culture which demands allegiance to things contrary to Christianity? What happens when we strip down the gospel to the death and resurrection of Christ as the message we hope to impart? Are we to "just preach the gospel?" We tend to end up avoiding areas of offense on matters related to sexuality, abortion, marriage, etc. in order to gain a hearing later. This invariably requires some relational sensitivity but, as often is the case, it can also involve some compromise along the way. Compromise can be a dirty word, but it is also the reality of human relationships. Even so, many can feel duped and even betrayed once Christian convictions on these matters inevitably become apparent. And become

[1] Kanneh, Lamin. T*ranslating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture* (Orbis, New York; 1989); https://www.firstthings.com/blogs/firstthoughts/2022/05/justin-lee-on-fundamentalism-and-evangelicalism

apparent they will in an age where the world is colonizing the kingdom. Demanding allegiance and confessing beliefs is a favorite tactic of these colonizers in their quest for dominion.

Rather than settling for mere "relevance," church planters are to be navigating the tumultuous waters of contextualization. It's a story as old as 2022. A young church planter moves to the city with a vision of reaching the people of that culture in the language of that culture with the good news of the gospel. He may not have studied Darrell Guder's *Missional Church* or David Bosch's seminal *Transforming Mission*, but he has picked up enough from Keller and Ed Stetzer to know how the game is played. He needs to make sure he contextualizes the gospel and disenculturates any impediments to the gospel. Over time, things begin to shift for him. He reaches people. But they have reached him too. Zach Lambert is the latest example. As the city becomes more pro-LGBTQ+, the pastor, earnest to hear and empathize with the plight of those hurting, begins to soften orthodox Christianity in favor of a so-called gospel-centered approach.

What are we to make of such a pedantic example? Colonization can happen to anyone. In seeking to make disciples, a new disciple has been made. How does someone with noble aspirations become a disciple of culture rather than discipling the culture?

Church planters must embrace a gospel message that is more robust than the four spiritual laws or Romans road approach or relational evangelism. We must develop in Christians and in churches the comprehensive scope of the gospel. If we are sent into the world after the benediction on Sundays, we must be sent out well equipped and well aware of what we are getting into. We must develop active ways to go on the offense lest we rehash the very style that got us into this mess: churches just trying to hold the middle. And make no mistake, when the church goes on the offense, it will be interpreted offensively. The church of God advances in the world and the world hates it for it. One way the kingdom of God advances by speaking prophetically against the idols of the city. This requires boldness from pastor and parishioner alike. It looks like a business owner not merely rejecting the rainbow flag brought by the local government official to hang on the storefront, but also encouraging fellow business owners to reject it as well. And it looks like telling that government official that God says this is wrong and why. All of that requires a level of discipleship from churches and discernment from God for which many are hungry.

Another way to equip Christians to resist radicalization is to teach the law of God. For many gospel-centered churches, the law is reduced to some impediment at best or giant hurdle at worst that people could never achieve. The law is portrayed as only sufficient and necessary insofar as it reveals sin. The gospel-centered movement has been plagued by an anti-nominan streak with characters such as Tullian Tchvidjian. Various uses of the law might be alluded to but the aspect in which the law shows you that you need a Savior is the one most often cited and celebrated.[2] While this aspect of the law is biblical and has been an emphasis throughout church history, it is rather anemic. The law of God is not simply an MRI machine which reveals the cancer of sin. It is

[2]https://www.tvcresources.net/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/20190421123FM_MattChandler_StandAloneEaster.pdf

also instructive and useful for understanding God's design for social relationships (Ps. 19:7). Christians gain insight into God's standard for money, sex, marriage, child-rearing, government, rest, and virtue from the law of God. Those who have been ill-equipped on these matters, have an unappreciative view of the pedagogical realities of the law, and are then thrust into the world, will find themselves giving up ground left and right.

René Girard gives us the insight that people are shaped by desires. God's law against covetousness recognizes this. We see what others have and who they are and we are invariably shaped by them. Social media is potent regarding this reality. It exposes us to an infinite number of images and statements and then invites us to position ourselves in support of or against those images. This social shaping by desire is not merely a result of the fall; it is by God's design. We were not designed to covet, we were designed to be shaped by others. Children are designed to be shaped by their parents. Siblings shape one another. We choose our friends carefully because they shape us, not for their social advantage or opportunity. Friends impact our very personality and system of belief. Loyalty is a virtue in this regard. God designed us to grow close in community with others and to develop attachment to others. This attachment shapes us. And, this attachment to others is not absent in planting a church. Just ask any church planter what their most challenging reality on the ground is, and you'll often hear the same refrain: loss. The greatest losses are the relational losses in church planting. That is because the church planter relationally attaches to many new people in a given context. The church planter gives relationally and is often left alone as the church changes.

This is not merely true of pastors and church planters. This is also true of Chrisitans. When Christians share the gospel and seek to be evangelistic, they are not some chemist conducting an experiment or a mathematician solving a problem. They are people relating with other people. They are invariably, and by design, shaped by those to whom they are attempting to evangelize. Many Christians are colonized by the city because they are naive to these realities. They believe that they can step into deep trusting relationships with radicals and avoid causing offense until the right opportunity occurs for them to share about Jesus's life and death. Typically, the Christian is either waiting for the other person to notice they are a Christian or they are waiting until their friend has a crisis moment. The former leads Christians to believe that the best thing they have to offer is that they are just like them, but with a little bit of Jesus. Or, for others, they conclude that in order to reach my friend or coworker, I must become utterly different so they ask what is different about me. This can create all sorts of unnecessary performative personality traits. The latter solution, waiting for a crisis moment, feels smarmy and predatory. Even though this tactic is not unbiblical and can be utilized by Christians, it can lead us to a "wait and see" approach to evangelism. We should not want people to have to experience a crisis before they come to see the beauty of the gospel.

This is why a robust community with deep attachments in the church is such a necessary and robust defense against becoming radicalized by the culture around us. But it is not merely for resistance. A robust church with places for deep relational attachment to Christ through rich liturgy and others in community provides two aids in resisting colonization:

First, it provides an alternative community which outsiders can experience. People can come and experience what life is like for those in Christ who have no need for revolutionary radicalism. Second,

it provides an offensive bulwark against the excesses of our culture. As the church departs into the world, this community becomes indispensable to evangelism. Evangelism is not done alone. It is done alongside brothers and sisters who can complement our gifting and be on guard against false teaching.

Consider church planting in the midst of societal upheaval on matters of justice. Much of the gospel-centered and contextual approach to mission and church planting submits to a Rawlsian construction of justice and assumes the neutrality of the public square. For John Rawls, the ideal society was one in which each person has an equal right to the most extensive liberty compatible with all. Society needs to be structured in such a way so as to maximize freedom. Furthermore, inequalities are assumed to be arbitrary unless we can demonstrate that it benefits us all. Therefore, any distinctions and particular identities become the grounds for special treatment in order to demand equality. Justice becomes merely political with no transcendent, metaphysical claims.

Christians who enter these cultural waters are assumed to adopt a neutral approach on matters of justice. As soon as a Christian brings up God and his transcendent norms and creational disparities, one has sullied the relationship and has now thwarted the opportunity to "share the gospel." Therefore, it becomes expedient to adopt the neutral public square approach because after all, gay marriage does not infringe on my liberty, in order that I may win people to Christ. Even worse, Christians give up claims regarding equality and justice based on transcendent norms in favor of a Rawlsian definition. Then when the culture screams justice and equality these gospel-centered Christians hear Christian words but adopt non-Chrsitian beliefs. They become cultural captives, colonized by their city.

It really does follow the Hallmark movie archetype of the girl who moves to the big city to get away from her small town. Except in this story there is rarely an appreciative return to the small town. Instead, the church planter becomes recalcitrant and adopts the same sneering spirit as those by whom he has been colonized. What if in re-enculturation, church planters are in effect adopting secular ideologies which are in fact laying eggs inside the church eating it out from the inside? Rather than this hollowing out of the pure doctrine of God within the church, churches must stand at the ready with the gospel, unafraid and unflinching in the face of a hostile world which would love nothing more than to destroy the kingdom of God. And if they cannot destroy it, they will at least attempt to neuter it, which is exactly what is happening when churches and Christians become colonized by the world.

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Once More, Church and Culture

BRAD EAST

Christendom is the name we give to Christian civilization, when society, culture, law, art, family, politics, and worship are saturated by the church's influence and informed by its authority. Christendom traces its beginnings to the fourth century after Christ; it began to ebb, in fits and starts, sometime during the transition from the late middle ages to the early modern period. It is tempting to plot its demise with the American and French revolutions, though in truth it outlasted both in many places. It came to a more or less definitive end with the world wars (in Europe) and the Cold War (in America). Even those who lament Christendom's passing and hope for its reestablishment have no doubt that the West is post-Christian *in this sense*. The West will always carry within it its Christian past — whether as a living wellspring, a lingering shadow, a haunting ghost, or an exorcised demon — but it is indisputable that whatever the West has become, it is not what it once was. Christendom is no more.

To ask about the church's place in society while living in Christendom is redundant. The question answers itself. The question is genuinely new, however, when posed *after* Christendom. For that reason it has been posed continually in the past few centuries, especially in the last 75 years. H. Richard Niebuhr's *Christ and Culture*, published in 1951, is a reliable touchstone. The postwar period up to the present has seen American Protestants in particular eager, and sometimes anxious, to clarify, to solidify, and, if necessary, to resituate their relationship to the nation: its legal and political operations, its respectable professions, its educational institutions, its means of cultural production. The conversation is no closer to being resolved today than when Niebuhr first gave the lectures in Austin, Texas, that would later become his book.

Niebuhr's template set the standard for those who followed. An ostensible sampling of major approaches to church and culture, by way of historical ideal types, the final type receives no criticism and remains at the end of the line, giving the unavoidable impression of a final evolutionary development. Like liberalism, it lies at the end of history; there are no alternatives, certainly not those that came before.

Other authors are less coy, proposing *the* correct model (or option) plainly and forcefully. Whether explicit or implicit, however, such approaches to "church and culture" are inapt to our present moment. Though we have much to learn from them — especially Niebuhr's, which stubbornly resists summary, simplification, and dismissal — they fail to offer either the practical guidance the American church so desperately needs today or a sufficiently capacious (because insufficiently catholic) appreciation of the radically different contexts in which the church has found itself across the centuries and, thus, the understandable diversity of its responses to those contexts. In other words, American (especially evangelical) Protestant thinking about the church after Christendom is overdetermined, on one hand, by its presumption of the American context as normative, and on the other, by its failure to see Christendom as truly at an end. Its besetting vices are amnesia and nostalgia.

If this seems contradictory, that's because it is. America is at once the post-Christendom nation *par excellence* and, for most of its history, Christendom's last outpost. As to the former, Oliver O'Donovan writes that "Christendom is an *era*, an era in which the truth of Christianity was taken to be a truth of secular politics. … Let us say that the era lies between AD 313, the date of the Edict of Milan, and 1791, the date of the First Amendment to the US Constitution." Formal and principled disestablishment, that is to say, is *nothing but* the repudiation of "the idea of a professedly Christian secular political order" — namely, Christendom.

As to the latter, American political order was for two centuries explicitly Christian. Not in theological substance — that is, this is not a material judgment about the conformity of the American regime to the truth of the gospel —but in social and rhetorical practice. "Free exercise" was a means by which Americans might *differently* embody their *common* faith in the God of Abraham. And so they did. Public office, presidential debate, congressional law, judicial opinion, family life, civic order: it was all shot through, overtly and unashamedly, with Christian speech, Christian belief, Christian identity. It was therefore a shock to the churches' system when, after the triumph of World War II, the informal establishment of Christianity as America's religion suffered repeated losses in the courts, in the arts, and in the pews. And now, at last, the exodus from the mainline that began in the 1960s has come for the evangelicals. The de-Christianization that started in the Bill of Rights and continued in law and popular culture has finally caught up to the local congregation, once thought secure in the Bible Belt. Of Americans born after 1995, fewer than half claim to be Christian, and the percentage declines with each passing year.

This is what I mean when I point to amnesia and nostalgia. Until the last few decades Christendom in America was alive and well, although alert observers could read the writing on the wall. In this way American Protestants had reason to suppose that "Christendom" (i.e., an ancient civilization symbolized by names like Constantine, Charlemagne, and Richard the Lionheart) was a thing of the past *and* that present

political arrangements (i.e., a demographically Christian nation that had no qualms about privileging one faith above others) were built to last. Read any evangelical writing on politics or culture from the last half century, and what you will find is axiomatic rejection of the first followed by a quixotic plan to rescue or retrieve the second. The failure lies in the inability to see that the second is the final, exhausted form of the first; and, moreover, that it is the principles animating American liberal order that struck the fatal blow.

In what remains of this essay I want to do three things. First, to offer a sample of some of the typologies on offer in "church and culture" literature. Second, to show their practical, historical, and political limitations. Third, to propose an alternative.

Start with Niebuhr. He describes the matter of his book as "the double wrestle of the church with its Lord and with the cultural society with which it lives in symbiosis." His aim is to supplement as well as to correct the work of Ernst Troeltsch's *The Social Teachings of the Christian Churches*. He expands Troeltsch's three types to five and subjects them in turn to theological and not only historical or social analysis. Those five types are:

1. Christ Against Culture.
This is the classic "sect" type: Anabaptists and other radicals who reject natural law and the duties of governing in order to adhere to the letter of Christ's commands, above all the Sermon on the Mount.

2. The Christ of Culture.
This type swings the other way, subordinating the teachings of Scripture and tradition to the dominant cultural norms of the day. Niebuhr is thinking most especially of German Protestant liberals like Ritschl and Schleiermacher, but also Abelard and Clement of Alexandria.

3. Christ Above Culture.
This is the first of three "median" types, which attempt to balance or find some agreeable compromise between the demands of the gospel and the duties and expectations of the surrounding society. The image of Christ standing above culture is meant to connote Christendom: a comprehensive synthesis obtained (or sought) between the Rule of Christ and the rule of kings, the law of the gospel and the law of nature. St. Thomas Aquinas is the great theorist here.

4. Christ and Culture in Paradox.
Niebuhr calls members of this type "dualists." If "Christ Above Culture" conjures a cathedral, dualism and paradox call to mind nothing so much as a pendulum. It is, as he says, an "oscillatory" type. It finds its ideal representative in Luther (that able advocate of Christian liberty and God's hangman alike) but also in Troeltsch, Niebuhr the elder, Kierkegaard, Brunner, and the early Barth. Such figures are always joining the battle, always pressing the cause, but never with wholly coherent terms of peace in mind. They reject the radical route yet speak with equally ferocious rhetoric. They reject likewise the quiescent cultural embrace of the liberals and the medievals. So they fight without rest, world without end.

5. Christ the Transformer of Culture.
This is what Niebuhr terms the "conversionist" type. He aligns it with St. Paul(!), St. Augustine, Calvin, and the mature Barth. It is more hopeful toward culture than the dualists, more honest about the demands of

> Christ's teaching than the synthesizers, but less extreme than either the radicals or the liberals. It grants precedence to the gospel and thus anticipates conflict between the gospel and the world — all without denying the doctrine of creation, the validity of natural reason, or the corruption of both through sin. It wants neither to replace culture nor to leave it alone but to convert it: to take its antecedent morals and beliefs and transfigure them. Yet Niebuhr allows that such a process of transvaluation is sure to remain incomplete this side of glory.

There is no doubting the erudition and insight of Niebuhr's typology. As to whether the final type is a legitimate peer alongside the others or something of a cheat — not to mention whether he is just to the other types, particularly the first — one's mileage will vary.

In any case, consider a more recent model. It comes from James Davison Hunter's *To Change the World: The Irony, Tragedy, and Possibility of Christianity in the Late Modern World*, published in 2010. This book rightly serves as a lodestar for understanding the waning fortunes of Christian cultural influence in America and the consistent failure of (again, especially evangelical) strategies to turn the tide.[1] Hunter makes a persuasive case regarding what culture is, how it circulates, how it changes, and accordingly what one would have to do in order to go about changing it. He is ambivalent about that last goal, though. He doesn't see it as a principal feature of Christian mission to "change the culture." But he offers a roadmap for those who do.

In addition, or as it were in parallel, he offers another path. This path he sets in contrast to three dominant modes of cultural engagement in American churches. They are:

> ***1. Defensive against.*** This approach "seeks to create a defensive enclave that is set against the world." Hunter points to conservative populist activism, motivated by lost causes, lost privilege, even a lost world — the world of the WASP mainstream (or as I put it earlier, Christendom in its late American phase).
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> ***2. Relevance to.*** This is the strategy of the liberal mainline and, more recently, of seeker-sensitive pop evangelicalism. It makes "a priority of being connected to the pressing issues of the day." Two or three generations ago, this meant making peace with "changing social mores" (on sex especially); today it means something like an exercise in "rebranding." If young people find the trappings of historic, institutional Christianity boring or outdated, then the obvious thing to do is give it a makeover. As Hunter writes, "the truth and integrity of faith is mostly assumed to take care of itself." This assumption turns out to be naïve in the extreme.
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> ***3. Purity from.*** This paradigm is similar to Niebuhr's "Christ Against Culture." But unlike those in the defensive crouch in (1) above, there is no attempt to reclaim territory or engage in mass evangelism, with dreams of another Great Awakening spreading throughout the land. "Neo-Anabaptists" and "urban monastics" may be Left or Right or off

[1] I've previously written about these issues in *Mere Orthodoxy*, using Hunter's book as a framework: see "Theologians Were Arguing About the Benedict Option 35 Years Ago," March 13, 2017.

> the political map altogether; whatever their doctrine or social ethics, they are united in the conviction that "the church has no … obligation other than to be itself," with a "net effect" of "a certain kind of disengagement" from law, politics, and the arts.

Hunter believes these postures to be inadequate to the calling of Christian mission. So he proposes a fourth approach, which he sees as a way forward:

> ***4. Faithful presence within***. Hunter roots his alternative in a theology of divine presence, solidarity, and loving initiative. In imitation of the incarnating God, the church ought to dwell, socially and bodily, in the midst of "the world" — where that term means the heart of society as such. Wherever a particular people may be found, their culture is there with them; Christians ought, as a matter of course, to take up residence among them, and thereby within their culture. Such residence ought to be faithful, though. First, it ought to be characterized by obedience to the Great Commission; whatever change, cultural, political, or otherwise, that results should be a byproduct of focusing on what matters most. Second, faithfulness begins with affirmation: What is good, true, and beautiful about this culture? What of it points to God? What of it does the church find amenable to the good news of Jesus? Third, after affirmation comes antithesis, or "constructive subversion." The church's Yes toward culture contains also a No, which the church should not be shy in articulating. Affirmation and antithesis thus form a dialectic of cultural engagement.

It is hard to take issue with a proposal as sober and subtle as this one. It calls to mind a similar vision, spelled out by Robert Jenson just a few years before he passed in 2017:

> So what, if anything, should the Church do about the state of Western culture? To deal cogently with that question, we must avoid an error that has confused much of the discussion. The question about "Christ and Culture," as if Christ were one sort of reality and culture simply another, has generated much admirable thought but is nevertheless a category mistake. For the Church is herself manifestly a culture, and according to the New Testament the Church is the embodiment of Christ. The question then should be about "Christ and Other Cultures."
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> Christ embodied as his Church does not swim in a homogeneous sea of "culture." Rather, the Church makes a way through history between Pentecost and the End, encountering other cultures as she goes. Each newly encountered culture already has its own morale and worship, and given that the world is at once the good creature of the one God and fallen into evil, the encounter between the Church and any culture will be both appreciative and polemical. The Church will find practices and ideas she can adopt and transform for her own, and others which she must combat. Neither the Church nor the other culture will ever be the same.

In this sense Hunter's suggestion is unobjectionable. Zoom in closer, however, and there are details that call for clarification or correction. Given, then, its kinship with Niebuhr's conversionist type and its location in such an important work of sociological criticism, I want to highlight certain features and limits that will aid us in constructing an alternative.

First, it is deeply American. That is, it is not a timeless vision but one applied to a specific context. This is not a problem so long as we do

not mistake, as American Christians are wont to do, our contingent situation for a universal one.

Second, it is also deeply modern and Western. By this I don't mean that Hunter is modernist or subscribes wholesale to the Enlightenment. He is not and does not. Nevertheless the vision he casts presupposes something like the settlement of the last two centuries — at once secular, liberal, and capitalist — as the status quo. Again, this is not a problem, because it is the setting into which he is speaking. But we must continually remind ourselves that this settlement, not what came before it, is the historical and global oddity in the church's mission. Perhaps it will outstrip the length and legacy of the church's prior experience. But what if conditions changed? Or what of communities in quite different parts of the world, such as Egypt or China? For all we know, our situation is unique and will be short-lived.

Third, it is a proposal by and for the upper-middle class. Almost without exception, the examples of faithful presence adduced by Hunter belong to professions and careers filled exclusively by the college-educated and sometimes only by bona fide elites. He refers approvingly to "business … policy and law … inquiry, scholarship, and learning … art [and] music." He calls for civic leadership, entrepreneurialism, founding institutions, and joining or contributing to the highest levels of cultural production and influence. All this, in service to and funded by a Reformed theology of work that sees labor of whatever kind as an ennobling participation in the creative work of God. Though he seeks to head off the following criticism, it is difficult to see most working people's jobs in this account. Flipping burgers, cleaning toilets, and moderating Facebook do not have to rise to the level of a divine vocation (in which one is asked to take pleasure!) in order for believers to do them with integrity. Pauline injunctions about doing work "as for the Lord" are not about baptizing the work — he is, we should not forget, addressing slaves — but about the baptized doing their duty, even if there is nothing about the work in itself that is meaningful.

Fourth and finally, given these features of the proposal, Hunter's presentation of "faithful presence within" suffers from an overly sanguine view of the professions and institutions in which Christians are called to be present. He writes, for example, that "faithful presence in practice is the exercise of leadership in all spheres and all levels of life and activity." Bracket the echoes of corporate dicta that suggest *inside every one of us is a leader* (to which is appended: *now obey your boss* and *God forbid don't organize*). The more relevant allusion is to Abraham Kuyper, who famously remarked: "There is not a square inch in the whole domain of our human existence over which Christ, who is Sovereign over all, does not cry, Mine!" This claim is often redeployed in theologies of work, vocation, culture, and politics similar to Hunter's. And, like his proposal, they are true as far as they go.

But how far is that? When my students read Hunter, they readily voice agreement. I then ask them a simple question: I*n what professions or spheres of life would "faithful presence" not be possible for a Christian?* After not quite following my meaning, they start to rattle off answers. Pimp. Prostitute. Pornographer. Stripper. Slumlord. Drug dealer. Torturer. Assassin. Abortionist. Nuclear weapons manufacturer. Lawyer. Politician. Spy. One student wondered aloud about selling guns or alcohol. Another volunteered that her dad, a pastor, also runs a gun shop. (I teach in west Texas.) Still another raised the question of marketing — a popular major at my university. If marketing aims to manipulate consumers to buy what they don't need with money they don't have,

may Christians do it? Or suppose that marketing per se is licit; what of working for a firm that advertises an immoral product?

The point is not that my students are right, about these or other jobs. It is that, even setting aside the fact that our imagined audience is white-collar professionals and not the Christian community as a whole, the Kuyperian-Hunterian vision does not prepare believers to consider all the ways their faith will require them *not* to participate in the workforce, *not* to attain lucrative careers, *not* to benefit from the economy, not to "engage" the culture. At the end of the day, even when it nods at critique, it is a social ethic of relentless affirmation and only modest, and then partial and incrementalist, antithesis.

I don't want to overstate the critique. As I said above, Niebuhr, Hunter, and Jenson are right to see a dialectic at work in the church's encounter with various cultures. Any suggestion of an absolute No or an absolute Yes is out of the question. Allow me, then, to submit an alternative. Not in rejection, but as an appreciative modification and extension of their proposals.

As I see it, there is no one "correct" type, posture, or model. Instead, the church has four primary modes of faithful engagement with culture. They are inevitably overlapping and essentially non-competitive with one another. Which mode is called for depends entirely on context and content. Rare is the time when the church would forego any of them; typically they are all at work simultaneously, whether in the same community, in different communities, or in individual members of the larger church. Each mode applies in every possible historical and political context: premodern and postmodern, established and disestablished, privileged and persecuted. Here are the four:

1.Resistance

The church is always and everywhere called to resist injustice and idolatry wherever they are found. It does this whether or not it has any social power or political prestige to speak of. It lives "against" or "in spite of" the existing powers that be. Sometimes these powers fade quickly, as with Nazi Germany or Apartheid South Africa. Sometimes they last longer, like pagan Rome or the antebellum South. Sometimes they last still longer, as with the fate of the Copts in Egypt and other Christians in the Middle East. But even when the regime is friendly to Christians — even when the regime is *formally Christian* — the task of resistance obtains. It is perennial. Sometimes all it requires is sheer perseverance. Sometimes that is enough.

2. Repentance

The church is always and everywhere called to repent of its sins, crimes, and failures. Which is to say, the injustice and idolatry the church is universally tasked with resisting is reliably found, first of all, within the church, not without. *Judgment must begin at the house of God*. Here the command of Christ means to live "against" or "in spite of" the corruptions and wickednesses of Christ's own body, which often enough find acute expression in its leaders. To be sure, the confession of sin ought to find its regular reiteration in the liturgy. But more is required. When the church, whether corporately or in the person of individual members, finds itself in sin, it should need no external pressure to admit its faults, publicly and penitently. The credibility of the gospel is rarely threatened by the church's failures so much as by its unwillingness to admit them — or, what is most scandalous at all, its readiness to cover them up.

3. Reception

The church is always and everywhere called to receive from the world the many blessings bestowed upon it by God. For God is the universal Creator; the world he created is good; and he alone is Lord of all peoples and thus of all cultures. As it is written, "Every good endowment and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights" (Jam 1:17). Or as the popular proverb goes, "All truth is God's truth." Which means that all good is God's good and all beauty is God's beauty. This means not only that the church will find much gold among the Egyptians. It means further that some such gold will be genuinely new to the church. Put plainly, the world is full of vital knowledge and priceless artifacts that in no way have their source in Christian faith (though their ultimate source is in Christ, as St. Paul teaches). Believers ought never to be naïve or uncritical, but in such cases the only thing to do is stretch out one's hands in humble reception, before giving thanks to God.

4. Reform

The church is always and everywhere called to preach the gospel, which is the word of God's saving grace in Jesus Christ. Another term for this task of proclamation is *prophecy*. The church is a company of prophets and is itself, as a community, a single great prophet, just as it is the corporate body of the Lord Jesus, who is its head. The Spirit fills and equips it for just this work. Nor is prophecy a "merely" spiritual matter. Whether we look to the prophets of Israel, the apostles of Acts, or Jesus himself, when God's word is announced it is a comprehensive address. It speaks to heart, mind, body, and soul. It concerns merchants and magistrates no less than peasants and servants. It commands righteousness among the people of God and justice among the nations. It recognizes no walls of separation. Where life is not in accordance with God's will, it expects change. The gospel, in a word, *reforms*. It generates adjustment in the way things are with a view to what they shall be in the kingdom of Christ. We see precisely this process in the church's history: the public remorse of Emperor Theodosius; the development of cenobitic monasticism; the revolution of St. Francis; the abolitionists of England and America; the spread of child labor laws; the civil rights movement of the 1960s. These are not instances of secular activism. They are the word of God in its triumphal march through history. When and where the time is right, when and where the Spirit moves, the proclamation of the gospel cuts a culture to the bone, and the culture is never the same. Ever after, it walks with a limp.

The benefits of this fourfold model are many.

First, it does not privilege any one mode but takes for granted that context is everything, on one hand, and no context is simple, on the other. Even under the Diocletian persecution, for example, the church was not *solely* resisting, even if that response was to the fore.

Second, it does not prioritize work as the primary sphere in which the church encounters a culture or makes its presence known. There is no question that the church's manifold witness encompasses labor. But there is no reason to make such labor central; doubly so when labor is, as it tends to be, insignificant, inconsistent, humiliating, unpleasant, or unjust.

Third, it does not focus on any one class of persons within the church but instead on the community as a whole. The generic modes I have identified here may be disaggregated into concrete tasks that any one individual or sub-group of the community might undertake,

whether intentionally or unconsciously in the course of one's daily life.

Fourth, little here is measurable in terms of external or tangible impact. Inasmuch as these forms of engagements are "modes" they are modes of *life*. They don't necessarily pick out discrete activities whose consequences one might evaluate by economic, political, or sociological methods. This seems fitting, given the nature of the subject matter.

Fifth, as I have already indicated, there is no specific social arrangement or political regime either presupposed or generated by this proposal. It applies when the church has no power and when the church has all of it. It pertains to Chalcedonian Christians in the Byzantine Empire, to Armenian Christians in the Ottoman Empire, and to Baptist Christians in the American Empire. The mission of the church is one and the same wherever the church finds itself; the same goes for its engagement with culture.

Sixth and finally, this proposal understands that the faithful presence of the church is a differentiated presence. Sometimes, that is, the Spirit beckons believers, like the Macedonian man in the vision of St. Paul, to cross over, to enter in, to settle down, to build houses and plant vineyards. In other words, to inhabit a culture from the inside. Sometimes, however, the Spirit issues a different call: "Come out of her, my people, lest you take part in her sins, lest you share in her plagues" (Rev 18:4); "come out from them, and be separate from them, says the Lord, and touch nothing unclean" (2 Cor 6:17, paraphrasing Isaiah and other prophets). The fidelity of the church's witness is measured not only by its presence to the world but also by its difference from the world. That difference is called holiness.

Consider, by way of conclusion, the monasteries of Mount Athos. Much in American Protestant discourse on the topic of "church and culture" rides on whether one sees Athonite monks as an especially beautiful or an especially baleful example of "faithful presence" and "Christian engagement." For me, I'm siding with the monks. If a model of the Great Commission cannot make sense of monasticism, then so much the worse for the model.

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THREE CHALLENGES TO TALKING ABOUT HEALTH

Sandro Galea. Well: *What We Need to Talk About When We Talk About Health*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2019. 274pp, $28.95.

BREWER EBERLY

One of my favorite ways to orient new medical students on the clinical team is to riff on a 2015 study by the County Health Review: only 16% of overall patient outcomes (defined as quality and length of life) are attributable to what we do in medicine.[1] It's a sobering statistic — one I use to encourage the students (and myself) to "hold our 16%" with humility.

Physician and professor of public health Sandro Galea is even more modest: a mere 6% percent of our collective health is determined by access to medical care.[2] Galea wrote *Well: What We Need to Talk About When We Talk About Health* to nudge public discussion of health away from the 6–16% we typically associate with medical interventions and toward a meditative, "long view of health."[3] His approach is sweeping: twenty chapters on subjects like money, power, politics, place, compassion, hate, luck, justice, death. He brings in climate change, gun violence, celebrity influence, industrial practice, education, urban design, road safety, fast food.

Well covers a lot of ground, reading as a series of brief, tight reflections on what most medical workers will

[1] Carlyn Hood, Keith Gennuso, Geoffrey Swain, Bridget Caitlin, "County Health Rankings: Relationships Between Determinant Factors and Health Outcomes," *American Journal of Preventative Medicine* 50, no. 2 (2015): 129–35. Cited by the Human Harvard Network Initiative, https://www.humannetworkinitiative.com.
[2] Galea, *Well*, 149.
[3] Ibid., 205.

recognize as "the social determinants of health."[4] And while I share Galea's formation as a primary care physician and sympathize with his vision, I see three challenges to changing what we talk about when we talk about health:

It is difficult to talk about health when we don't agree on what health is.

As Galea argues, "all members of the human family wish to be healthier."[5] But this begs the question of what we mean by "health." The World Health Organization (WHO) famously defined health as "not merely the absence of disease" but "the complete physical, mental and social well-being" of the human person as a whole — a definition so comprehensive in scope as to be unachievable in practice.[6] Leon Kass's construal of "well-working" is often named in counterpoint to this — narrowing health to "an activity of the living body in accordance with its specific excellences," in part to give the medical sciences something to aim for. That said, Kass's definition seems to overlook the relational, entangled aspects of health in which, as Wendell Berry famously put it, "to speak of the health of an isolated individual is a contradiction in terms."[8,9]

Why does it matter how we define good health if we can all agree we want to be healthier? Because contemporary biopolitics favor broad, WHO-ish construals of health in order to justify those individual choices and legally available medical interventions that are not clearly health-restoring — neither in the sense of bodily well-working Kass describes, nor in the richness of Berry's vision of creaturely enmeshment. Does "good health" include access to elective abortion? To physician-assisted suicide? Can good health include puberty-blocking agents aimed at approximating the bodily experience of the opposite sex? Does the elimination of Down Syndrome make the human family "healthier"? If "nothing is possible without health," how are we to understand how those with chronic illness can and do live according to what Karl Barth called "the will to be healthy" — a kind of well-working present even within the sick (sometimes especially within the sick)?[10]

Well doesn't engage these questions. And while all members of the human family probably do wish to be healthier, it depends what we mean by "health" (and certainly what we mean by "all members").

[4] "About Social Determinants of Health (SDOH)," March 10, 2021. *Center for Disease Control and Prevention*. https://www.cdc.gov/socialdeterminants/about.html.
[5] Galea, *Well*, xii.
[6] Ibid., 183–4. See also "Constitution," 2022. *World Health Organization*. https://www.who.int/about/governance/constitution.
[7] Leon Kass, "The End of Medicine and the Pursuit of Health" in *Toward a More Natural Science: Biology and Human Affairs* (New York: The Free Press, 1985): 157–86, 174.
[8] Wendell Berry, "Health is Membership," in *Another Turn of the Crank* (Washington, D.C.: Counterpoint,1996), 86–109, cited in M. Therese Lysaught, Joseph J. Kotva, Jr, Stephen E. Lammers, Allen Verhey, eds, *On Moral Medicine: Theological Perspectives in Medical Ethics*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm B. Eerdmans, 2012), 419–25.
[9] There are other definitions: health as species normativity, integrated "meta-capability," adaptive potential, value states. See Adam Omelianchuck, "Do You Have a 'Syndrome' If You Have a Flat-Shaped Head? *Journal of Medicine and Philosophy* 43 (2018): 369–80. See Christopher Boorse, "Health as a Theoretical Concept," *Philosophy of Science* 44 (1977): 542–73.
[10] Galea, *Well*, 33; See also Karl Barth, "The Will to Be Healthy," in *On Moral Medicine*, 320–5

Medicine instrumentalizes what we talk about.

There is a crucial difference between your physician recognizing you as a whole person and your physician breaking that wholeness down into discrete parts to be categorized, diagnosed, and treated. Obviously, some of this is good. If my son gets pneumonia, I certainly hope his pediatrician uses accurate diagnostics and therapeutics to focus on one aspect of his health. But under the biopsychosocialspiritual model, the clinician can feasibly analyze *every* aspect of one's health (literally ana-*lysis*, "to break down") and slowly bring each component into ever more totalizing management and efficient reimbursement. I found myself imagining the chapters of *Well* contorted into yet another checklist or template in the electronic medical record.

And besides, fewer young clinicians want to practice whole-person care to begin with. Medical trainees are increasingly avoiding primary care practices traditionally oriented toward hard-won, long-suffering relationships.[12] Take my specialty of family medicine, which recently had its lowest MD match rate *in history*.[13] Medical trainees don't want the hidden life of the preventative physician with a long view of health. They want the tightly controlled and delineated encounters of subspecialty consultation.

Galea is clear that *Well* is not necessarily directed to medical works. Even so, I worry *Well* overlooks the extent to which medicine is prone to grabbing jurisdiction wherever it can while simultaneously pushing clinicians into forms of medicine that are largely disinterested in the very vision it is trying to cultivate.

Talk is easy, love is hard.

Wendell Berry writes in "Health is Membership" (necessary reading on this subject, it seems to me) that "people seriously interested in health will finally have to question our society's long-standing goals of convenience and effortlessness."[14] As Galea points out, we've already shown that we will not tolerate limits even on something as silly as the size of containers used to sell sugary drinks.[15] The last few years of COVID theater, masking, and vaccine controversy are low-hanging fruit here.

My sense is most people understand that their individual health is bound to the health of their neighbors in some way, but they don't know what to do about it. The kind of collective vision of health in *Well* is dependent upon the ways of a

[11] Joshua Briscoe, "Shouldn't We Care for the Whole Person?" Notes From a Family Meeting, May 15, 2022. https://familymeetingnotes.substack.com/p/shouldnt-we-care-for-the-whole-person?s=w. See also Jeffrey Bishop, *The Anticipatory Corpse: Medicine, Power, and the Care of the Dying* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2011), 246-253.

[12] Farr Curlin, "What Does *Any* of This Have to Do With Being a Physician? Kierkegaardian Irony and the Practice of Medicine," C*hristian Bioethics* 22, no. 1 (2016): 62–79, 63. See also Phil Whitaker, "Knowing patients well can be life-saving. But family GPs like me fear our days are numbered," *The New Statesman*, December 8, 2021. https://www.newstatesman.com/long-reads/2021/12/knowing-patients-well-can-be-life-saving-but-family-gps-like-me-fear-our-days-are-numbered.

[13] Kenny Lin, "How did Family Medicine fare in this year's National Resident Match?" *American Family Physician* Community Blog, April 18, 2022. https://afpjournal.blogspot.com/2022/04/how-did-family-medicine-fare-in-this.html

[14] Berry, "Health..."

[15] Galea, *Well*, 131.

certain kind of community practiced in living with the sight and slowness necessary to notice one's neighbor "half dead" on the side of the road (let alone take them in). Galea looks to Augustine, hinting that we ultimately need stories of agapeic love that are "fervent to correct."[16]

Galea's use of Dickens' *A Christmas Carol* is instructive here. Galea argues that Scrooge's famous transformation came in a moment of "enlightened self-interest."[17] He came to see that his health was intimately bound to the health of others — especially Tiny Tim — and changed as a result.

But Galea says more: this is not the only reason Scrooge changes (and surely not the main reason). A better reading is that of a cold and avaricious man who is given the grace of a three-spirited encounter at the threshold of his own grave and in the sight of a suffering child. Scrooge takes up contrition, confession, and conversion — not the baptized selfishness of egoistic altruism: "Hear me! I am not the man I was..."[18]

As the church continues to wrestle with recovering her work and witness in the United States — a country that spends more on medicine than anyone else with worse outcomes than everyone else — I wonder if we might take a cue from the church of the first few centuries.[19] One of the earliest descriptors of Christianity was a "religion for the sick."

Talk is easy. Absent *caritas* — what Galea names "a desire for love" — and the traditioned communities that make that love coherent and possible, we will not be able to achieve health, let alone change what we need to talk about when we talk about it. We'll be left with folks like me, desperately holding our 16%.

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[16] Ibid., 74–5.
[17] Ibid., 163.
[18] Charles Dickens, "A Christmas Carol" in *The Book of Christmas* (Reader's Digest Association, 1973): 151–95, 190.
[19] Roosa Tikkanen, Melinda Abrams, "U.S. Health Care from a Global Perspective, 2019: Higher Spending, Worse Outcomes?" *The Commonwealth Fund*. January 30, 2020. 0.
https://www.commonwealthfund.org/publications/issue-briefs/2020/jan/us-health-care-global-perspective-2019.
[20] Gary Ferngren, *Medicine & Health Care in Early Christianity* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009).
[21] "Sandro Galea: What is the difference between health and medicine?" *Instant Genius* Podcast. April 2020.

Spinning toward autocracy

A NEW BOOK EXAMINES THE EVOLUTION OF DICTATORSHIP AND WARNS THE WEST TO STEER CLEAR

Sergei Guriev and Daniel Treisman, *Spin Dictators: The Changing Face of Tyranny* in the 21st Century, Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2022, 340 pp., $29.95 pb.

BONNIE KRISTIAN

Hitler hath slain his millions, and Mao his ten millions. But what do we make of Putin?

His title is the very democratic "president" of Russia. He has no concentration camps, no Holodomor, no Great Leap Forward, no diktat of atheism. He wears suits, not epaulettes, and has political enemies poisoned or intermittently jailed but never hauls them off to a gulag. It seems unlikely, were he to die tomorrow, that his body would join that of another Vladimir, Lenin, in a public mausoleum. Putin's Russia isn't free. But is he really a dictator?

He is, say Sergei Guriev and Daniel Treisman in *Spin Dictators: The Changing Face of Tyranny in the 21st Century*, but — at least until he invaded Ukraine last year — Putin generally has not been a "fear dictator" in the familiar, 20th-century sense. His rule has rather been emblematic of a new breed of autocrat, the "spin dictator" for whom it is almost never worthwhile to remove the velvet glove and flaunt the iron fist.

At a swift 219 pages of text, with half as many again devoted to notes and references, Guriev and Treisman have penned a compelling, well-researched, and accessible case for why "after all the brutal manias of the 20th century … we still see new autocracies rising from the ashes" (ix). Pursued through forays into authoritarian discipline, propaganda, censorship, electoral procedure, and foreign policy, their argument is that dictatorships did not all die in recent decades, but many were changed.

Where once most despots ruled through fear, employing gruesome violence to cow the populace into submission (9), now they tend to take a lighter touch. As the liberal world order developed and enlightenment values gained sway in halls of power (38, 169), spin dictators learned to ape them. These smooth-edged autocrats are willing to become, in Aristotle's phrase, "not harsh, but dignified,"

to use, following Machiavelli, "simulation and dissimulation" instead of brutality to achieve their ends (14).

Fear dictators blared lies from loudspeakers, displayed enemies' mutilated bodies, murdered *en masse*, and only sometimes deigned to stage their faux elections. The spin dictator's propaganda is subtler, layered, decentralized, often ironic. Enemies are staidly prosecuted over taxes or libel; state murders are secretive and rare; and though a spin dictator may well fix an election, he frequently needn't bother.

The contrast is reminiscent of Neil Postman's famous sketch of two dystopias, George Orwell's *1984* vs. Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*, in the foreword of his landmark social criticism, *Amusing Ourselves to Death*. "Orwell warns that we will be overcome by an externally imposed oppression," Postman wrote, that is, by a classic fear dictatorship defined by violence and overt censorship. "But in Huxley's vision" — the vision Postman deemed more prescient while writing in the 1980s, the first decade in which spin dictators outnumbered those who ruled by fear— "no Big Brother is required to deprive people of their autonomy, maturity, and history. As he saw it, people will come to love their oppression, to adore the technologies that undo their capacities to think."

The spin/*Brave New World* analogy isn't as exact as fear/*1984* — in fairness, Huxley couldn't model his fictional tyranny on spin dictatorships yet to come, while Orwell had the Soviet Union at the ready. Yet the core idea of mostly painless manipulation as the main mechanism of social control is much the same between the oppression Huxley imagined and that which *Spin Dictators* documents. "This new model is based on a brilliant insight," Guriev and Treisman contend: "Instead of terrorizing citizens, a skillful ruler can control them by reshaping their beliefs about the world. He can fool people into compliance and even enthusiastic approval. In place of harsh repression, the new dictators manipulate information" (4), adopting an aesthetic of democracy and burnishing popularity among subjects who (usually) don't require external restraints to exact obedience.

By this standard, then, Putin's Russia is indeed a dictatorship. Indeed, he was a favorite exemplar in *Spin Dictators*, which published just over a month after the Ukraine invasion. In the months since, both authors have said Putin has moved from spin to fear. "By attacking the postwar international order and changing his strategy of control at home, Putin has gambled with his own future," Treisman wrote in an in-depth analysis, "Putin unbound," in the May/June 2022 issue of *Foreign Affairs*. "Initiating a war that does not go according to plan is a classic mistake that has undermined many authoritarian regimes."

And what of that postwar international order? At the end of the volume, Guriev and Treisman turn from description to prescription, delving into recommendations for the West to resist dictatorship in its wily new form both at home and abroad.

Perhaps inevitably, some of this discussion concerns Donald Trump, but here and throughout the work, Guriev and Treisman are admirably restrained in their mentions of the former president. Canny readers will spot connections between some of the spin dictators' tactics and Trump's antics — particularly where false allegations against the media are concerned — but the authors' light touch will extend their work's shelf life and readership alike.

Yet while there are some Trump/spin comparisons to be made, maybe more striking are the contrasts between our squabbles and fears in the West and the dark reality of true autocracy. We worry,

rightly, about loss of civil liberties, degradation of our institutions, and rising political hostility. In the blurbs on the back of *Spin Dictators*, *The Atlantic*'s Anne Applebaum and scholar Francis Fukuyama raise alarm over the future of democracy itself.

But Guriev and Treisman, having run through histories of grotesque slaughter and a censor in every newsroom (91), are more sanguine than their admirers. "[A]lthough dangers are real, the alarm seems premature," they write (202). Despite setbacks, the last three decades have seen enormous gains for freedom, democracy, and prosperity worldwide (208). And even if the West "sink[s] into spin," such "backsliding is more likely to end in the spin of a Bolsonaro than the carnage of a Pinochet. Although the former is troubling, the latter is clearly worse" (218-219). As a matter of physical safety and material quality of life, that's hard to argue — who wouldn't take the risk of caning in Lee Kuan Yew's Singapore over the Cultural Revolution or Great Leap Forward in Mao Zedong's China? Or, today, would you rather be a citizen of Turkey or Saudi Arabia? Russia or North Korea? But a spin dictatorship is still a dictatorship, and its control and ruination via manipulation of our very hearts, as Huxley depicted, is still a sinking to avoid. That's why it's disappointing that Guriev and Treisman's final chapter, where they turn to policy recommendations to curtail spin dictatorship, is the weakest in the book.

Their proposal of multinational mass surveillance in partnership with Big Tech never considers the likeliest outcome of such a project: that autocrats themselves would use the same technology for more nefarious ends. Back doors, once built, can be opened by anyone who can make a key — or arrogate one. Similarly undeveloped is the notion that liberal democracies can somehow overhaul organizations like the EU, NATO, and the UN to deprive dictators of power. These organizations already have autocracies, some with veto rights, among their memberships. How is the overhaul supposed to happen without their consent? The proposal of "an alliance of liberal democracies to defend democracy" via its "greater moral authority than any individual state" must be received skeptically by any who can recall 2003's Coalition of the Willing — however good its founders intentions, these organizations have a proclivity toward mission and membership creep. And, if our history with human rights conventions is a guide, the United States wouldn't join anyway, rendering the alliance, if not powerless, certainly far from the moral-democratic colossus Guriev and Treisman want to see.

This concluding chapter, happily, is also the most inconsistent, which means those unsatisfactory ideas are presented alongside better ones: that the West "welcome modernization — even in our adversaries," because "if a developing China seems a problem, a China blocked from development would be a bigger one" (211-212); and that we "put our own house in order" — shoring up civil liberties, rejecting abuses of power — because "[s]pin dictatorships exploit the vulnerabilities of democracies" (212). That latter task seems particularly urgent with another contentious election already bearing down upon us, for vulnerabilities we have indeed.

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THE PERMANENT CRISIS OF THE HUMANITIES

Permanent Crisis: The Humanities in a Disenchanted Age, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2021, 320 pp., $40.25.

SARAH CLARK

At my master's graduation last spring, the dean of our school gave the commencement address. He began with the crisis in the Ukraine, proceeded on through the quandary of lying politicians, and ended with the ongoing crisis of climate change. (I should note that the degrees my cohort were receiving that day had nothing to do with international relations, politics, or the environment.) As hearty applause followed the end of his remarks, the young woman sitting behind me remarked disgustedly, "That speech was everything that was wrong with my degree. *Everything*."

I don't know exactly what she meant by that, but I suspect that part of "everything" might have been the notion that the total worth of what we had all been studying for a year or three could be measured by whether or not we went on to become leaders in addressing the disasters currently facing our country and world. As students of the humanities, it seemed, we were expected to at the very least dedicate ourselves to changing the hearts and minds of those around us on these important subjects, even if we aren't equipped to do the actual work of solving the problems at hand.

This, as has been cried from the op-ed pages of nearly every newspaper and literary magazine in the country, is unfair. It misses completely the point and purpose of the study of the humanities — which are, because of attempts like this one to measure and commodify their results in terms better suited to the sciences, in crisis. Or as Paul Reitter and Chad Wellmon put it in the introduction to their book *Permanent Crisis*,

> *The humanities are in crisis because modern society has lost sight of what really matters in life; the humanities are in crisis because universities are managed like corporations; the humanities are in crisis because humanities professors subscribe to theories that encourage hostility toward or suspicion of art and literature, and so on.*

Reitter and Wellmon's point, of course, is that the humanities and their predecessors are not only constantly in a state of crisis, but that they are in a very real sense constructed on a foundation of crisis talk. Moreover, the accusations leveled at the set of disciplines collectively known as the humanities are not actually all that unfair, because the humanities "have repeatedly failed to do what has been promised of them."

With a nod to other traditions around the globe, Reitter and Wellmon base their historical analysis in the German university system, beginning around the dawn of the eighteenth century, when the humanities as such were barely a twinkle in a philology professor's eye. In fact, "As a coherent set of disciplines institutionalized in universities and colleges, 'the humanities' are primarily an invention of American higher education between 1930 and 1950," but the roots of the modern humanities stretch back to the dethroning of theology from its place at the head of academic life.

In the absence of this center from which epistemological certainty had radiated, there arose a need for a new set of disciplines that "could satisfy those distinctly transcendent needs previously met by religious and moral traditions." Thus the first crisis that begat the proto-humanities took the form of scholars lamenting the loss of a "unity of knowledge" that was now dissolving into a morass of separate and specialized fields of study. This should sound familiar to anyone who follows the debate about what ails the university of today. The only problem, according to Reitter and Wellmon, is that the golden age of this "unity of knowledge" never really existed in the first place, and without the development of "the modern university and specialization," the humanities would never have developed as they did, or perhaps at all.

Over the next several chapters, each with footnotes reaching into the triple digits, the authors detail the ever-evolving debate over what the university, scholarship, and the scholarly life ought to be. They engage with the positions of German academics ranging from the household name (Nietzsche) to the comparatively obscure (Schiller, Altenstein, Du Bois-Reymond, to name only a few). They cover the development of the modern sciences, both hard and soft, at length, as well as the evolution of philology into the more modern disciplines of linguistics and philosophy. Along the way are plenty more laments that should ring true to modern ears, including Nietzsche's comments on how the daily newspaper is distracting students and "taking the place of education," which strongly "resemble the observations of today's more anxious technology critics, who worry that our compulsive checking of Facebook feeds, Twitter notifications, and email alerts leave us hyperstimulated and underfocused."
The point, in short, is well-made and well-documented. It seems our worries about falling enrollments, the objectification of learning, the loss of the shared human (or Western) heritage, the triumph of utilitarian fields over pure knowledge, and even our fragmenting attention spans, are not just centuries in the making, but the very same complaints that were being made a century or two ago. The humanities have failed to deliver on their promise to provide a "unity of knowledge" that could restore the "human essence" lost to modernity, and the endless cycle of crises for which humanities scholars have proffered their disciplines as the cure have succeeded only in "blind[ing them] to the paradoxical relationships, competing goods, and varied ends that have characterized the creation and transmission of knowledge for centuries."

In the book's conclusion, the authors do

implicate themselves, as "self-identified humanities scholars," in the general failure to consider the "inherited contradictions, oppositions, and presumptions" that have been handed down through the university system in both Germany and the United States. This book is their attempt to bring these to the fore, and to reopen the conversation about the aims of the university in a less repetitive and more productive way.

Reitter and Wellmon themselves take a stand for the school of thought of Max Weber, the subject of Chapter 6, defending his "moral asceticism" from accusations that "he was an epistemologically naïve positivist" or "value-neutral ur-sociologist" and arguing instead that "the values that Weber identified as essential for scholarship turn out to resemble the ones that today's advocates of moral education tend to foreground as a counterpoise to research training: inclusiveness, intellectual integrity, courage, and a principled commitment to intellectual and value pluralism, among others." In Weber's vein, Reitter and Wellmon hope to move beyond the incessant talk of crisis and harkening back to a "mythical" better time, and to focus instead on the "sober" task of moving past crisis to focus on "the conditions of intellectual life and the possibility of trustworthy knowledge." As someone who felt rather in sympathy with the eye-rolling remarks of my fellow graduate, I too hope that the discourse around the fate of the humanities will move in this direction.

Though they stop short of laying out a concrete course of action to accomplish this, Reitter and Wellmon do, in the last three pages of *Permanent Crisis*, go a bit further into what their vision could entail — with the caveat that they don't want to overpromise in a way that will lead to yet another round of crisis talk, of course. Still, they offer the possibility that Weber's *Scholarship as Vocation* actually sets out a way forward for the humanities that even Weber himself "could only point to," one that demands "value freedom" within the university in order to have the possibility of succeeding. First, the university should, rather than attempting a complete value neutrality, embrace values like inclusiveness "which are at once scholarly and moral" and impart them to their students. Those scholarly values, Weber believed, have the potential to "form students into mature, independent, self-reflective subjects" who can then consider their own values and desires, soberly consider how those values will "inevitably conflict with those of others," and reckon with the fact that those conflicts "will have specific social consequences." The passions and ideals to drive scholarship, in other words, must come from the students themselves. The modern university's role is to develop its students into persons capable of wielding those passions and ideals responsibly. Perhaps, thus equipped, they will elect to hold tight to the university's values and "follow the scholarly calling" toward that "trustworthy knowledge" that Weber wanted to safeguard. Or perhaps they will feel led to leave the ivory tower behind and solve the world's problems instead.

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About Mere Orthodoxy

We are a small group of Christians who since 2005 have been defending word count and nuance on the internet while working out what our faith looks like in public.

Whether it is arts, movies, literature, politics, sexuality, or any other crevice of the human experience, we believe that the Gospel has something to say about it and that "something" really can be good news.

We take our cues from C.S. Lewis and G.K. Chesterton, two of the most thoughtful, perceptive Christians of the twentieth century. One of them wrote Mere Christianity and the other wrote Orthodoxy, and we like those books so much we stapled their names together and took it as our own.

Their thoughtfulness wasn't abstract: it was rooted in the challenges and struggles that England was facing in their time, and their mission was to demonstrate how a classically minded, creedally centered orthodox Christianity was an attractive and persuasive alternative to the ideologies of their day.

And they did their work with words, with essays, poems, and stories.

Here's what we hope you will discover in our writing:

We are scripturally rooted and creedally informed. We know that it's not enough to simply say the Apostle's Creed and that the further we get from it, the more we'll disagree on the particulars of how Christianity should play out in public. But we also think that getting to the Apostle's Creed is a pretty good start for most Christians in our era, so that's where we'll put our baseline.

We're cheerfully contrarian when we have to be. We disagree with each other, and probably with you too (at least on something, right?). We think that's part of what makes life and writing interesting. So we'll make arguments, but hopefully in a way that is generous and kind.

We're eclectic. We could write about anything. Chasing our interests is the only thing that keeps us interesting, and being interesting is the one rule we have. Other publications may have a "niche," and Google loves them for it. Our niche is the world and where our reflections take us in it. And we kind of like it that way (and hope you will too).

We're publicly engaged. We're after the meaning and significance of things, the substance. Which means that we are after matters of public concern. And our hope is that you'll think more carefully, more deeply, and hopefully more Christianly about our world and your place in it after reading us.

THE APOSTLE'S CREED

We believe in God, the Father almighty,
creator of heaven and earth.

We believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord,
who was conceived by the Holy Spirit
and born of the virgin Mary.
He suffered under Pontius Pilate,
was crucified, died, and was buried;
he descended to hell.
The third day he rose again from the dead.
He ascended to heaven
and is seated at the right hand of God the Father almighty.
From there he will come to judge the living and the dead.

We believe in the Holy Spirit,
the holy catholic church,
the communion of saints,
the forgiveness of sins,
the resurrection of the body,
and the life everlasting.

Amen.

MERE
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