MERE ORTHODOXY

EST. MMV

Ana Siljak on John Le Carre, A Symposium on James Davison Hunter's Democracy and Solidarity featuring John Shelton, Brad Littlejohn, and Stiven Peter, Myles Werntz on Augustine and Slavery, Bob Thune on Ivan Illich, Samuel James on Josef Pieper, Vika Pechersky on Dostoevsky and Euthanasia, A Symposium on Michael Horton's Shaman and Sage featuring Nadya Williams and John Ehrett, James Wood on Rod Dreher. Poetry from Rachel Joy Welcher and E. J. Hutchinson

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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.

Concerning Repair

I have been thinking lately about the scene in *Fiddler on the Roof* in which the main character, a Jewish dairy farmer named Tevye who lives in a small Russian village, has just overseen the wedding of his eldest daughter. He, his family, and the rest of their village are eating, dancing, and celebrating the union when out of the darkness torches approach the party. It is a group of Russian police of a sort, sent to hold a pogrom–a kind of organized riot that was used to intimidate Russian Jews, often escalating into more extreme forms of violence in which countless Jews were seriously injured or killed. And so the pogrom sweeps through the wedding, sweeps through the village. Plates and glasses are smashed, tables overturned, down pillows torn, expensive fabrics ruined. At one point the Russian officer overseeing the pogrom, who had been friendly to Tevye in the past, looks at him apologetically and says "orders are orders." As the scene ends, Tevye stands like a man stricken, staring helplessly at the sky, his hands held out in confusion. The more playful questioning of God seen in the much loved earlier song "If I Were a Rich Man" now becomes something more searing, visceral, and brutal–the bafflement of a good man hard done by the world… perhaps even by God, the scene invites us to think.

Pogroms are a unique horror of history, of course, and we should not forget that, particularly with the growing presence of anti-Semitism in contemporary America. But the questions Tevye asks in that scene are not limited to people who face sufferings as immense as his own. They are, rather, questions asked by anyone who has experienced something good and life-giving, seen that thing ripped away, and then wonder "but why?" Why did that good thing have to be lost? Why couldn't it endure? What is God doing anyway, taking that good thing away or, if you'd rather, allowing it to be taken away? The answer, such as it is, that Tevye seems to come to is that we cannot know the answers to all these questions, but we can know what God calls us to do–and so we had better get on doing it. And so he and his family live right on, as one of Wendell Berry's best characters sometimes says in moments of severe testing.

This issue of the *Mere Orthodoxy* journal became in large part an extended reflection on that question and Tevye's response. There is for many of us right now, I think, a heightened sense of both living in ruins and also of having only damaged goods to work with as we seek to carry out repairs. Many of the pieces in this issue reckon with one or both of those things.

Rachel Welcher's opening poem, the first poem we have published in the print journal and the first of two in this issue, is an imagined letter to her young daughter Hildegaard in the event that Rachel might

die unexpectedly. She closes her lovely piece by reminding Hildie that even as the world changes, Jesus remains constant. Ana Siljak's reflection on the 50th anniversary of John Le Carré's much loved spy novel *Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy* considers how we have transitioned into such a radically low trust society that we have all become Le Carré's famous hero, the unremarkable (and often untrusting) sleuth George Smiley. We will also consider, with the aid of John Shelton, Brad Littlejohn and Stiven Peter, all three of whom are writing on James Davison Hunter's new book *Democracy and Solidarity*, what hope there might be for a renewal of civic society in 21st century America. In a rich review of two books on St Augustine and slavery, Myles Werntz reflects on what it means to live in the ambiguity inherent in having nothing but damaged goods to work with. Other reviews, from Bob Thune and Samuel James, will consider our relationship to education and language, while Vika Pechersky explains what Dostoevsky would make of the growing acceptance of euthanasia in the contemporary west. John Ehrett and Nadya Williams have both written responses to Michael Horton's major new book *Shaman and Sage*, which as Horton notes in his reply is closely concerned with the nature of salvation: is the goal salvation from the world or salvation of the world? The Christian says that it is the latter, which is no small part of the reason why we can go on getting up and laboring with hope. Finally, we close with a rich meditation on rest and pastoral ministry from Seth Troutt followed by a translation by E. J. Hutchinson of a previously untranslated poem by the 5th century Roman poet Claudian. Ultimately we end where we began: With a reminder that Jesus remains faithful through everything and that love is at the heart of every good endeavor we attempt.

JAKE MEADOR

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IN CASE I DIE UNEXPECTEDLY

RACHEL WELCHER

for Hildegaard

Always salt your pasta water.

Watch how he treats his mother.

Ask people how you can pray for them,

then stop and pray for them

right then and there,

in a crowded restaurant,

in the grocery aisle,

during donuts before or after church.

Embrace awkwardness, or else

you will miss out on so much.

Don't chew your nails (like I do).

Don't open everything with your teeth (like I do).

Don't always fill the silence. It can be a gift.

Carry the pocket knife your dad will give you,

but don't forget to take it out of your backpack

before you go to the airport.

Wash your darks and lights separately.

If you find a good peach, give thanks to God.

If you find a good mango, get down on your knees

and worship.

Give things away as often as possible. Hold everything

with open hands. Nothing is our own.

Don't fall for fad diets. Try to eat healthy, but

don't feel guilty for going to *McDonald's.*

There is no such thing as "get rich quick,"

there is only hard work. Go to bed tired.

Put your feet in the water as often as possible:

touch, taste, and see that God is good.

Wake up with hope. Jesus is the same

yesterday, today and forever.

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DAKOTA.

We Are All George Smiley Now

ANA SILJAK

In 1967, four years after Kim Philby defected to the Soviet Union, the *Sunday Times of London* shocked the British public with their multi-part expose on the high-ranking British intelligence officer turned spy, complete with a photo of him standing in Red Square. The headline: "I Spied for Russia since 1933." Since 1933 Philby had been trusted implicitly by the British Foreign Office. He was almost appointed as Chief of the British Secret Service and had developed a close friendship with the CIA's James Jesus Angleton. Since the late 1940s, multiple sources within British and American intelligence knew that Soviet spies had infiltrated their governments. However, notwithstanding the sound and fury of US Senator Joseph McCarthy's crusade against Communist infiltrators, many of these spies remained undetected until the 1960s.

In his biography of Philby published in 2016, *A Spy Among Friends*, Ben Macintyre asserts that Soviet spies were protected by the "mutual trust" that reigned in Britain's ruling class, a trust "so absolute and unquestioned that there was no need for elaborate security precautions." British intelligence saw themselves as the masterminds behind the defense of the West during the Cold War, bound together like "family." Naturally, Philby's betrayal broke that trust. The result was "horror," that left, as one of Philby's proteges remembered, "a perennial cloud of doubt hanging over the present, the past, and the future."

David Cromwell was working in British intelligence when the Philby scandal first broke in 1963, and his intelligence career was cut short in the upheaval that followed. He was already a well-known mystery and spy novelist under the pseudonym John Le Carré, so he decided to turn the Philby story into a novel. *Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy*, published in 1974, spent multiple weeks on best-seller lists in Britain and the United States. Though *Tinker* was based on the Philby affair, Le Carré did not make a fictional Philby into the center of his story. The charming, well-born

Philby would have made a fascinating protagonist – a sort of James Bond gone bad. Le Carré could have fictionalized Philby's work training saboteurs during World War II, his cocktail parties and tennis matches in exotic locales, his serial adultery, and, for even more lurid detail, the rapid descent into madness of Philby's long-suffering wife.

Instead, Le Carré chose George Smiley, the main character in some of his previous novels, as a kind of anti-Philby. George Smiley is pale, short, "podgy," adorned with poorly tailored suits and thick-lensed glasses. He does not play tennis, or drink cocktails with the smart set – he is neither witty nor charming. No adulterer, he is a victim of the adultery of his beautiful and well-connected wife, and given the description of his looks and character, the reader can only marvel that he had such a wife at all. By the time we meet him, he has been forcibly retired from the British Secret Intelligence Service, known best by its pointedly chosen nickname: "the Circus." Smiley spends much of the novel lonely, either quietly listening as others recount tales of defections, infiltrations of enemy territory, torture, and assassination, or silently poring over piles of documents. The novel so closely follows Smiley that the Philby character, Bill Haydon, is thinly sketched and pale by comparison.

Tinker places the fate of Cold War British and American intelligence on the shoulders of this absolutely unlikely character. Tasked with unearthing the "mole" in the "Circus" (invented terms that later entered real-life spycraft), Smiley discovers (and reveals to us) the dark Machiavellian heart of the ostensible Cold War battle between good and evil. Smiley discovers

just how casually both sides engaged in conspiracy, huckstering, betrayal, torture, and murder, all at the behest of shadowy figures, Karla (for the Soviet side) and Control (for the British side), whose real names were unknown. *Tinker* repeatedly implies that British intelligence after World War II was an effort to shore up a declining empire, propped up by agents who ran criminal enterprises, infiltrated newsrooms, and, when necessary, unhesitatingly betrayed fellow agents to torture and death. The Soviet side was more coldly cruel, more heedless of human life. But there was no doubt for Le Carré -- both sides had lost their way. Halfway through the novel, we hear Smiley say this to the mysterious (and silent) Karla himself:

> "Look," I said, "we're getting to be old men, and we've spent our lives looking for the weaknesses in one another's systems. I can see through Eastern values just as you can see through our Western ones. Both of us, I am sure, have experienced *ad nauseam* the technical satisfactions of this wretched war…. Don't you think it's time to recognize that there is as little worth on your side as there is on mine?"

In the 1960s, the exposure of Philby was a dramatic revelation, within British intelligence and without. In the novel, the exposure of Bill Haydon is an unsatisfying denouement. Tinker gives us no grand confession of and no reckoning with the awful consequences of Haydon's betrayal, personal or political. Smiley feels none of the "horror" of his real-life counterparts. Instead, Smiley feels only pity, and there is even "a part of him that rose already in Haydon's defense." For

Smiley, Haydon's betrayal was mitigated by the lack of anything worth betraying.

After 50 years, the entire novel reads differently. Le Carré's searing revelations of the sinister amorality at the heart of politics and intelligence seem old hat, almost charmingly naïve. Was there a time when people trusted their government and had no inkling of secret operative training sites, clandestine detention centers, government run smuggling operations, and criminal enterprises? Today, a casual glance at any form of social media will reveal any number of supposed "moles" who work at the behest of China or Russia, the Heritage Foundation or the World Economic Forum. On Twitter and on Facebook, candidates for Karla-like shadowy figures who control the levers of power include the Koch brothers, the Soros family, Bill Gates, and Elon Musk. Armed merely with an internet connection, anybody can become George Smiley -- "reading, comparing, annotating, cross-referring" -- all with a few clicks of a mouse.

In 1991, after the end of the Cold War, Frances Fukuyama dared to suggest that "History" was over – we had reached the "the universalization of Western liberal democracy," and humanity had every reason for "optimism." History, he asserted, was "a record of accumulating knowledge and increasing wisdom, of continual advancement from a lower to a higher platform of intelligence and well-being." But we now know that Fukuyama was wrong: "knowledge" did not result in "wisdom," but rather in a Western society in which each of us has turned against our institutions and our neighbors. The more we know, the more we see deceit, deliberate disinformation, sabotage, and

treachery. Philby's world was one of trust, ours is of distrust.

How did we all become George Smiley? We could start with "Russiagate," the accusation that the victory of Donald Trump in 2016 was caused by the efforts of Vladimir Putin. The lurid tales of prostitutes, wiretapping, and Russian internet memes that arose out of that conspiracy theory were a caricature of 1950s McCarthyism, bringing to mind the Marxist dictum of history repeating itself, "first time as tragedy and second time as farce." In 2020, the Covid epidemic polarized Western society, each side accusing the other of working for China or "Big Pharma," plotting world government or supporting fascism. By 2024, it was possible for a single event, such as the assassination attempt against Trump on July 13, to engender two well developed and entirely opposite conspiracy theories: that it was carefully plotted by the "deep state" to eliminate Trump or was entirely staged by the Trump campaign to engender popularity. A casual glance at Twitter will reveal social-media rabbit-holes that would make Smiley's head spin.

None of this is at the heart of our present conspiracy-mindedness. Instead, the source is much deeper, one that can be found in a prescient chapter of Robert Putnam's now mostly forgotten *Bowling Alone*. Social trust, Putnam tells us, is seen to be the glue of society. People who trust, are "more engaged in community life." Those who are "disengaged," by contrast, "believe themselves to be surrounded by miscreants." Putnam charts the steady decline of trust in American society, showing that year after year, fewer and fewer Americans trust society and its members. Decline in

trust was downstream of the decline in communities (such as bowling leagues). It turned out, Putnam theorized, that we needed community in order to trust each other. Is it any wonder, then, that as bowling leagues decline, conspiracy theories grow?

It is easy to diagnose mistrust, but very hard to cure it. But perhaps a way forward is found, surprisingly, in an off-handed comment made to Smiley in the novel: "You're not responsible for everyone, you know, George." Smiley seems to absorb this lesson when he reflects on a moment in the past, when he finally got the chance to speak face to face with the shadowy Karla himself, to get him to defect to the West. Smiley remembers the hot, stuffy prison cell, the silent Karla a prisoner before him. This was Smiley's first realization that, "in the hands of politicians grand designs achieve nothing but new forms of the old misery." At that moment, he first realized that his sole responsibility was perhaps to save a single life, and this was "more important—morally, ethically more important—than the sense of duty, or obligation, or commitment." Conspiracy mindedness is the sense of a terrible burden to reveal the entire truth to an unbelieving mass, to turn humanity away from its unwitting path to destruction. Turning away from this, a person can notice the "particular" and pay attention to the human being next door, on the street, or sharing your prison cell. Trust can never be rebuilt by governments or political parties. It must be painstakingly constructed out of interpersonal relations with spouses, neighbors, and bowling leagues.

And what can we make of Le Carré's full quotation from a note written by Irina, the Soviet operative who sets the plot of the novel in motion by revealing the existence of the Soviet mole? As she writes to her handler, the man she knows only as Thomas:

> You have seen only the bad things in me— the drink, the fear, the lies we live. But deep inside me burns a new and blessed light… God has shown me that it is here, right in the middle of the real world, all round us… Thomas, you must always long for the light which I have found. It is called love.

Is love the only path to trust? It is hard to know, because Le Carré has "Thomas" tell Smiley: "Like I told you…She was crazy."

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The Institutional Roots of America's Political Crisis

JOHN SHELTON

The course of American Christianity over the next thirty years—if not the rest of the twenty-first century—will be entirely downstream of James Davison Hunter. For the last three decades, this professor of religion, culture, and social theory has set the parameters, language, and goals of public Christian engagement, introducing important concepts such as "culture war" and "faithful presence," and establishing institutions critical to understanding and navigating the world, such as the Institute for Advanced Studies in Culture (initially called "The Postmodernity Project") and *The Hedgehog Review*. Hunter is not even seventy, but already in his lifetime he has had an outsized impact, serving on the National Council of the National Endowment for the Humanities and providing consultation to the White House, the Bicentennial Commission for the U.S. Constitution, and the National Commission on Civic Renewal.

Hunter is even responsible, in part, for the mainstreaming of postliberal thought through Patrick Deneen. Hunter was the co-editor of Yale University Press' Politics and Culture (formerly Democracy and Its Discontents) book series, which published Deneen's *Why Liberalism Failed* and placed Deneen at the center of much debate over the shifting political tides in the aftermath of President Donald Trump's 2016 election. Hunter's *Democracy and Solidarity: On the Cultural Roots of America's Political Crisis* is the most recent book in that same series and it deserves every bit as much careful study and engagement. And perhaps Hunter's book is something of an *apologia* for his bit role in the rise of postliberalism and populist forces. While Hunter is no apologist for the status quo (writing that "there are clear signs… we are now in a period of exhaustion"), he nevertheless says his "concern for the fate of liberal democracy" drove him to write this nearly 500 page book, his longest yet.

In writing his own "big book," John Steinbeck claimed that everything he had published before (including the Pulitzer Prize-winning *Grapes of Wrath*) was merely "an exercise, as practice for the one to come." Steinbeck wrote that the book—what would eventually become *East of Eden*—"must contain all in the world I know and it must

have everything in it of which I am capable—all styles, all techniques, all poetry." This is what Hunter has delivered in *Democracy and Solidarity*, weaving his life's research into a multigenerational tale of America's coming of age.

Hunter's story begins with the hybrid-Enlightenment: "the specific configuration of cultural sources that underwrote American democracy" and "could contain democracy's many internal disagreements." "Drawing as much from Calvinism as it did from classical Republicanism and Lockean individualism," those disagreements are ineliminable, but not necessarily fatal in the way that Deneen (never explicitly mentioned in the book) would argue.

Americans up until the present have found new ways of reforging the hybrid-Enlightenment, often with dramatic differences, but always in a way that has "remained recognizable to successive generations." Hunter's question, indeed his unresolved concern, is: "can an Enlightenment-era political institution—liberal democracy—survive and thrive in a post-Enlightenment culture?"

Others did so in their own cultural moments. The book walks through vignettes of "David Walker, Angela Grimke, Lyman Beecher, Phoebe Palmer, Frederick Douglass, John Dewey, Reinhold Niebuhr, Walter Lippmann, Martin Luther King Jr, Richard Neuhaus, Richard Rorty, and Chantal Mouffe," each articulating with "uncommon clarity the contradictions inherent within liberal democracy" and contributing to "the process of working through these stubborn contradictions."

And yet, for reasons Hunter explores in the book, it is unclear that our own day's many formidable Christian intellectuals could achieve what their predecessors did in the past. For one, "the secular turn in intellectual and academic life… was a successful challenge to the monopoly long held by the Protestant establishment over the legitimate interpretation of the world." At the same time, fundamentalist Christianity followed a "strategy of civic privatism… through the 1960s." In combination, those two trends ensured that "never again would traditional Protestant Christianity provide the background cultural consensus" for America, at least not in the twentieth century.

It is not merely that we live in the "negative world" whereas the subjects of Hunter's book lived in the "positive world," as a clumsy application of Aaron Renn's paradigm might suggest. The challenge is about institutional and financial realities as much as it is about cultural attitudes. The stepping stones that once laid a path to public platforms have since eroded. Though not covered in detail in the book, Niebuhr's own rise is illustrative of the challenge of reforging the hybrid-Enlightenment today.

While Niebuhr first honed his craft in church pulpits and a denominational publication, it was his 1916 essays in *The Atlantic* that launched his career—both in terms of exposure and compensation ("he still recalled with delight, forty years later, that these two pieces had brought in the colossal sum of $120," the equivalent of more than $3,000 today). In the 1920s, the *Christian Century* was able to provide Niebuhr "near-total freedom to write what he wanted, a sizable supplement to his income, a

national, interdenominational readership of some thirty thousand who soon came to expect regular illumination or provocation from his pen."

As Niebuhr's biographer notes, the *Century* made his later career possible "by creating a loyal audience of friends and even foes, who followed his writing from one journal to another," snowballing in size as he was able to tap into more and more institutional reservoirs for even broader reach, including Union Theological Seminary, the World Council of Churches, and the various projects of American magazine magnate Henry Luce (whose *TIME* Magazine featured Niebuhr on its front cover in 1948). By the end of his career, Niebuhr could draw the modern-day equivalent of $25,000 or more for a single article.

The capacity of institutions to sustain the intellectual life in this manner has thinned considerably. By his own account, Hunter's intellectuals had "a significant public platform for addressing the affairs of the day" and "a disproportionate capacity to define and shape the symbolic universe of a community or society." Lacking our own Henry Luce, and with publishing weaker than ever, it is unclear whether another Niebuhr could ever emerge.

Hunter is right about the cultural challenge of sustaining an Enlightenment-era political institution in a post-Enlightenment era. But saving liberal democracy from its lethal exhaustion will first require repaving the paths that allowed Christian intellectuals like Niebuhr to define and shape the symbolic universe.

Some younger Christians have called this sort of effort a "reconquista," taking back the institutions that many 20th century Christians either ignored or abandoned. But I prefer a different term, one I first learned from James Davison Hunter: "faithful presence."

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Democracy After Nihilism

STIVEN PETER

In my neighborhood in Queens, New York, my precinct was the tipping point in the red wave that swept across the city. My block voted 51% for Trump, but you walk one block to the right and the share increases sharply to 70%. Similarly, you walk one block to the left and the precincts afterward voted for Harris by 25%+ margins. My neighborhood, Ridgewood, has been experiencing a boom in development as gentrifiers from Bushwick and Williamsburg have moved westward, seeking the cheaper cost of living enjoyed by the local Hispanic and Slavic residents. The change, reflected in volatile precinct votes, is evident on a physical level. One block in my neighborhood has a beloved pizza restaurant frequented by the historic community. However, one block over is a new bookstore café that houses books advocating for the abolition of gender, the dismantling of the American Israeli colonial empire, and the redistribution of capital. I have never seen the same person enter both places, except me. My neighborhood is coming apart all within the same 20-block radius. Like my neighborhood, America is coming apart, shuffling into left and right ecosystems, with a broad diversity of classes, ethnicities, and religious backgrounds constituting a center. And just as my childhood neighborhood became unrecognizable, America is increasingly becoming unrecognizable to multitudes.

How did this happen? How can we go forward? For James Davison Hunter, the answer lies in tracing the deep

structures of American culture since the founding to today. Building off his earlier book *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America, Democracy, and Solidarity* engages in part history, part theory, and part cultural commentary to sketch a timeline of America's cultural dissolution. For an ambitious work, Hunter's framework is elegant and compelling.

For Hunter, the promise of American democracy is "*e plurubus unum*"—"out"of many, one." Hunter traces how that statement was *made* true in America since its founding.

First, the "one" that Hunter seeks isn't rational consensus—but solidarity. "Where consensus suggests conscious and deliberate assent, what more typically binds us together in solidarity is the complex interweaving of the rational, affective, psychic, and sociological elements of human experience, things that cannot always be put into words." In other words, the "one" that America has felt is a past and destiny shared across differences. Hunter contends, compellingly, that the source of this unity was a shared religious and philosophical culture—part Enlightenment and part Calvinist—that provided a framework of tolerable difference politically. This hybrid enlightenment drew boundary lines that defined what it meant to be an American. However, as America "worked through" its contradictions, it exhausted the culture that underwrote its solidarity and challenged the authority of the hybrid enlightenment to draw boundaries. Solidarity based on shared concrete religious and philosophical values gave way to solidarity based on shared faith in "democracy" or "Judeo-Christian

values" which eventually gave way to solidarity based on agreement in procedural liberalism, and even this is now called into question as a source of shared agreement.

Hunter also excels in diagnosing the present moment as dehumanizing and nihilistic. I take this nihilism to first arise from a lack of shared moral consensus and vocabulary. Hunter notes, "'rationality' has given way to multiple and competing rationalities, none of which is privileged. Sociologically, there is no single truth, only multiple truths, each with its own public." The diverse sources of information and the lack of a prevailing authority mean that our culture dissolves into subcultures with their own ecosystems of truth. "There is now no authority by which questions of truth, reality, or public ethics could be settled definitively." The dissolution of *public* knowledge has given way to incommensurable public discourse about morality. "Public discourse as a rational exchange of competing positions is difficult and perhaps impossible in our public culture." As a result, as a culture, we are unable to define the *value* of human life.

Hunter, here, picking up a thread laid decades ago by Alasdair Macintyre in *After Virtue*, carries it out to its conclusion in our culture today. For instance, we currently have the most sophisticated medical technology devoted to sustaining the lives of neonates. My wife, a neonatal ICU nurse, has unique protocols for taking care of a premature infant each week. She and the other nurses and doctors on her floor work *nonstop* to maximize the child's chance of survival— even to the point of doing procedures in the dark to

conserve a 24-week-old's calorie consumption so that he has enough energy to breathe. Our technological sophistication and talent allocation to save a neonate are unprecedented. Yet, that same neonate's life can be terminated by abortion. As it stands today, the same life can have nearly unlimited resources devoted to its survival or can be killed depending on the will of the mother. A society where these two realities can both take place is incoherent. The value it places on human life is arbitrary. Consider as well that currently in the West we are having debates over the legality of medically assisted death. At the same time, we place great emphasis on the necessity of mental health and discourage suicide by providing suicide hotlines. How can a society allow someone to choose death and also have suicide hotlines?

The answer I believe Hunter points us to is that we don't have a society at all. Rather, we have an anti-culture that instrumentalizes humanity. The issue of euthanasia in Western society in particular is instructive because behind the perverse logic of death with dignity is the economic benefit governments gain from a "costly" citizen. The logic here reveals that in the absence of public morality, the only thing that can be agreed upon is economic utility, technological efficiency, and "choice." At the larger level, this anti-culture manifests in the form of government by bureaucrats and technocrats. Hunter writes, "From markets, business, commerce, and entertainment to government, law, public policy, communication, healthcare, and the military," it operates without regard for persons, treating humans as faceless, interchangeable cogs in a machine.

Audacious as this may seem, I believe Hunter has not fully identified the scope of the problem. In the past three years, we have seen all forms of society embrace AI technology in the name of efficiency. We face the prospect in the next few years of AI replacing entire fields. But what does this say about the majority of human work except that it is literally dehumanizing, meant to form the worker into a cog in a machine? Under bureaucratic government, humans are thought of as simple units of consumption, utility, and productivity. The humanities provide no relief; they too are subject to "efficiencies" in AI or are disposed of for more "useful" fields of study. But it's precisely the humanities that generate the diversity and beauty of human culture.

These processes all have one message: What makes us unique is not important. "Local cultures that are the wellspring of particular customs, habits of life, and identities are, if not destroyed, certainly leveled, absorbed, or colonized into a featureless homogeneity." We are understood as members of an economic opportunity zone. I was taught the McDonald's thesis of foreign policy: "No two countries that both have McDonald's have ever fought a war against each other." Even the neighborhood I'm in is nothing but a collection of Zillow listings. Indeed, even the mortgages on the homes around me are bought and sold in an international system for the sake of market efficiency and risk management. The technocratic forces at play, ever since I've been alive, have always been like this.

However, these forces have not been without notable

responses. 2008 was a key moment in the collapse of faith even in technological efficiency. The economic collapse caused by gross mismanagement and the resulting lack of accountability, slow recovery, and economic malaise has resulted in the rival political factions that exist today as an attempt by average citizens to reassert control.

Hunter locates identity politics as a response to this dehumanization. These identity groups "represent a *means to power and influence* in a world that has rendered average citizens powerless… an assertion of *distinctiveness* in a world that tends to flatten or level all meaningful differences, the possibility for *meaningful belief* and purpose…a way of *belonging* in a world that atomizes our existence even as it weakens the ties of local and organic community, a heartfelt plea for *recognition and the dignity it confers*." But these groups are at best spurious because the distinctiveness, meaning, belonging, and recognition they have is based on nothing more than political interest. They are simply claims to power

But a democracy characterized by nothing more than competing claims to power is at root *nihilistic*. This is the central issue at root in our politics today. This nihilism is not a belief in "nothing" as such but a rejection of civilizational values above the will to power.

Later in *Democracy and Solidarity*, Hunter identifies three competing wills in our day: left authoritarianism, right authoritarianism, and authoritarian technocratic rule. By Hunter's analysis, Left and Right authoritarianism are *de facto* nihilist

in that they are built of a rejection of civilizational values and institute an American way of life contrary to America as an intervention to the void left by the dissolution of public Christian culture. The paradox of this dilemma, which threatens the success of any of these wills, is that America generated solidarity not through law but through voluntary association. In *Democracy in America*, Alexis de Tocqueville noted that, with respect to solidarity, Christianity moderated the otherwise pure freedom granted by American law. "The law [that] allows the American people to do everything, religion prevents them from conceiving of everything and forbids them to dare everything… religion…must be considered as the first of their political institutions; for if it does not give them the taste for liberty, it singularly facilitates their use of it." As Christianity lost its ability to facilitate social coherence, the reign of private liberty took hold. However, to generate the benefits of Christianity in America, through the wielding of power only, would therefore go against the American culture. Paradoxically, then, even conservative right authoritarianism could not succeed in replacing the cultural logic of America. In other words, these competing wills seek not to reform America but to re-found America. America's liberal logic has played itself out to show a hollow, dehumanizing core. As one thinker has put it, "the liberal, secularized state draws its life from presuppositions it cannot itself guarantee." Why salvage it? Such is the logic of our competing movements. Though they promise escape from the abyss, they ultimately lead us further into it by facilitating a complete rejection of American civilization. There is no solidarity in these paths –

only perpetual competing wills to power. All happens within the frame of nihilism.

At the same time, there is no use in returning to a solidarity based on procedure. Procedural liberalism is a position that united by consensus; it does not generate a common people with a shared destiny. The competing moral visions in America are too vast and there is no way to facilitate discourse since we lack a shared moral vocabulary. Procedural pluralism at best facilitates balkanization without a cultural logic unifying the country.

Any antidote to nihilism must therefore seek to unify the country by introducing a shared moral vocabulary that transforms consensus into solidarity. The American regime does not need to be re-founded; the American people must be *reformed* through returning to the cultural logic that made America successful.

The best option available for reform alongside these means is a return to American individualism moderated by Christian civic virtue and competence. Alongside equality, freedom has been the clarion call of the American cultural logic. Hence, it remains the only cultural concept rich enough to recenter American culture. However, this freedom must be transformed from private liberty into ordered liberty. This transformation must take place through the coordinated actions of individuals, neighborhoods, churches, and executive action that reject instrumentalizing humanity and affirm human dignity. It must model liberty meant for the

advancement of society as a whole. In short, any renewal must combine freedom with the good, not one without the other. The past decade has shown a malaise at functional nihilism—there is a yearning for an opening for a new cultural agenda to unite the country. A movement that renews freedom ordered toward the common good of society, one that resists instrumentalizing logic, can succeed. It can offer belonging, recognition, and thriving by focusing on the promises basic to the common good—security, affordability, and competent public government.

Similarly, social conservatism can begin to be renewed by focusing on developing the best conditions for the development of children. Initiatives such as blocking phones in school or restricting access to pornography for children have broad support and can be useful entryways to inject ordered liberty in embryonic form. They work by using the shared concern for children as a basis to evaluate and moderate technology. This will in turn allow us to reorient our relationship with technology to serve the common good as a whole. At the civic level, churches must work to provide social cohesion, as they did before, for their community. That is, churches must take communal leadership over their local communities and their well-being.

We must rebuild the common good needed for solidarity organically and intentionally. While there is a cultural war at play, a vision for the common good recognizes that the majority aren't partisan but seeking a path that can guide them through life. In this sense, the culture war is really a fight over who gets to

build a culture. This culture must be thick enough to account for massive changes in technology, mediate deep differences, and most importantly, *work* for most of the country. Christians are well positioned to cast vision for this culture because they have a robust anthropology of the human person that can reaffirm human sanctity.

But first, Christians must recover and articulate this anthropology, showing that it resonates with the deepest longings of the human experience and can address our unparalleled technological disruption. Second, the Church must embody this anthropology, beginning with the cultivation of its members into not just members of the Church but well-formed public citizens. Third, the Church must incorporate a whole anthropology as part of its evangelistic outreach, proclaiming that Christ offers salvation from nihilism. This whole anthropology must be incorporated into our evangelistic efforts. All of this represents a level of coordination that sets its horizons beyond seeking power and sets out a vision to care for the people wrecked by dissolution. In other words, it works backwards from consensus to eventual solidarity through the long, enduring process of virtue formation.

Our Lord said that in the end times, "because lawlessness will be increased, the love of many will grow cold." (Matt 24:12). Our Lord warns us of the great temptation to not love the wrong things but to stop loving altogether. As Augustine says, "a people is an assemblage of reasonable beings bound together by a common agreement as to the objects of their love." Then our lack of love puts us at risk of not just being divided, but ceasing to be a people at all. The work of Christians in the next decades must be to, hoping against hope, rekindle a magnanimous national love of virtue. They must rebuild the middle civic institutions integral to democracy through the cultivation of competence, love of community, and a common end of flourishing.

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The Resilience of America's Hybrid-Enlightenment

BRAD LITTLEJOHN

For years, James Davison Hunter has been referenced as a voice of relative optimism in the never-ending debate over Christianity and culture. While commentators like Rod Dreher may have been dubbed prophets of doom, calling for retreat and disengagement from a crumbling *polis*, Hunter, with his cheerfully titled *To Change the World* (never mind its more ambivalent subtitle) held out hope for meaningful Christian civic renewal from the centers of cultural power. No one can accuse his latest, *Democracy and Solidarity*, of looking at America through rose-tinted spectacles. Observing at the outset, "Under the circumstances, it is worth considering whether contemporary American democracy can be fixed," he concludes his 400-page tour of the "cultural logics" that have historically bound Americans together by registering his sincere doubt that it can be.

The strength of his argument is its Hegelian framework for making sense of the ideals that have sustained American political order, a "hybrid-Enlightenment" containing within itself ideas from biblical faith and Enlightenment rationalism held together in dynamic tension. In every era since the Founding, these tensions

have been "worked through" to produce new syntheses—but lately, the syntheses have become weaker and the poles further apart. "We are now in a period of exhaustion. The endlessly worked-through sources of the hybrid-Enlightenment are depleted and no longer have traction." The result is a kind of nihilism on all sides, where we no longer believe in the power of persuasion, only the persuasion of power.

The weakness of such Hegelian arguments, though, is their intellectualism, their tendency to treat ideas as historical forces in their own right to the exclusion of more mundane factors. It is perhaps strange that the author of *To Change the World*, with its all-important focus on institutions, should tend to neglect the role of institutions here, but so it is. In particular, while Hunter observes in passing the role of "changes in the technological landscape, not least in the media of communication" in producing the nihilistic politics of our present, he gives them no sustained attention. I would argue that this omission produces a diagnosis at once too optimistic and too pessimistic.

Too optimistic, because while Hunter claims to "take the full measure of the challenges we face," it is not at all obvious that he has done so. If Anton Barba-Kay is correct in his *A Web of Our Own Making* that digital technology represents an "absolute and comprehensive social harrowing," then no attempt to make sense of our political and cultural breakdowns is complete without consideration of the media landscape that is deforming our discourse. Barba-Kay gives such a detailed consideration in his magisterial recent survey of the nature of digital formation, arguing that digital media are in many ways "at variance with politics as such." For, while "political life takes place in bonds and bounds…the internet, in contrast, is at basic odds with the attachments of bounded political life. It is a medium of the mind or the unsettled imagination….Where there is nowhere between here and everywhere, political speech cannot take place."

The frictionlessness, placenessness, and detachment of online discourse allows us the luxury of living in alternate universes, of never having to come to grips with each other, of simply checking out when we can no longer deal with one another. Moreover, the effortlessness of online communication, and its resulting overwhelming volume, results in a kind of communicative hyperinflation, where speech becomes a debased currency—no wonder we are content to talk past each other. Thus "individual agency diminishes and diminishes even as we feel that it grows and grows online. That is the virtual: the bargain by which we can feel more involved at the price of being less effective."

If Barba-Kay is correct, then nihilism and exhaustion is exactly what we should expect in a world of Very Online people. Samuel James

recently penned a provocative essay on his Substack suggesting that what so many have lately diagnosed as our condition of "political idolatry" could really be better described as "political boredom." "Political idolatry," he observes, "assumes worship, and worship assumes some kind of confidence in the thing being worshiped," but few of the people obsessively following politics have much real faith in it anymore. It has become for many a kind of spectator sport, or live-action role-playing, far easier to participate through digital media, yet harder to take seriously. There is a performativity to our culture wars now that I suspect was not there in the 90s.

Perhaps such nihilism—the nihilism of apathy rather than hatred—is the worst of all: "because you are lukewarm, and neither hot nor cold, I will spit you out of my mouth," the Lord warns Laodicea. And yet there are grounds for optimism in this diagnosis, reason to think that this framing reveals Hunter's requiem for the hybrid-Enlightenment to be a bit premature. To explain why, let me offer a first-person perspective.

Over the past six months, I have observed two communities of discourse. One, which I've observed as a bemused spectator, is the increasingly inane conversation of Very Online Christian Nationalism. Much of this discourse had long since descended into self-parody, but the loss of a clear and present common enemy after Trump's victory swiftly accelerated a splintering of the movement. At time of writing, many of the movement's principals were publicly devouring one another over whether, and to what extent, one should blame the Jews for the moral rot of modernity.

The other discourse, in which I've been a far more active participant, is that of a kaleidoscopic, bipartisan anti-porn coalition that has come together around the potentially landmark Supreme Court case, *Free Speech Coalition v. Paxton*. What's striking about this coalition is just how alive and well the "hybrid-Enlightenment" seems to be within it. Conservative Catholics and Bible Belt evangelicals may be motivated in part by religious authority, feminists and child-rights campaigners by ideas of human dignity, and social scientists by cold hard facts—but strangely, these sources seemed to speak with one voice when it came to the moral status of showing gang-rape videos to ten-year-olds. The other striking thing about this coalition was its non-nihilism. Most of those involved have seemed to display that wonderfully American combination of idealism and pragmatism, guided by real moral fervor but a willingness to focus on actionable goals alongside those of different ideals.

Ironically, the two discourses overlapped for a fleeting moment at last summer's National Conservatism conference. There, I found myself in a room with members of both coalitions. While a panel made up of members of the second coalition

were explaining the legal challenge and the opportunity before us, the conversation amongst the first group reverberated with mockery of the supposedly weak-willed liberalism on display: "They only want to ban porn for kids; a proper Protestant Franco would ban it for everyone." And yet, for all of their putative fervor in the cause, I've not heard or seen one of these folks active in the exciting legal and legislative battles now being joined in most of the fifty states to break the dystopian spell Big Tech has cast over the hearts and minds of the next generation.

In light of all this, I venture a hopeful hypothesis. Where real political action is still happening in this country, the sources of solidarity remain robust, and resilient hope still holds nihilism at bay. Too many citizens, however, feel cut off from the possibility of authentic political agency. In part this is a function of the collapse of what Patrick Deneen has called "aristopopulism"—the brain drain of local elites to a handful of coastal centers, and the consequent sense that there's nothing much of importance to be part of if you're stuck in flyover country. In part it is the result of a media culture that allows us all instantaneous vicarious participation in whatever's happening inside the Beltway. These two trends are mutually reinforcing: as our small-town politics feels less significant, we escape from its emptiness through performative online national politics; and as we fritter away our energies in futile X wars, we have that much less attention to apply to the actual needs of our cities and states.

Our political games, in short, are far more divisive and intractable than our actual politics. If we could tear our inebriated eyes off of the former just long enough to rediscover the joys of the latter, democracy and solidarity—and yes, a Christian society—might again have a fighting chance.

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THE USES OF DAMAGED GOODS

Toni Alimi. *Slaves of God: Augustine and Other Romans on Religion and Politics.*
Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2024. 328pp. $42
Matthew Elia. *The Problem of the Christian Master: Augustine in the Afterlife of Slavery.*
New Haven: Yale University Press, 2024. 296pp. $45

MYLES WERNTZ

When Christians confess that salvation comes through Christ, we are saying something very hard: that God's salvation comes through a creation which bears the marks of sin. The salvation of the world does not happen by fiat, or by a pure act of will, but by God becoming incarnate in the same flesh through which the sin of the world came. All that God makes use of in the restoration of the world—the Scriptures, church tradition, the people of God—bear the marks of this damage. The question is thus not *whether* damaged goods are used by Christians, but what use they can be.

We are in an era in which what use we can make of damaged goods is a leading question, catching up art, music, historical figures, theologians. Consider a more recent example, and one closer to home for Christians. When Wendell Berry's *The Need to Be Whole*—a substantial treatment of patriotism and racial prejudice—arrived in 2022, it was greeted with a mixture of appreciation and puzzlement. Readers quickly realized that the unspoken theme of the book was how to reckon with the most diabolical of American institutions: chattel slavery. Across this work of Berry's, slavery and racism are treated as a complex wound, a wound both damaging to body and soul and also creating possibilities, alternately distancing whites and blacks while creating opportunities for cooperation

and friendship between whites and blacks because of the proximity slavery created.

As two recent works on Augustine of Hippo and slavery demonstrate, Berry's posture of trying to hold two things together—the reality of friendship and the abomination of slavery—is not unique. Matthew Elia's *The Problem of the Christian Master: Augustine in the Afterlife of Slavery*, and Toni Alimi's *Slaves of God: Augustine and Other Romans on Religion and Politics*, offer incisive investigations of the problem that Berry's book raises: what do we do with Augustine, for whom positive attitudes regarding the institution of slavery and theological wisdom are so closely intertwined?

The stakes for how we answer this are much higher for Augustine of Hippo. He is the theologian, social philosopher, and bishop whose work sits at the river's head of much of 1700 years of Christian theology. Without Augustine, western articulations of original sin, political life, hermeneutics, and free will are without a proponent. Augustine, a saint in the ecumenical church, affects the shape of Christian theology since the 5th century, both in his ancient appropriations and in modern interpreters looking to the saint's work for political guidance.

But less appreciated and understood in the myriad appropriations of Augustine is the way in which his corpus consistently draws upon images of slavery, forming a "pervasive series of interrelated metaphors animating his treatment of God, sin, Christology, desire, order, virtue and freedom", as Elia puts it. The question of Augustine's use of slavery imagery burst back into view in Sarah Ruden's 2018 translation of *Confessions*, in which every instance of "Lord" is rendered by Ruden as "Master", lifting up Augustine's persistent of use of *dominus*—the household master—as his preferred title for God. Augustine's use of *dominus* as the title for God is part of the architecture of the "master's house", Elia says, a house which invites us to view the world—and indeed, theology—from the vantage point of the slave master.

Lest we try to rescue Augustine too quickly, we must attend to the evidence which Elia and Alimi marshall. In Augustine's corpus, it is not that slavery is bad, but *disobedient* slaves are bad. That position toward slaves was common in Augustine's day, but significant for Elia is the way in which this motif of slavery pervades Augustine's thought: pilgrims are those who travel in contradistinction to slaves running away; political order is envisioned as a household in which the *dominus* benevolently rules; Christ is preeminently the humiliated slave who is exalted. Elia's excavation, carried out in conversation with traditions of black political thought, highlights the manner in which Augustine's corpus is inseparable from viewing slavery as not just an ordinary feature of social life, but a *providential* one which helps organize his theological categories.

It is the *afterlife* of this connection which Elia finds the most troubling. Rather than examine the explicit links between Augustine's views of slavery and his doctrinal positions, the former has been treated independently of the latter, or worse, the latter is left untreated. Consider, for example, that for Augustine, slaves are the extensions of the master's own body,

and how this reflects Augustine's understanding of divine providence. Or how Augustine held that it was right and good for masters (Christian or not) to discipline their slaves, and how this view reflects his understanding of governmental interventions on matters of religion. Even if we disavow slavery as an immoral action, the theology which descends from Augustine has still taken up Augustine's presumptions about the justification of slavery. And these presumptions, Elia describes, are everywhere: celebrations of policing, justified violence, and uncritical labor—and indeed, presuming the need for subordination. All of these are just some of the ways in which contemporary Augustinian thought continues to operate from the vantage point of the master. Elia's primary target is Augustinian interpreters and inheritors here, but one can quickly see that these presumptions are taken up even by those who have never read Augustine.

Elia's work stages a conversation between Black Studies and Augustine, and thus moves back and forth between past and present, concerned more with Augustine's long shadow over the present as it has shaped theological sensibilities about tradition, power, and freedom. In doing so, there are moments in Elia when the historical Augustine is obscured or incompletely rendered, in order to give attention to Augustine's influence in the present. But these quibbles with Elia's work are minor compared with the questions which Elia raises concerning what we do with the imagery of slavery, prominent not only within Augustine's work, but within Scripture itself.

It is easy for people living in political freedom to read

Augustine's use of slavery as a spiritual metaphor, Elia suggests. But for those living as slaves in Augustine's day (and since), viewing the language of slavery as only metaphorical is insufficient. For Augustine's own view was that slavery was not only justified, but providentially apt. His language of slavery to sin, slavery to God, and Christ as the *doulos* or "slave" needs to strike us, not just as metaphors but as social realities Augustine wants us to accept. As Elia writes, "I propose we let ourselves be troubled and stay troubled," by the implications of the social reality Augustine builds. This is the first step to being able to ask questions about what it might mean to be good, true, or beautiful, what it means to be holy or free, if we do not assume that slavery—to God or to others—is something to be lifted up.

If we suspect that Elia is overreading Augustine's position on slavery, Toni Alimi's book comes with all of the receipts. Alimi's *Slaves of God* is a first-rate work of classics scholarship, comparing the writings and treatment of slavery by Augustine against the backdrop of his own era. Drawing in the writings of Cicero, Lactantius, Seneca, and numerous other Christian and Roman authors, Alimi slowly paints a picture of Augustine very similar to Elia's, but in many ways, more damning.

Elia's descriptions of Augustine have one eye turned toward the present, and thus, are concerned with those elements of Augustine which have most directly shaped present reflections on theology and ethics. Alimi's concerns are not with those of the present, but with Augustine's own context, beginning with Augustine's vision of the world as one in which

slavery to God is universally expected. Slavery to false gods brings unhappiness, and only slavery to God brings true rest. God's coercion of humanity, Alimi notes, serves this motif: we are unruly slaves who need to be brought back into the house of the good master, God.

Faithful slaves of God receive God himself as their inheritance, Alimi writes, and are expected to conduct themselves as representatives of the Master at every turn. In contrast to the Romans, who seek gods who allow them to behave violently and with abandon, the slaves of God are expected to renounce certain forms of coercion and domination. This theological vision is consonant with Augustine's political thought as well. Chattel slavery, for Augustine, is one of those ways available to the world to help move the world toward its eternal good: good masters are those who help direct their slaves toward God. Chattel slavery, neither inherently moral nor immoral for Augustine, can be used morally and immorally, moving a slave toward God and true happiness, or away from God.

In summarizing his work, Alimi writes, "slavery was a controlling theme in Augustine's thought. Chattel slavery is legitimated by slavery to God, which is in many ways Augustine's fundamental description of the divine-human relationship. True religion returns fugitive slaves to their original master and establishes the city in which all of God's faithful slaves are also citizens. Once one starts looking for slavery in Augustine's thought, one finds it everywhere." By everywhere, he means *everywhere:* in how Augustine construes creation, divine agency, divine friendship, Christology, political life, the working of God on the will. At every juncture, the "master's house" motif which Elia highlights appears, beginning with humans as those creatures meant to be God's slaves, all the way down.

It is not that Augustine was simply a man of his age, for Augustine, Alimi shows, could have seen things otherwise. Citing examples from Cicero—from whom Augustine draws regularly—and from Lactantius, one of the extant contemporaries of Augustine, we see how these concerns for divine order, God's activity, and virtue are accomplished without having chattel slavery as a governing motif. Cicero, opposing the use of chattel slavery, makes Augustine's defenses all the more baffling, given Augustine's pervasive citations of the Roman philosopher.

The subject of these books—Augustine's relationship to slavery—has been taken up before, and the fine work of these two books will be taken up by scholars anew. And there seems to be no way out of avoiding their conclusion: the theological world of Augustine illuminates the dynamics of sin and salvation, even as it sees actual slavery as one of the vehicles by which God redeems the world. One way forward is that of sheer avoidance. We cannot, for example, read Augustine's work on the dominating lust of the pagans as if it was only the *pagans* who exercised domination in the world, because of their slavery to sin. This is not a path available to us in reading Augustine: the slavery of the pagans to lust is only a *bad* form of slavery, with the slavery exercised by the Christian master the good form. The opposite of slavery to sin, for Augustine, was slavery to God. Indeed, for Augustine political and economic

slavery could themselves be a providential vehicle for spiritual renewal of slaves.

But another way forward is that which both Elia and Alimi's work offer. Elia's work makes use of the concept of signification, that words have multiple meanings, and can obscure as much as they illuminate. Elia ends his book with a meditation on how reckoning with Augustine's slavery imagery helps us to see the ways in which our own worlds are built on the domination of other people. Augustine's use of slavery, for example, illuminates the dynamics of sin, but also for Elia invites us to ask what hides in the shadow of this metaphor: the justifications of power and coercion, and the denials of freedom and love which are now theologically justified in the present day. But Elia does not apply this logic to slavery *itself*: in what ways might the motif of slavery be resignified?

Alimi's project—a largely descriptive venture—ends with a cryptic note which takes up briefly this very possibility. Augustine's slavery imagery, Alimi concludes, is that which was appropriated both by slave evangelists of the 17th century, and by political mystics like Simone Weil. In the hands of William Edmunson, the language of slavery was designed to retain slaves in the political place, while freeing their souls toward God: Augustine's best-case scenario for slaves. But in the hands of Weil, the language of slavery became a call to work for political liberation: she was God's now, and her destiny was to give herself endlessly for the dehumanized workers of 20th century France. Slavery to God, for Weil, meant working for the economic and political liberation

of the dehumanized worker. Strategies of reading theological figures against the grain—whether Augustine, Aquinas, or John Howard Yoder—have their limits. There is only so much that can be done by asking questions of internal consistency, of reading one aspect of a corpus against another, to try to repair internal weaknesses. What Alimi and Elia propose is something more radical: to let the troubling image stand, and ask how the image might undo itself.

Weil's example is instructive here. She read slavery as meaning *first* a literal call to submit to God, but then *second* a call for her to undo *political* slavery. The call of God comes to her in a way which invites us to repair the damaged *site* of the call itself. The gold of the Egyptian is melted down for the temple of God. The high places of Asherah become the high places of God's own worship. The cross, a weapon of torture, is tarried with and remade as the vehicle of God's salvation. And, in Philemon, being co-slaves to God becomes the opportunity for Paul to invite Philemon to set Epaphroditus free from his own debt slavery. If there is a future for reading Augustine—or any theologian who, in pursuit of understanding God's ways, justifies the unjust—it is this: the call of God, through damaged goods, entails healing the vehicle itself. No pure vehicle exists save Jesus himself.

The payoff for following Weil's example here is that it likewise affords us a way to reckon not just with Augustine's theology, but with the font of Augustine's theology: Scripture's own language surrounding slavery. Augustine's own views on slavery did not emerge out of thin air, or simply as a matter of

being a Roman citizen. As Alimi amply notes, there were contemporaries of Augustine who saw slavery differently. For Augustine was nothing if not a careful reader of Scripture–the imagery of slavery comes from the Scriptures themselves: in the Old Testament, in the Gospels, in Paul's letters. The same difficulties come in Scripture as we see in Augustine: slavery is present as the debt slavery viewed as a providential mechanism in the Old Testament, as a metaphor for disciples in Jesus' parables, as part of the conditions of church life in Paul's churches.

And in each of these cases, as we see with Philemon, repair–and dissolution–of the institution seems to be in view. Slaves are not held forever, but set free in Jubillee; the disciples are no longer called slaves but friends; Onesimus returns to his master not as a fugitive but as a prospective (political) equal. That Augustine saw human enslavement to God as part of what it meant to be a time-bound creature does not mean that we need follow his lead here. Rather, it means that repairing Augustine's theology has a Scriptural precedent in how Scripture itself treats the slavery of its own day: as that which we see clearly and that which we have the liberty to live without. As Weil demonstrates, we can read Scripture's language on slavery in the spiritual sense, and in doing so, see the poverty of slavery's literal sense, as Augustine himself did not.

This work of repair involves, as Elia points out, asking hard questions—and making even harder commitments—with respect to what that repair looks like. This is done not out of guilt so much as acknowledging that receiving a gift of God—in this case, Augustine's theological wisdom—means receiving it in such a way that we honestly name the ways in which it damages, and the way in which it heals, and enabling the damaged aspects of these gifts to not be hidden away. For only if they remain troubling before us might the bearers of the gift too be healed.

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LEARNING ISN'T THE RESULT OF SCHOOLING

Ivan Illich. *Deschooling Society*. Marion Boyers Publishers: London, 2000. pp. 150.

BOB THUNE

The All-In Podcast routinely sits atop the charts as the top-rated technology podcast in the world. Launched during the COVID pandemic by four Silicon Valley investor-entrepreneurs, it's entertaining, interesting, and often irreverent. The friendly competitive energy among the hosts — and the sense that we're getting their raw, unfiltered opinions on the world — drives the show's popularity. One of their favorite invited guests is Elon Musk.

At a recent live recording in Los Angeles, the hosts asked Musk for an update on Optimus (the humanoid robot now under development at Tesla). Musk was ebullient. Within thirty years, he surmised, artificially intelligent, general-purpose robots will outnumber humans. We'll soon be living in a world where robots will walk your dog, mow your lawn, and "teach your kids."

If robots teaching your kids is a welcome development to you, maybe this essay isn't for you. But for the rest of us, such a proposal invites sober reflection. How did we arrive at a place in society where the task of teaching children could be delegated to a machine? To answer this question, we need to revisit the work of Ivan Illich. Illich was one of the most interesting and insightful radicals of the 1960s and 70s. Born in Austria, he served as a Roman Catholic priest in New York City, moved to Mexico to lead an intercultural research center, and spent his later years as a university professor in the U.S. and Germany. His fierce criticisms of modernity and of institutional religion frequently drew the ire of the Vatican, and his anti-capitalist proclivities caused

opponents to deride him as a communist.

Illich's thought reflects the influence of Latin American liberation theology, Marxist social analysis, and postmodern epistemology. He's highly attuned to material conditions; highly critical of bureaucratic and technocratic solutions; and highly skeptical of totalizing narratives. In his incisive little book *Deschooling Society*, he invites us to consider the difference between learning and schooling.

Learning is something every human being does. But schooling, Illich contends, "[is] built on the axiom that learning is the result of teaching… And institutional wisdom continues to accept this axiom, despite overwhelming evidence to the contrary."

This contrast between learning and schooling lies at the heart of Illich's challenge to modern education. He asserts that our educational institutions, like most institutions in Western society, have succumbed to the logic of the market. We have come to view education as a good to be consumed. Society tells us that to be happy and successful, we must consume that good. Schools exist to offer us access to that good. The government, wanting its citizens to be happy and successful, seeks to subsidize and systematize the production of that good. And then a whole ecosystem of curriculum and consultants and conferences arises to ensure the quality of that good.

The end result is a one-size-fits-all product, measured by outcomes like test scores and graduation rates and college readiness, that largely fails to cultivate wonder and curiosity. Schooling replaces learning; standardization triumphs over spontaneity; "passing the test" eclipses the love of knowledge.

If education is a consumer good, then offering it at scale requires mass-production. Compulsory schooling creates a market for textbooks, teacher training, standardized testing, and specialists. And like most mass-produced goods, this entire ecosystem tends toward an economy of scale.

"School sells curriculum — a bundle of goods made according to the same process and having the same structure as other merchandise. Curriculum production for most schools begins with allegedly scientific research, on whose basis educational engineers predict future demand and tools for the assembly line, within the limits set by budgets and taboos. The distributor-teacher delivers the finished product to the consumer-pupil… and last year's wrapping is always obsolete for this year's consumer."

This is how we arrive at the prospect of robots teaching our kids. If we uncritically accept the premise that learning is the result of schooling… and if schooling, to produce predictable outcomes, must be standardized and systematized across a wide market… then schoolteachers will ultimately face the same workforce disruptions as Amazon warehouse workers and Ford assembly-line technicians. We may reach a day when it is cheaper, more predictable, and more efficient to train a humanoid robot to teach

a pre-packaged curriculum to a classroom full of students. What's more, a robot will not be subject to human bias, human frailty, or the expense of retirement benefits and health insurance.

What can we do to avoid such a day? Well, Illich's radical proposal — derided by many in 1971, and still controversial today — is captured in the title of his book. He believes we must dismantle the educational bureaucracy that has come to dominate so much of our society. (Lest you dismiss his proposal as overly aggressive, consider that Yale University employs 5,460 administrators for just 5,000 undergraduate students. Administrative bloat is a symptom of an over-schooled society.)

Though I had not encountered Illich's work at the time, similar intuitions led me to help start a classical Christian school nine years ago. It's been a strong success, and by God's grace we've been able to coach and support similar school startups across our region. But Illich's critique confronts even this burgeoning movement. Too often, Christian education is merely an alternative delivery vehicle for the same vision of schooling. We sell a different brand of education to a different type of consumer; but we compete according to the values of the market and measure our success by the standards of the market. Without strong and intentional efforts at resistance, Christian schools drift toward upward mobility and career success and college readiness rather than virtue and character and curiosity.

Christian parents, teachers, and students across the spectrum of education would do well to recapture Illich's insights. Learning, not schooling, is the aim. When schooling replaces learning, the humanness of education is effaced, leaving us vulnerable to a machine-centric future. If we care about the children around us, we must resist the push toward educational efficiency, productivity, and standardization. And such resistance will require us to be a bit a more radical.

What, exactly, would gently radical resistance look like? Based on my own reading of Illich, let me offer three humble proposals as a starting point.

1. Change the scorecard. I am surprised how many Christian schools emphasize test scores, college entrance exams, and career readiness as their primary success metrics. These are the outcomes American parents tend to associate with "a good education." But Christian education isn't just a different means to the same end; it's a whole different telos. We must embrace a deeper and more intuitive vision of success. If your kid makes it into a great college, but lacks virtue and character, is that a "win?" Most parents, I trust, would say no. Christian education should aim to shape virtue, impart wisdom, and build character traits like discipline and perseverance and resilience. Christian schools and Christian parents should make these outcomes the explicit goal, allowing college admissions to take a backseat to character formation.

2. Prioritize the classroom. There's been a lot of

talk in our national politics lately about "dismantling the administrative state." The same thing needs to happen in most schools. Bureaucracy tends to grow; administrative needs multiply; and the career path of many "educators" is to end up in an office rather than a classroom. Christian education should radically resist this trajectory. Our best leaders should be in the classroom; our best efforts should be given to quality instruction; our best resources should flow toward learning, not managing. This is not to deny the critical need for good administration: schools are complex organizations, and they need competent leadership. But the best administrators are the ones who are most focused on a great classroom experience.

3. Emphasize the joy of learning. In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, interest in our local classical Christian school skyrocketed. When I asked people why they were interested, the answer was almost always: "My [neighbor's, sister's, cousin's, friend's] kids go here, and they really love this school!" It's not a surprise: kids love learning! They just don't love *schooling*. When we allow the natural joy of curiosity and mastery to drive a child's school experience, they almost always thrive. And everyone around them thrives, too, because there's nothing more universally gratifying than a child full of joy and excitement. We all wanted to be that child. We remember the moments when we *were* that child. And we want the kids we care about to have that kind of childhood.

Maybe Illich's radical vision of a deschooled society won't come to fruition in the way he hoped. And maybe it shouldn't. But at the very least, we should allow his critique to renew our vision for educational reform. If we don't want robots teaching our kids, we'd better understand the difference between schooling and learning. Because if we continue to believe that learning is the result of schooling, we've already lost the plot.

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How Sophistry

Leads to Abuse

Josef Pieper. *Abuse of Language, Abuse of Power*. San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1992. 54pp. $11.95

SAMUEL JAMES

In December of 2023, a group of Ivy League university presidents testified before a Congressional committee regarding antisemitism on American campuses. The most fateful question asked that day would end up being a straightforward one from New York representative Elise Stefanik. Ms. Stefanik asked the group whether calls for the genocide of Jewish people would constitute unlawful harassment according to each president's respective university code. All three gave the same answer, nearly verbatim: "It would depend on the context."

Donors were unhappy with this answer (or at least with how unpopular the answer was). Claudine Gay and Liz Magill eventually resigned their positions at Harvard and the University of Pennsylvania, respectively, and few would argue that such a result was or is unjust. To go back and re-listen to their testimony, however, is quite useful. Rep. Stefanik believed she was hearing a limp wristed justification for antisemitism. But I'm not so sure.

Each president explained "context" by referring the committee to the same cache of words: "targeted," "pervasive," "severe," "conduct." Things were brought to a head by Magill, who blurted out that chants for the deaths of Jews might be against Penn's code of conduct "If the speech becomes conduct." A stupefied Rep. Stefanik asked if by "conduct," Magill meant *actually committing* genocide against Jews.

Of course, this is not what Magill meant. There's no reason to believe that Magill is personally antisemitic. There's no reason to believe Magill meant anything at all. The phrase "If the speech becomes conduct" means nothing. It

is a formula, not a proposition; a creation of Human Resources, not an expression of human reason. Everyone in the room knew that the university presidents were trying *not* to say something. In that exchange, language became a hiding place.

George Orwell would have appreciated the moment. "The great enemy of clear language is insincerity," he wrote in "Politics and the English Language." "When there is a gap between one's real and one's declared aims, one turns as it were instinctively to long words and exhausted idioms, like a cuttlefish spurting out ink." The spectacle that ended Claudine Gay and Liz McGill's presidencies is perhaps a fitting symbol of, to borrow from Christopher Hitchens, how far the termites have spread in American higher education, and how long and well they've dined. What has happened to the conscience of the university? Partly, it's been jargon-ed into oblivion. Words like "harassment," "equity," "safe," and "just" no longer mean anything an honest person can understand. They are deployed like artillery or parachutes, depending on the situation.

Of course, such dilution of meaning happens in many other places, too. Films, advertisements, self-help bestsellers, and even some preachers use words like "authentic," "repressed," "deserve," "boundary," and "trauma" to refer to anything from being lynched to having the barista mispronounce your name. But the devolution of language at the college campus is worse. These are the places that society entrusts with resources and authority to, among other things, explain what things mean. If nonsense like what

Claudine Gay and Liz McGill spouted is normal at the very places that are supposed to teach us how to think, what are the consequences?

Josef Pieper's *Abuse of Language, Abuse of Power* is well titled. Its main argument is right there: The abuse of language, especially for the purposes of propaganda, happens because people want power. Beginning with Plato's arch enemies, the Sophists, Pieper briskly summarizes the inner lives of those who expertly say non-things.

Sophists, both ancient and modern, display "exceptional awareness of linguistic nuances and utmost formal intelligence, from their way of pushing and perfecting the employment of verbal constructions to crafty limits, thereby—and precisely in this—corrupting the meaning and the dignity of the very words." In other words, Sophists are very smart, and they know it. Their words are calculated to inspire in their audience both admiration and a fear of being the only poor dolt who doesn't understand. These emotions in an audience give the Sophist enormous power to do what he wants to with language. He can flatter, he can cajole, he can manipulate: and all the while the disconnect between what he says and reality is camouflaged almost perfectly.

Even in flattery, however, there is a kind of elitism in sophistry. Pieper observes that abandoning the pursuit of truth in speech reveals the speaker "no longer considers the other as a partner, as equal. In fact, he no longer respects the other as a human person." But why? Because language has only one of two roles to

play. Either it seeks reality, however imperfectly, or else it seeks power.

The illustration that many will reach for at this point is so easy it feels unfair. The COVID pandemic featured many neologisms that violated common sense, and in many cases this abuse of language was quite literally a power play. But there are other examples, too. One thinks about the dissident Right's love of "effeminate" as a catch-all slur for any male who doesn't fall in lockstep conformity with its orthodoxy. The actual meaning of the word is irrelevant, as is the particular target. Again, the fear is the point. Nobody wants to be considered effeminate. The word works like a concealed handgun in tense negotiations. You know it's there, they know it's there, and every desire you might have to take a stand is weighed down by the desire to not see that handgun.

Contemporary political discourse regularly abandons even the pretense of seeking truth. But too often, politicians and journalists "merely chalk it up "disinformation" and leave it at that. This is not what Pieper means. The problem is not so much that there's a lot of untrue things being said. It's that there are a lot of people who don't care about the truthfulness of what they're saying or hearing. The former situation creates ignorant citizens; the latter creates *indifferent* ones.

It is entirely possible that the true and authentic reality is being drowned out by the countless superficial information bits noisily and breathlessly presented in propaganda fashion. Consequently, one may be entirely knowledgeable about a thousand details and nevertheless, because of ignorance regarding the core of the matter, remain without basic insight…something far more discouraging is readily conceivable as well: the place of authentic reality is taken over by a fictious reality; my perception is indeed still directed toward an object, but now it is a *pseudoreality*, deceptively appearing as being real, so much so that it becomes almost impossible any more to discern the truth.

The technological problem is real. Mass media in general, and the Internet especially, create what might be called an implausibility structure for truthful thinking. There's just too much information, coming too quickly and too easily accessible, in order to think honestly and wisely about it all. If one is going to keep up, one has to decide in advance what kind of lies, what kind of fallacies, what kind of untruths one is willing to live with.

But the technological problem is not the biggest one. More urgent is the openly transactional relationship many modern people have with the idea of truth itself. I'm entitled to my myths because the people I dislike—my political enemies, my religious rivals, my personal out-group—have theirs, too.

I can vividly recall numerous times when someone told me what they'd just read online, and I knew this

information was untrue, and told them so. Rarely in my experience does someone proceed to argue the point, offering up evidence and arguments. Far more common is the shrug and something along the lines of "Well it might as well be true." You can see in that moment a sliver of humanity dying. Mankind's natural instinct to care about whether what he thinks is true or false cannot be suppressed without harm to oneself, and to others.

Pieper's treatise, first published in 1974, ends with the conviction that the university ought to be a bulwark of truthful speaking. This part of his essay feels almost hopelessly quaint and ironically prescient. Pieper insists on the university as an "expressly reserved" place for truth-telling, "explicitly protected against all potential special interests and invading influences, where hidden agendas have no place." Reverse engineering this hope reveals just how right Pieper was. Special interests look like the bureaucratic leviathan of academic administration. Invading influences look like the bowing of academy to activism. And hidden agendas sound like the progressive social doctrine that confidently asserts a woman can have a penis yet cannot tell whether chants for genocide should get a person removed from school.

As I write, Christmas is a few weeks away. *Abuse of Language, Abuse of Power* is like the ghost of Christmas Past. Readers can see in its pages the specific choices that professors, media moguls, and tech startups have made to land us where we are. When the clock strikes midnight and the book closes, we are left with no

strategies or habits, just regret. But perhaps language is the kind of thing one cannot recover with sheer willpower. Once abused, perhaps all that remains is to sit under its wrath, and let it render us according to our deeds.

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What Dostoevsky Would Think of "Assisted Dying"

VIKA PECHERSKY

As the news of the passing of the assisted suicide bill in the U.K. echoed through news outlets and social media platforms, many Christians voiced their disappointment, frustration, and even horror at such a development. Civilized societies do not kill their weak and elderly, some said. Others posted and reposted Stanley Hauerwas' famous words that if in 100 years Christians do not kill their children and elderly, we will have done well. Ross Douthat delivered his usual blistering and elegant critique, to which even Dostoevsky would have nodded approvingly if he had a chance to read these lines:

"They envision assisted suicide as an expansion of human agency, even form of liberal dynamism. But it's not a coincidence where and how it's coming in: Amid bureaucratized stagnation, expressing the spiritual logic of societies that lack confidence, optimism, (or) the will to live."

Dostoevsky, of course, thought a lot about modern society, its ills, and its projected path. Some even say that he was a prophet of sorts. It is also not a coincidence that suicide plays a major role in his writing. His novel *The Possessed* (also translated as *The Demons*) is the prime example of Dostoevsky's contemplation about the fate of modern society and his prophetic gift.

The novel is set in a provincial Russian town on the fringes of Russian society, and it revolves around a group of wannabe revolutionaries who seek to disrupt the social and moral order of 19th-century Russia. A side note to a prospective reader: The novel is dark, even diabolical at times. The events move fast and chaotically as if hurled forward by a malevolent invisible force. However, the grim tones and the chaos are not incidental. They are at the heart of Dostoevsky's vision and critique of the modern world.

In the novel, two suicides occur at crucial points in the narrative. The first is committed by Kirillov, a radical

atheist who wishes to prove that he has become god by taking his own life. The second suicide is committed at the end of the story by the main character–Nikolay Stavrogin, a local aristocrat, whose life of dissipation left him hallowed out and utterly lifeless.

Importantly, both suicides vary drastically from each other, both in the mode of death, as well as the reasons that drove each man to take their life. Dostoevsky's commitment to personalism prevents him from making crude generalizations. Each of them is highly educated and intelligent in their own way. It would seem that each of them has everything they need to live a good life. And yet, both are unable or unwilling to do so.

In his book *Dostoyevsky: Interpretation*, Nikolai Berdyaev suggests that Stavrogin and Kirillov (along with a handful of other Dostoyevsky tragic heroes) are quintessentially modern men. They have freed themselves from the bonds of family, tradition, religion, and God himself; they have turned to the dark side of freedom–self-centered and self-positing liberty.

Berdyaev intimates that Dostoevsky was deeply concerned with the question of freedom. Indeed, he was one of the strongest proponents of it, best illustrated by The Grand Inquisitor poem in *The Brothers Karamazov*. The poem is set in 16th-century Spanish city of Seville at the height of the Inquisition. Christ visits the city in person, drawing crowds of people to Himself. The Grand Inquisitor arrests Jesus for undermining his authority. In the dark cell where Christ is held, the Grand Inquisitor confronts Him

in a long monologue accusing Christ of thinking too highly of people and placing an unbearable burden of freedom on humanity. Humans are weak and feeble, the Inquisitor says. People want order, miracles, and a sense of security, which is what the Inquisitor gives them instead of freedom.

Berdyaev insists that despite the great writer's dedication to human freedom, it has an inherent danger for him. Dostoevsky explores the dynamic of freedom once the person assumes the license to wilful self-positing. There is a dark logic at play in his novels: When a society kills its God, it will also kill the man. In *The Possessed*, the loss of life in each suicide is only part of the tragedy. Dostoevsky is absolutely ruthless in his depiction of people gripped by godlessness, nihilism, and moral ambiguity. He also tears into a humanistic naivete which assumes that the human freedom to choose one's manner of dying somehow dignifies people or gives them more power.

This is what Kirillov set out to prove. However, Dostoevsky will not allow simplistic resolutions because human actions are always open to multiple outcomes, and people can never control the results. In his commentary on Dostoevsky, Rowan Williams called it "indeterminacy of each moment." Kirillov's suicide, however noble and pure in his intentions, became the pawn in the killing of an innocent man and a chance for the perpetrator to get away with murder.

What's worse is that Kirillov knew of the murderous plan and that his suicide would let the murderer off the hook and failed to take responsibility. All his

high words about human freedom and destiny could not hide his disdain for human life. Once again, Dostoevsky will not allow the false pretense. The real hate and disregard for human life shows its ugly face. Stavrogin's suicide is the expression of the loss of will to live. It represents the flip side of the same malady that afflicts modern society. The desire to assert one's own destiny, take power over one's life, and loss of will to live are the results of the same dark logic of freedom. The unchecked personal freedom with which Stavrogin lived his life was a dead end and left him in a stupor. By plumbing the depths of false knowledge, vice, and self-indulgence, Stavrogin has extinguished in himself any fire of life. It incapacitated him and turned him into a living ghost, neither dead nor fully alive. Nothing arouses any desire in him, he is no longer capable of love or hate. He is utterly indifferent to the events around him even though he has the power to avert the tragedy. All that's left of Stavrogin's self-positing is self-loathing and a profound sense of failure.

Berdyaev credits Dostoevsky in describing the dialectic of dark freedom. First, freedom turns away from God and turns into human self-positing. Then, self-positing turns into evil necessity and coercion. This results in the destruction of freedom.

If this dialectic is truly at work in our modern societies (as it was in Russia with the arrival of Communism), and if humans in their flight from God are bound to self-destruction, then euthanasia is one of the collective outworkings of this dark logic.

Some have accused Dostoevsky of being unnecessarily

cruel and brutal in his depiction of modernity. But it is precisely the severity with which the great writer describes the savagery of self-emptying and self-destruction of modern man that can prepare us for the real-life savagery the modern society could inflict upon itself.

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Orphics in Our Midst

NADYA WILLIAMS

One winter day near Thessaloniki in 1962, two archaeologists excavating a fourth-century BC Macedonian nobleman's tomb made a unique and extraordinary find: a papyrus roll. This in and of itself is already unusual, as all other papyri to survive from antiquity were found in Egypt, whose sands have afforded the perfect preservation environment for the fragile material (two others have been found outside of Egypt, only to crumble forthwith upon discovery).

But the contents of this papyrus, once its fragments were assembled and deciphered, proved even more extraordinary than the sheer fact of its survival: This was a philosophical allegorical commentary on an Orphic hymn. Dealing with the nature of the soul and conditions under which it might yet elude death, it was an appropriate text to place in a tomb. Considering the difficulties involved in understanding any Orphic texts, it's also appropriate that it was a commentary, rather than the hymn itself, that was buried with the unknown gentleman. When it comes to understanding important matters correctly, better safe than sorry.

I first encountered this document, named the Derveni papyrus, on the first day of a graduate seminar in Greek papyrology that I took nearly twenty years ago. The scribe's hand is legible enough to allow baby papyrologists to cut their teeth on deciphering the script. But reading the words here is the least of anyone's worries. The Derveni papyrus is a gateway into a world of psychedelic mushrooms, dripping acid, and the wildest search for the true world soul or at least the divine self somewhere deep within your mortal body—metaphorically speaking, probably, but one never really knows with the Orphics and their ilk.

Really, the Greeks and various other ancient pagan groups—from the Indus River Valley to Mesopotamia and across the Mediterranean—could be weird, but what has been insufficiently noted before is that they were weird in remarkably similar ways, philosophically speaking. So argues theologian Michael Horton

in his new book, *Shaman and Sage: The Roots of "Spiritual but Not Religious" in Antiquity*.

Horton urges us to look at ancient paganism in greater detail than Christians have so far. Typically, we are prone to think in simplistic terms of polytheism or paganism as the worship of many gods and monotheism as that thing we do, having inherited it from the Jews. And yet, ancient pagan religions are fascinating in much more complicated ways than we ordinarily think, once we look more closely. Myths of divine rebirth, dismemberment or other violent death, and reincarnation abound, as do questions about the complexities of the relationship of the human and the divine.

What are people for? What are gods for? Are all gods manifestations of one being, and how do the various parts of this one being all connect to each other? On a related note, what is the nature of the soul, and under what conditions does it, unlike the inconveniently fleshly body entrapping it, become immortal? But the real question you're here for is: What does any of this have to do with Christ—and, therefore, with us, modern believers? In other words, why should Christians today care about the Derveni papyrus, those weird Orphic followers, and the plethora of other no less strange sources about complicated shamanistic beliefs and practices across ancient Eurasia?

This last is the question that Horton sets out to answer in his book. This admittedly hefty volume does not present a complete answer, though: This is just the first book in a planned trilogy.

Horton explains the need for this project in *Anno Domini* 2024 by pointing to some unfortunate trends in the contemporary religious landscape: "58 percent of eighteen- to twenty-four-year-old Americans believe that astrology is scientific. The number of US adults who believe in astrology is greater than the combined membership of all mainline Protestant denominations." I will hazard to guess, in fact, that plenty of members of mainline Protestant denominations believe in astrology too, even as I've met some who do not believe in the resurrection.

In our world of "Great Dechurching" these are sobering reminders that "Spirituality without religion is not just a vapid weigh station to atheism, particularly when most atheists affirm some sort of spiritual reality. Not even in post-Christian Europe is scientific naturalism the victor over religion. Instead, beliefs that would have been considered superstitious by Christians and scientists alike are considered scientific."

But, Horton argues, while this is a modern and post-Christian story, it's an ancient and pre-Christian one too. So back we go to the Orphics, the people who had written the Derveni papyrus and the hymn on which it comments. Horton cautions: "The history of Western civilization cannot be reduced to Orphic philosophy and Hermetic magic. Yet it cannot be understood without it. The so-called Axial revolution was not something that happened once upon a time in the sixth century BCE. Rather, it has always been the native religion of Western culture. Challenges to the public religion of Athens and of Christendom

have always asserted the 'Religion of the One'—the perennial tradition of the One as everything and everything as the One."

In other words, too often, perhaps without even realizing it, ancient mystics and pagans are remarkably (and disturbingly) similar to modern religious skeptics.

Horton proceeds to offer a superbly researched chronological gallop through the spiritual beliefs from the Mesopotamian world of Gilgamesh and Achaemenid Zoroastrianism to the growth of beliefs, stories, and cults surrounding the single most influential figure in this book: the Greek mythical bard Orpheus.

In Greek mythology, Orpheus lost his wife, Eurydice, to snakebite. The gods granted him a favor: he could descend to the underworld, claim her, and bring her back to the world of the living. Except he looked back at her during the march back, and as consequence, lost her forever. In myths about his later life, the frenzied worshippers of the deranged wine god Dionysus tore Orpheus apart as part of ritual.

Over time, both Orpheus and Dionysus became connected to mystery cults in the Greek world and the larger Mediterranean orbit, both together and separately, as various groups were navigating beliefs and rituals about the nature of the soul: "From the late seventh or early sixth century, the same artists who gave life to Dionysus were captivated by the Thracian singer. Calling Orpheus 'the father of songs,' the great lyric poet Pindar is

taken with the doctrines of the body as a prison of the soul, reincarnation, and the hope for eventual disembodiment."

We find figures like Orpheus evolve from mere shamans into sages too—as stories around them are told by philosophers and become the foundation for further philosophical ideals about the nature of the soul and the body. One of the most recognizable names in this story is Pythagoras—of the Pythagorean theorem fame—who was a mystic philosopher as well as a mathematician. (If you have always hated math because it felt like the enemy of your soul, you may have been on to something)

By the time we get to Plato, "It is a modern anachronism… to picture the Greek enlightenment as a retreat from religion; rather, it was a flight from what we might call organized religion. The goal remained nothing less than salvation of the soul and assimilation to God." In the process, Plato's writings reflect throughout the continued influence of Orphic beliefs in practice.

But it's not just the pagans whose spiritual journeys revolve around various permutations of Orphic philosophy. The story starts getting arguably even trippier once we get to Jewish and early Christian thinkers who incorporated Orphic elements. We meet Philo of Alexandria, a contemporary of Jesus, whom Horton nicknames "Orphic Moses," and who himself referred to Plato as "Greek-speaking Moses." Among Philo's particularly obvious Orphic beliefs is his interpretation of Abraham's life: "Abraham's migration is a cycle of descent and

return, an eternal journey between two worlds. Thus, his interpretation of scripture was much like Plato's Orphic interpretation of Odysseus's departure and return to Ithaca and Plutarch's exposition of the myth of Isis and Osiris. The end is always like the beginning."

The end result is a different sort of Judaism, Horton notes, and "something completely foreign to Hellenists: descending into ourselves in order to *despair* of finding God there, so that we will cast ourselves upon the God who is outside of our soul. For the rest of the journey to God, Philo interprets biblical narratives as quarries for what is in the main the Orphic-Plato cosmogenic myth."

The interest in philosophy as an art and a science, but also sheer magic, continued into the Roman Empire. The time of turmoil in the third century— what historians call the Third Century Crisis— inspires, unsurprisingly, a new manifestation of the shaman-type figure to whom despairing souls could turn. This is Hermes Trismegistus, whose mysticism fascinated such Christian witnesses as Clement of Alexandria.

Not surprisingly, the Hermetic movement also influenced Neoplatonism, the new incarnation of the Platonic school in the Late Roman Empire— which included a Christian element, the Christian Neoplatonists. Horton explains the various groups' interest in Hermes the magician: "There is a lot of theology in the Corpus Hermeticum and theurgic Neoplatonism, but the main interest is in doing and not dogma. Magicians were utopians, wanting to bend the rules of fate. They were the vanguard of natural scientists because they wanted to change nature, not just to understand it."

If you (like me) have ever noticed the strong Neoplatonist flavor in the Gnostic movement, you will find Horton's analysis helpful in explaining the myriad ways in which the different Gnostic sects appropriated and reinterpreted Orphic and Hermetic views, all while displaying several common beliefs. First among these is that "The true God is unknowable and beyond the hierarchy of being and yet identical to one's deepest self." As in straight-up Orphism, there is also a hierarchy of worlds: "The lower world was created by an inferior and evil ruler." Finally, and most recognizable Orphic trend is: "Gnostics curved the historical events of Jesus's incarnation, crucifixion, resurrection, bodily ascent, and return at the end of the age into a circle of Orphic descent-and-return."

It is perhaps unsurprising that such a blender-smoothie-theology approach that the Gnostics and at times also other Christian Platonists (like Origen) brought to marry Orphism with Christianity, rankled not only orthodox Christians but also some pagan critics of Christianity, like Porphyry. He was particularly scandalized with "the doctrine of the resurrection of the body." Isn't this a rejection of the Platonic—and Orphic—emphasis on the truth of the soul first? Appropriately enough, Augustine later finds rejecting Platonism key in strengthening his faith in Christ.

In the book's final chapter, Horton offers a bird's-eye overview of Orphic-Hermetic ideas in the

Byzantine world and beyond. These ideas preview, I assume, the two volumes in this series that are to come. Horton concludes: "wherever we discern a quasi-docetic eschatology that leaves the body and the visible world behind, we are in an Orphic rather than biblical atmosphere. This includes an emphasis on "God" as a cipher for the "Whole" and a subordinate Christology that privileges the *logos asarkos* (meaning, Word without flesh) in eternity over and above the *logos ensarkos* (meaning, the Incarnate Word) in time. And that, I suggest, is the nucleus of what it means, at least in a formerly Christian civilization, to be spiritual rather than religious."

I have noted before that there are two types of ancient historians: Those who emphasize the differences between people in antiquity and us; and those who lean on the similarities of the human experience. Horton makes in this book a convincing argument for the latter, when it comes to matters of spirituality. We as a species are remarkably less creative than we might like to think. We are also remarkably self-centered by nature—thence the desire of every self-proclaimed shaman and sage to find, ultimately, the spiritual or the divine within. It is convicting to read over this intellectual history that Horton brings together to show how natural to us is the desire to make ourselves into our own gods.

Therein lies the theological value and application of this survey of intellectual history of Orphism and similar spiritual beliefs throughout antiquity. Christianity was distinctive and unusual among these beliefs that existed all around it. And yet,

even for some believers, the temptation was irresistible to try and reconcile Christianity with the mysticism that was practically in the air and the water all around. I did not look at philosophical ideas in my own examination of cultural Christians in the early church. But Horton reveals this tale of cultural Christians in the spiritual realm—just as for many non-Christians, such superstitions in antiquity were their main religion, just as they are for so many non-Christians today. Paganism, it turns out, was anything but simple.

The book is superbly researched—Horton is the undisputed master of both primary and secondary source material. He has done the impossible here, presenting the story of both the massive millennia-old intellectual forest and its many trees in exquisite detail. This book is no fast-paced beach read, but it will be well worth the time you spend with it.

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THE LONG ORPHIC SHADOW

JOHN EHRETT

Michael Horton's new book *Shaman and Sage: The Roots of "Spiritual But Not Religious" in Antiquity*, is really two studies in one. The first is historical: as book one of a planned three-volume project, *Shaman and Sage* is a massive, deeply researched intellectual exploration of the Western esoteric tradition, from its origins in Egyptian and Indo-European mysticism all the way up into the early Middle Ages. The second, however, is even more interesting. Horton's volume—as its subtitle might imply—is as much a theological intervention as a historical one, seeking to confront the deep roots of a seemingly contemporary theological problem. *Why do so many people think they don't need "organized religion" to seek God—or the "divine"?*

Where Tara Isabella Burton's *Strange Rites: New Religions for a Godless World* was journalistic and observational, Horton's approach is genealogical. And that genealogy leads him to an interesting place: for Horton, the modern shift to an individuated, anti-institutional spirituality is not a historical novelty, but merely the latest outbreak of a long-gestating intellectual phenomenon. The provocative thesis at the heart of Horton's study is that the Western tradition—and *ipso facto* the Christian tradition—has, since basically its origins, incubated "Orphism," a theological-philosophical tradition that, in Horton's telling, is fundamentally opposed to orthodox Christian thought. And it is this latent Orphism that underpins what today's millennials mean when they call themselves "spiritual but not religious."[1]

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[1] Michael Horton, *Shaman and Sage: The Roots of "Spiritual But Not Religious" in Antiquity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2024), 426.

It is impossible to do full justice, in any review such as this, to the depth of Horton's historical research and interpretations of primary texts. Comprehensive treatments of individual claims—for instance, Horton's interestingly against-the-grain reading of Pseudo-Dionysius—must await responses from the specialists whose work Horton engages. In what follows, my goal is simply to provide some overarching observations about the book's argument as a whole—and, perhaps, a critique of where its logic ultimately leads.

Sharply drawn dichotomies are a defining feature of Horton's intellectual project. In that spirit, the volume opens with a distinction that sets the trajectory of the rest of the book, a distinction between "locative" and "utopian" world-pictures, or macrocosmic understandings of the shape of reality. In Horton's telling, early human societies favored *locative* models, in which "the individual feels embedded in an ordered cosmos with boundaries that must not be crossed. One belongs to a family that belongs to a clan that belongs to a city, which is the earthly copy of the archetypal society of the gods above."[2] We have here something very like the "three-tier" world-picture of ancient thought.

But the locative cosmos harbored its trickster. In Horton's account, the cultic figure of the shaman—who invokes supernatural forces in order to transgress the boundaries of the ordered cosmos—presaged the emergence and consolidation of *utopian* outlooks, and the dawn of many of the world's richest religious traditions, in what is commonly described as the "Axial Age."[3]

Horton rejects the common characterization of the Axial Age as a philosophical transition from polytheism to monotheism. As Horton reads this period, the shift is "definitely not a trend from polytheism toward *monotheism*, as frequently suggested, but rather toward *monism*, which I use in the modern philosophical sense."[4] In particular, at the heart of the new utopian outlook is "the idea of the emanation of everything that is real from a single and absolute source, spreading like fireworks into a dazzling appearance of diversity and returning to its real being as a simple unity[.]"[5]

For Horton, a metaphysics of emanation is wholly opposed in principle to the Jewish-Christian doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*, which bursts the boundaries of any ostensibly "perennial" philosophical system. "Not in the myths of the nations but in the covenant history of Yahweh with his chosen people, revealed authoritatively in Scripture, is the truth to be found."[6] Jewish-Christian monotheism, for Horton, must be philosophically grounded in something altogether *other* than this utopian outlook.

[1] Michael Horton, *Shaman and Sage: The Roots of "Spiritual But Not Religious" in Antiquity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2024), 426.

[2] Horton, *Shaman and Sage, 18*

[3] Horton, *Shaman and Sage, 54*

[4] Horton, *Shaman and Sage, 16*

[5] Horton, *Shaman and Sage, 9*

[6] Horton, *Shaman and Sage, 22*

The religious-philosophical system that follows from an emanationist cosmology, Horton contends, can be termed "Orphism," after the legendary Orpheus said to be its founder. Orphism, as Horton renders it, is "a catchall label for what ancients themselves understood as teachings concerning the soul's immortality, its fall into a bodily prison, and its reincarnation in various bodies 'to pay the penalty' with the hope of escaping the wheel of rebirth to reunite with the One and All."[7] The distinguishing features of Orphism, however, are not merely soteriological, but broadly metaphysical: elsewhere, Horton emphasizes that Orphism "is wholly vertical in its lower to higher orientation: the particulars of historical time to the eternity of universal ideas, corporeal to incorporeal, visible to invisible, division to unity."[8]

After arguing for its roots in Persian, Vedic, Egyptian, and other sources, Horton traces the Orphic world-picture through the mystical initiation rites at Eleusis, through the formulation of Orphic principles as philosophical dogmas (the process by which the eponymous "shaman" becomes the "sage" of Western antiquity[9]), and through the subsequent debates over the reception of these axioms. From there, much of the book becomes a theologically inflected history of the Platonic philosophical tradition writ large, running through Plato himself, Plotinus, Origen, Porphyry, Proclus, and Iamblichus, among others.

The "climax" of the volume is a fascinating juxtaposition of two thinkers, Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite and John Scotus Eriugena—both of whom understood themselves as Christians, but who, in Horton's reading, represent very different engagements with the "Orphic" inheritance carried forward from classical civilization. As Horton has it, "Pseudo-Dionysius . . . represents a *creative transposition* of Neoplatonic themes to distinctive Christian doctrines" (good), while Eriugena "articulated a medieval *philosophical religion*" (bad).[10] Pseudo-Dionysius fundamentally revises Orphic Neoplatonism; Eriugena succumbs to it.

What's wrong with "philosophical religion"? Well, as Horton has it,

> philosophical religion assumes that historical religions, including their scriptures, do not themselves present the truth until they are interpreted allegorically to say in many cases the opposite of their obvious sense. In its simple creed, Christianity is as particular as Judaism or any other religion. It has its own narrative (*mythos*), rites, and way of life, all bound to the body and history. Yet when interpreted philosophically, it is the consummate religion: the ultimate myth underlying the same universal doctrines affirmed by reason (i.e., Orphic presuppositions).[11]

[7] Horton, *Shaman and Sage,* 24

[8] Horton, *Shaman and Sage,* 286

[9] See Horton, *Shaman and Sage,* 157

[10] Horton, *Shaman and Sage,* 376

[11] Horton, *Shaman and Sage,* 323

Put another way, Horton is concerned to critique a method of theological inquiry in which "Christianity" is treated as merely a localized and inculturated instance of a general monistic philosophical system—*not* a tradition that meaningfully norms that system. For proponents of this "philosophical religion," where particular bits of Christian doctrine—such as the resurrection of the body—seem incompatible with the broader emanationist schema, with that schema's characteristic emphasis on immateriality and intellectual ascent, then the doctrine must be disregarded or allegorized away into nothingness. So too, the Incarnation of Christ becomes—at best—an elevated instance of a general metaphysical "type" (that is, how God relates to all finite realities), rather than as a world-transforming *event*.

Something like this, for Horton, is the perennial temptation of theological metaphysics, over which the specter of Orpheus hovers; by contrast, Christianity ought not be "philosophized" into being something other than itself.[12] "A feature of 'axiality' across cultures, we have seen, is the transposition of ritual-founding myths into philosophical ideas. Yet Israel stands out as a glaring exception."[13] What has Athens to do with Jerusalem, indeed.

Horton is clearly correct that all mainstream Christian theological claims cannot be uncritically assimilated to the metaphysical paradigms of late antiquity. To take the most obvious case, an unreconstructed Neoplatonism logically implies, in Arian fashion, the subordination of the Son to the Father. And it seems to me that Horton is also on firm ground in critiquing Eriugena's impulse to subordinate "God" and "creatures" to a homogenizing category of "Nature,"[14] or Meister Eckhart's willingness to dissolve the substance of the Triune Persons in an effort to reach some simple unity of the Godhead beyond Trinity.[15] In the business of doing theology, there is always an enduring risk that, consciously or unconsciously, alien philosophical concepts may be impermissibly setting the norms for Christian thought.

But equally true, I think, is Johannes Zachhuber's observation that, at the dawn of what Christians now call "orthodoxy," it was indisputably the case that "Christian authors could not avoid embedding their doctrinal confessions about the Trinity and of the Person of Jesus Christ into a terminological and conceptual system whose validity did not directly depend on the acceptance of these doctrines[.]"[16] The Fathers of the Church, that is, worked within the philosophical milieu of their day. And when one

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[12] In a certain sense, Shaman and Sage's argument precisely inverts other genealogies of modernity. Where John Milbank, for instance, sees the rise of metaphysical voluntarism as a fall from the Christian philosophical ideal, see John Milbank, Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason, 2nd ed. (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), 437, Horton treats divine voluntarism as a positive good. Cf. Horton, Shaman and Sage, 351 ("Even if we posit the seminal reasons of things as ideas in God's mind eternally, they remain free self-determinations of what God will create. They are eternal and necessary only in a relative sense (as God's decisions) not absolutely. Whatever God decrees to exist is in conformity with his simple, intellectual, immutable nature but is not required by it.").

[13] Horton, *Shaman and Sage, 352*

[14] Horton, *Shaman and Sage, 377*

[15] See Horton, *Shaman and Sage, 412*

[16] Johannes Zachhuber, *The Rise of Christian Theology and the End of Ancient Metaphysics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), 4.

comes to biblical texts like Acts 17:28 ("In him we live and move and have our being") or Colossians 3:11 ("Christ is all, and is in all"), it's hard to miss the Hellenic philosophical resonances.

What was, for Christians, the appeal of broadly "Platonic" philosophical systems? Countless books have been written on this point, but it must be stressed that this inheritance provides a robust philosophical model for conceptualizing (among other attributes) the infinity, aseity, necessity, immutability, immateriality—and, crucially, *universality*—of the Creator. The God of Sinai is not the deity of a particular clan or city, but the one tree into which the Gentiles are now grafted.[17] A theological emphasis on transcendence and unity is not something alien to Christian thought; it is a crucial constituent of the Christian tradition from the very earliest days. Surely, any Christian theological metaphysics must account for this in a compelling way.

In my view, Horton's efforts to disentangle Christian claims from the broadly Platonic philosophical tradition ultimately invite more theological problems than they solve. Grant, for the sake of the following argument, that I am wrong and Horton is right—that "[i]n terms of their most central doctrines, Orphism and Christianity are wholly antithetical,"[18] and that a sharp opposition exists between "locative (Orthodox)

religion" and "utopian (spiritual-Platonic) faith[.]"[19] One thereby declines to affirm that the Christian God is related to creation as its ontological source and ground (at least in the sense entailed by an *exitus/reditus* cosmology).

As I see it, one then has two alternative options for conceptualizing the God-world relation: (1) God falls "within" the horizon of a larger, essentially locative reality; or (2) God is radically transcendent, such that our categories of "reality" do not apply to Him in the same way, though He is in fact the cause of created things. Neither of these seems particularly theologically palatable.

The first horn of the dilemma renders God essentially finite and logically contingent, thereby compromising both His infinity and aseity. As David Bentley Hart explains, "[i]f creation were somehow something simply 'outside of' or 'other than' God, like one object outside another, then logically one would have to say that there is something more than—something in addition to—God, [who] would be a kind of thing . . . a being embraced within what wider abstract category is capacious enough to contain both him and his creatures under its canopy[.]"[20] To be sure, there have been Christian thinkers who have grasped the nettle and alleged that God is a contingent being—Richard Swinburne comes to mind[21]—but this is far from the

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[17] Romans 11:11–31.

[18] Horton, *Shaman and Sage, 311*

[19] See Horton, *Shaman and Sage, 415*

[20] David Bentley Hart, "The Destiny of Christian Metaphysics: Reflections on the Analogia Entis," in *The Hidden and the Manifest: Essays in Theology and Metaphysics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2017), 99.

[21] See Steven Duncan, *Analytic Philosophy of Religion: Its History Since 1955*, 119–21.

historic Christian position. And I do not think it is Horton's own view.

Consider now the other horn of the dilemma—what we might call a "radical transcendence" approach, which prioritizes the apophatic. As Herbert McCabe summarizes this view, "the Lord we worship is not a god but the unknown reason why there is anything instead of nothing."[22] I suspect, at bottom, Horton is committed to something like this view: in distinguishing Pseudo-Dionysius from Eriugena, Horton calls attention to the thinkers' supposedly "incommensurable accounts of the metaphysical basis for analogy," arguing that "[t]here is an unbridgeable gulf between saying, on the one hand, that we know God's attributes insofar as 'like produces like' and causes are in the effects and, on the other, insofar as the creation proclaims the invisible attributes of its creator."[23] The former is bad, Orphic; the latter is orthodox.

But there's a problem here. Horton seems to be insisting here that in order to maintain the God-creature distinction, there be *no* real ontological continuity or resemblance between terms as predicated of created realities and terms as predicated of God. This is an account of theological analogy that collapses, ultimately, into equivocity. Once theological predication becomes equivocal, what does it then *mean* to say that God saves us from sin? Or that God is love? We don't really know.[24] The specter of twentieth-century mainline Protestant thought, with its deracinated and "demythologized" theologies, begins to emerge—a paradoxical result indeed.

Now, to be sure, Horton occasionally suggests some sort of fruitful rapprochement between the Platonic philosophical current—one could call it "Orphic," though for Horton this characterization is implicitly pejorative—and Christian thought. He grants that "Augustine's mature thought reflects a form of chastened, self-critical Christian Platonism that established the creative tension in medieval theology,"[25] and acknowledges that "there are some metaphysical and cosmological doctrines that cannot be accommodated while others, though shared with pagan philosophy, are required by exegetical deduction."[26] This is quite true—but it is an observation that fits uneasily with the very sharp distinctions between "Christianity" and "Orphism" that his project is concerned to establish.[27]

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[22] Herbert McCabe, *God Still Matters*, ed. Brian Davies (London: Continuum, 2002), 12.

[23] Horton, *Shaman and Sage, 349*

[24] For more on this point, see generally Francesca Aran Murphy, *God Is Not a Story: Realism Revisited* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).

[25] Horton, *Shaman and Sage, 330*

[26] Horton, *Shaman and Sage, 354*

[26] Horton, *Shaman and Sage, 354*

[27] It bears mention that one of the book's odder tendencies is what seems to be a strong interest in marshaling historical data in service of Horton's (quite particular) formulation of Reformed Protestantism. The ostensibly "authentic" Christianity against which Horton juxtaposes Orphism is distinctively aniconic, anti-Christendomic, and characterized by a relatively "low" sacramentology. See Horton, Shaman and Sage, 369–87. It is one thing to mount a broad philosophical critique of the "Orphic" sensibility; it is quite another to imply that virtually all Christian traditions other than one's own have been corrupted by a singular alien ideological force.

Erich Przywara charts what strikes me as a more defensible philosophical course, one that does not attempt to split off Christian thought from "Orphism," as if the whole business of metaphysical theology was the problem, but rather to *correct* Western philosophy's metaphysical errors in the deepest sense. In Przywara's account, a properly Christian view of theological analogy represents "the decisive mean, set over against both theopanism (an absolute *devolutio* from above) and pantheism (an absolute *evolutio* from below)[.]"[28] Christian thought certainly cannot acosmically collapse the God-creature interval (Horton's principal concern), nor aggregate finite realities into a monstrous totality; and yet all finite existents are always immediately dependent upon the God who calls them out of nonbeing in every moment (*creatio continua*). Przywara's proposal seems meritorious to me; is he to be counted among the impermissibly "Orphic" because his *analogia entis* is articulated within a broadly Platonic framework?

Now, the foregoing discussion—though important—has been rather technical. What of Horton's overarching thesis—that modernity, at its heart, is basically Orphic? Did our metaphysical tradition necessarily make us "spiritual but not religious"?

In venturing a potential answer to this question, I turn to a perhaps unusual source: Shahab Ahmed's recent work on the internal constitution of *Islam*. In *What Is Islam?: The Importance of Being Islamic*, Ahmed sets out to explain how a large swathe of historical Muslim society could conceive of practices like wine-drinking—typically considered off-limits to Muslims—in distinctively *Islamic* terms.[29] On its face, this seems like the same sort of "transvaluation of values" that Horton identifies as characteristically Orphic.[30]

Ahmed doesn't make this move. In offering an answer to the "problem of wine-drinking," Ahmed argues for conceptualizing *Islam as such* as a hermeneutic engagement with the "Pre-Text," "Text" and "Con-Text" of Revelation to Muhammad.[31] By "Pre-Text," Ahmed refers to immediate existential encounter with Allah, the originating source of Qur'anic revelation; by "Text" Ahmed means the Qur'an; by "Con-Text" Ahmed means the corpus of Islamic tradition as it has developed over time.[32] The diversity of Islamic practice correlates with which "pole" is emphasized: Muslims who drink wine understand themselves as engaging with the "Pre-Text" of Revelation (conceiving of wine as one of Allah's good gifts) over and beyond the specific proscriptions of the "Text" of the Qur'an.[33]

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[28] Erich Przywara, *Analogia Entis: Metaphysics—Original Structure and Universal Rhythm*, trans. John R. Betz and David Bentley Hart (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans. 2014), 229–30.

[29] Shahab Ahmed, *What Is Islam?: The Importance of Being Islamic* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016), 3.

[30] See Horton, *Shaman and Sage, 115,130*

[31] Ahmed, *What Is Islam?*, 492.

[32] Ahmed, *What Is Islam?*, 492.

[33] Ahmed, *What Is Islam?*, 506

The genius of Ahmed's analysis is that it is generalizable beyond the Islamic context; it is an articulation of *the basic structure of spirituality within a religious tradition that affirms both a universal God and a particular revelation or set of institutions and practices.* To posit a "revelation" is to posit a Revealer. And to the extent that a given tradition affirms that this Revealer is apprehensible within the terms of reason (cf. Romans 1:20) there will *always* be those who seek a more direct encounter with that Revealer. To put it in Horton's terms: there will *always* be those who claim to be "spiritual but not religious," because the internal structure of Christian thought *invites* such a response.

Martin Luther, of course, was famously skeptical of such efforts. But within bounds, this tension seems to have periodically engendered fruitful internal critique *within* the Christian tradition: consider Søren Kierkegaard's critique, *in the name of God*, of the ossified theological culture of his day. And yet, as Horton rightly grasps, this element also opens the door to the cafeteria-style spirituality of modernity. That is a bitter pill to swallow.

Horton has written a book that I hope is widely read and vigorously debated. The questions it poses are critical questions for all who take theology seriously—going not simply to the form of Christian doctrine, but its underlying substance. But I am unconvinced that it is our "ways of conceiving reality that [are] more mystical, speculative, abstract, and transcendent" that are modernity's chief problem.[34] For my money, that's where wonder begins. And a Christian tradition without it would probably be an impoverished thing.

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[34] Horton, *Shaman and Sage, 375*

A Response from Michael Horton

MICHAEL HORTON

I am grateful to the distinguished reviewers for not only reading *Shaman and Sage* but for summarizing its basic argument better than I have done. As I repeat probably too frequently, I do not think my narrative is in the least bit comprehensive. But I believe it retrieves volumes from the repressed part of the Western library that have been checked out many times over many centuries.

Nadya Williams,"Orphics in Our Midst"

Covering so much ground, I recognize at the outset that *Shaman and Sage* may ruffle some specialist's feathers. Needless to say, I'm both eager and not a little nervous to read reviews from scholars of ancient Greco-Roman culture. Getting an overall thumbs-up from Nadya Williams is an encouraging start. The story of her discovering the Derveni papyrus in a papyrology class is fascinating. But it's not all antiquarian interest. She rightly raises the question: "What does any of this have to do with Christ—and, therefore, with us, modern believers? In other words, why should Christians today care about the Derveni papyrus, those weird Orphic followers, and the plethora of other no less strange sources about complicated shamanistic beliefs and practices across ancient Eurasia?" And I'm grateful she thinks the book addresses this question.

I go back so far in this volume because the context—especially the shift from a locative to a utopian outlook—is a larger part of modernity's story than is often realized. Nobody believed in reincarnation, for example, until the emergence of Hinduism in the sixth century BC and it came to Greece through Orphic shaman-sages. Today, more people in the West believe in reincarnation than in the resurrection. Orphic mysticism is always incubating, to return in another form as the antithesis to traditional theism. Plato's Socrates turned away from the public religion of Athens to Orphic myths as a source for his philosophical ideas. We may see some echoes of this in contemporary secularization, which is less a gush of pure atheism than a rebellion against the God of Abraham in favor of "spirituality." Of course, Christianity is monotheistic, but the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are closer in some ways to the personal gods than to an intellectual Sun emanating itself throughout the cosmos. Like the public religion of Greece and Rome, Christendom was seen as confining the spirit to the body. The divine self wanted to make a break for it. As Nadya notes, "In other words, too often, perhaps without even realizing it, ancient mystics and pagans are remarkably (and disturbingly) similar to modern religious skeptics."

The final chapter does indeed lead readers to the verge of the Renaissance, explored at the beginning of the second volume, with Ficino's own description of his project as a revival of Orphism. Nadya captures well my goals in this book, noting that my approach emphasizes similarities and continuities over differences. The latter approach is essential and I leaned on many of those scholars for the spade work. But I also agree with Nadya that when focusing on a single thread, such as spirituality, a cohesive narrative can be illuminating. In any event, modernity itself is a metanarrative that many specialists presuppose. I try to navigate between over-explaining and over-simplification. So, I can breathe a sigh of relief—at least for now—and signal my appreciation for her encouraging review.

John Ehrett, "The Long Orphic Shadow"

John Ehrett gives me a little push-back, which is always helpful when you're attempting to defend an ambitious thesis. I do indeed use (or adapt from others) sharp dichotomies for the big picture and then try to fill it in with qualifications. I've especially found J. Z. Smith's "locative-utopian" categories extremely helpful.

I also distinguish sharply the biblical worldview from Greek "Orphism." However, I try to do two things here: first, to display the uniqueness of the Christian message in its Greco-Roman milieu; second, to show how ancient Christian writers engaged this heritage both appreciatively and critically. There is a spectrum among these writers. The church's rejection of views attributed to Origen exhibits the red line, but the story is more complicated than either the Hellenization of Christianity or the Christianization of Hellenism. I emphasize the intertextual imagination of these patristic sources as well as why I think Christians found in Platonism its ally as well as nemesis. The New Testament itself exhibits its Greek context,

appropriating Platonic and Stoic concepts for very anti-Orphic conclusions. In comparison with rival schools, Platonism was Christianity's most natural interlocutor. Besides classical divine attributes we could mention the goal of life as conformity to God as much as possible, the soul's survival of death, and other doctrines.

So, I agree wholeheartedly with John's quotation from Johannes Zachhuber. I am not at all trying to "disentangle Christian claims from the broadly Platonic philosophical tradition." After all, as Turretin observed, it was the Socinians who rejected the Trinity "as a metaphysical doctrine, not biblical." Harnack's rejection of the Apostle's Creed gives us a good picture of what happens when we try to strip the faith of its hard-won formulations.

But I stand by my statement that in terms of creation *ex nihilo* versus emanation and all that hangs in the balance (viz., the incarnation, resurrection, etc.) the two systems are totally opposite. Salvation *from* the world is the Orphic heart of Plato's Socrates; salvation *of* the world is the heart of the gospel. Critics of Christianity like Celsus and apologists for it like Irenaeus and Tertullian recognized this quite clearly. That so many ancient Christian writers were nimble enough to negotiate their cultural-linguistic world and the apocalyptic religion of the prophets and apostles is a testimony to their vast competence in both.

I'm not sure if John is affirming "an *exitus/reditus* cosmology," but emanation is not the only way of saying that "the Christian God is related to creation as its ontological source and ground." To his question

I might ask: Must we accept some form of ontological continuity to affirm that God is the source (*principium essendi*) of all creaturely being? Can Da Vinci be the source of the Mona Lisa without the work being an extension of his ontological existence?

Also, I'm also not quite sure what to make of the false choice of univocity or equivocity, since I defend analogy, as most Christians have done. The quote from David Bentley Hart seems to imply that we cannot speak even analogically of God as "other than" creation. Hart, in my view, is as brilliant as he is unreliable as a theologian. I am partial to the Orthodox view of God as "beyond being," such that he could never be a being among beings or be described in his incomprehensible essence. But that hardly entails the radical apophaticism John attributes to my argument: "Horton seems to be insisting here that in order to maintain the God-creature distinction, there be *no* real ontological continuity or resemblance between terms as predicated of created realities and terms as predicated of God." But "no real ontological continuity" is very different from "resemblance between terms as predicated of created realities and terms as predicated of God." The former is a univocal view of being, which I think is wrong, the latter an analogical one that I hold.

John thinks I dispense with mystery and wonder. This reflects in my view the dominance of a uniquely modern but contemporary revival of Christian Neoplatonism (e.g., Radical Orthodoxy, Charles Taylor, et al.). "Enchantment," as understood from the Romantics to Max Weber, is identified with pre-

Christian mysteries, I argue in volume 3. The attack on the Hebrew prophets characterizes this entire élan, which I am confident that John does not endorse. The Christian mysteries are far more "enchanting" in the broader sense, with a transcendent God acting not only upon the world but assuming a human nature and enlivening creatures from within by the Spirit. Only supernaturalism affirms genuine transcendence and mystery as well as divine immanence; natural supernaturalism remains in what Taylor calls the "immanent frame."

Moreover, I distinguish radical mysticism from Christian mysticism throughout the later chapters. My treatment of Pseudo-Dionysius alone challenges John's rather sweeping conclusion. Here is the context of his concluding quote: "Analogous to its emergence throughout the Persian Empire, philosophy arose in Greece through the impetus of new religious concepts and ways of conceiving reality that were more mystical, speculative, abstract, and transcendent." Here I was not offering a critique but simply describing the emerging shift between archaic religion focused on rituals for blessings in this life to more philosophical ideas geared toward the afterlife—long before Christ's advent.

Finally, I appreciate John's introducing me to Shahab Ahmed's work. The point deserves further conversation. My initial query is whether John is recommending a hermeneutic in which particular doctrines and ethical commands in scripture may be contradictory to and overridden by what we interpret as a more fundamental "Pre-Text." If this is

his contention, I would indeed be inclined to see it as an example of philosophical religion ascending above the particularities of historical revelation.

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EVANGELISM FOR AN ENCHANTED AGE

JAMES R. WOOD

Tim Keller could have chosen to finish his life by resting from his missiological labors. However, ever-evangelist that he was, he continued to explore what a missional encounter with contemporary culture should look like. To this end he produced one of his final publications, *How to Reach the West Again*, in which he sought to offer his final programmatic word to guide the church in North America in the days ahead.

I came to this work somewhat late. It was published during COVID, and I had other things on my mind at the time. And at that point I had largely turned elsewhere for guidance for our cultural moment. However, when I finally gave it a read, there was one key point that struck me: Keller's acknowledgment of the realities to which many have come to refer with the label "negative world." Keller argues that we have entered a "new era" in many places in the West.

In previous eras, Keller explains that "religion was broadly seen as a social good, or at least benign." But we are no longer in either–in Aaron Renn's terms–"positive" or "neutral" world. Rather, Keller admits that "increasing numbers of people now see the church as bad for people and a major obstacle to social progress." In such an era, "there is not only no social benefit to being a Christian, but an actual social cost to espousing Christian faith. Culture is becoming more actively hostile toward Christian beliefs and practices." And at what points is the Christian faith particularly offensive to our contemporaries, according to Keller? "Traditional Christian

beliefs about sexuality and gender," which are increasingly "viewed as dangerous and restrictive of people's basic civil rights." He reiterates this point later, saying,

> One of the greatest objections to Christianity today is that it has an outmoded sexual ethic. … The Christian view of sex is especially repugnant to today's understanding of self and identity. That view asserts the self's freedom to pursue fulfillment and it also idealizes sexual expression. The Christian sexual code is therefore considered both unrealistic and oppressive.

Furthermore, Keller admits that many of the moral and metaphysical assumptions that served as "religious dots" which past evangelists could assume and connect are no longer there. Echoing the work of Philip Rieff, Keller argues that the late modern West is defined by a fundamental rejection of "sacred order." At this point I begin to part ways a bit, even in Keller's diagnosis. I am not sure if this is the best way to frame our contemporary culture. My disagreement is only exacerbated with Keller's later comment that the "main alternative" to Christianity in our day is some form of "secularism." But my strongest point of criticism has to do with what Keller offers in order to reach the West again.

Keller does what Keller does best here by confronting the various idols predominant in contemporary culture. In the mode of "subversive fulfillment," he seeks to show how the desires underneath these forms of idolatry are confronted by and fulfilled in Christ. He models this type of apologetic encounter for his audience to emulate in order to reach our secular neighbors. Keller promotes a "Christian theory" that must "critique the forms of secular modernity" and "expose the main flaws in our culture's narratives, showing how they fit neither human nature nor our most profound intuitions about life—let alone our own moral ideals." This material, when I first read it last year, felt very out of touch to me, I must admit. And I have taken my students through it and it also does not connect with them. It is just a bit too rationalist. This is all just a bit too buffered, a bit too immanent, and relies too heavily on argumentation.

I was reminded of Keller's book recently while reading Rod Dreher's latest book, *Living in Wonder: Finding Mystery and Meaning in a Secular Age*, which offers an alternative diagnosis and set of proposals for how to reach the contemporary West with the Christian faith. Dreher makes the case that we are not going to argue people into the faith today. Interestingly, both Keller and Dreher invite us to turn to the witness of the early church for inspiration; but what they draw from that era reveals the fundamental differences in their respective proposals.

One of the works to which Keller often referred

toward the end of his life was Larry Hurtado's book *Destroyer of the Gods: Early Christian Distinctiveness in the Roman World.* Keller found in Hurtado's summary of the early church's witness amidst a hostile environment inspiration for how to reach our context. Keller turns to Hurtado again in this late work. What Keller takes from Hurtado is the need for a "category-defying social vision" and "counter-catechesis." The early Christians "demonstrat[ed]" the truth of the faith, according to Keller's use of Hurtado, by answering questions and out-narrating their contemporaries—telling a better story. They modeled how Christians in a hostile context can deconstruct the common beliefs of a culture and answer the questions of the heart that the culture's narrative cannot.

My read is that this all feels a bit methodical, a form of evangelistic *technique* even; and it simply lacks sufficient attention to the supernatural and even the "miraculous" which characterized much post-apostolic witness.

Another work on the early church which would press such recognition is Ramsay MacMullen's *Christianizing the Roman Empire (A.D. 100-400).* MacMullen explains that early Christians faced a similarly "negative world" (not his term, of course) in which there was no obvious social reward for embracing the faith. How did they connect with unbelievers and win them to the faith in such a context? By confronting the gods and driving out

demons. MacMullen's treatment of these themes comes out most clearly in a chapter titled "Points of Contact, Models of Persuasion, Before 312." From such a title, one could imagine the author taking a route similar to Keller's. However, MacMullen gives considerable attention to the role of the miraculous. For many who became Christian, they noted the role of exorcisms and the appeal of other manifestations of the supernatural. Even pagans remarked on how many were won over to the church in response to a display of the miraculous. Not just rational, but also miraculous "demonstration" was key as Christians engaged head-on in a contestation of power against the false gods of the day. This "demonstration" was not limited to answering questions and out-narrating. Persuasion in this anti-Christian context consisted in part in a firm engagement with the supernatural.

MacMullen's emphases map more onto Dreher's new project, which also seeks inspiration from the early church. *Living in Wonder* is a book about a world filled with mystery, and the growing recognition of the emptiness of materialism. Dreher wants us to see what many of our contemporaries are already coming to perceive, and which most of our Christian forebears assumed: that this world is "enchanted." According to Dreher's analysis, our post-Christian world increasingly resembles the pagan world of the ancients, where most just assumed that the gods were everywhere, that the world is filled with spiritual meaning, and that our

selves are not "buffered" as rational monads which remain unaffected by realities beyond our mind. Ours is an age defined primarily not by atheism or secularism, but by a longing for mystery–which has opened the door to various forms of neopaganism, even the occult. "The idea that the greatest challenge to Christianity is a form of atheism is an idea whose time has long passed," argues Dreher. "Our post-Christian world is being re-enchanted;" and we need to discern and confront the demonic forces which take advantage of this shift. Otherwise, we leave our neighbors amenable to forms of "dark enchantment."

Dreher explains that evangelism in the early church was not reduced to a rational presentation of the gospel. Rather, magic was everywhere, and miracles were part of the church's apologetic. Dreher appeals to another historian of the ancient world, Robert Knapp, who argues that part of the success of the early church in winning converts was due to the fact that "the 'magic' of the Christians was more powerful than the magic of the pagan priests and sorcerers." And the writings of many church fathers reveal that miracles–not just a message–played a significant role in conversion of many in the early post-apostolic generations. Most were not converted through persuasion alone, but also supernatural events and encounters.

For the first millennium (or more) in the West after the resurrection of Christ, the natural and the supernatural were commonly understood as intertwined. Christians shared with their non-Christian neighbors a "sacramental vision," according to which the material world was understood and experienced as saturated with spiritual meaning and power. The rift between the natural and the supernatural emerges in the High Middle Ages, argues Dreher. From here it becomes much more commonplace to envision the natural world as self-sufficient--without reference to, dependence upon, or being encountered by the supernatural. The world was increasingly desacralized, and in modernity many have come to embrace a technological vision about the material world. Things are, in this milieu, understood to have no intrinsic meaning or value, other than what we place on them or give to them. And modern man comes to imagine that he can manipulate the material world for his own interests without direction or constraint; he increasingly comes under the spell of control, mastery, and domination. This technological frame makes us lose what Hartmut Rosa calls "resonance"—a sense of positive connection between the self and the world outside one's head. This world cannot be "controlled," and any attempt at such control leaves us fragmented and closes the door to enchantment. You lose a sacramental vision and you lose mystery; you lose mystery and you lose resonance; you lose resonance and you threaten the loss of deep meaning.

But, as Dreher explains, our contemporaries are

increasingly disenchanted with disenchantment. They are desperate for mystery and meaning. The problem is that most churches today don't know what to do with this.

Here I do need to register a certain frustration with Dreher's portrayal of Protestants, particularly Calvinists. He throws Calvinists somewhat under the bus for dismissing mystery (though at one point he gives a nod to the resources in Calvinism to resist the forces of liquid modernity). However, in light of our discussion of Keller's work above, I wonder if Dreher is on to something about a potential blind spot or temptation in contemporary Reformed thought and practice. Dreher explains that to those with a penchant for rigorous doctrinal thinking, his arguments might sound like "mystical mumbo jumbo." And for those who emphasize evangelism and social service, "re-enchantment talk might come off as spiritually indulgent." To put it in my own words, I think Dreher is calling out many contemporary Reformed and evangelical Christians for a functional materialism or rationalism. And there is likely something to this.

I think Dreher is right that Reformed and evangelical types today should be pressed to more sufficiently account for spiritual warfare. Our witness should not be reduced to rational apologetics; we need to confront evil and demonic spirits and false gods. And his challenge to embrace God's work through the serendipitous is likewise a welcome word for expressions of Christianity that like to keep things "decent and orderly" and love systems.

However, how can we resist letting this emphasis on the mystical traverse into unhealthy territory? As Dreher admits, mystical experience is not enough—assuming such is an error into which many charismatic Christians fall. And there is a "shadow side of the spirit world" for which we must account in any discussion of enchantment. But it is equally dangerous to downplay or deny the mystical, because the longing for enchantment can only be suppressed for so long. Therefore, we need to direct it to healthy Christianity, otherwise our spiritually exhausted and mystically curious neighbors will be drawn to the demonic. And forms of Christianity that demand little and inadequately account for the spiritual leave people vulnerable to such dark paths. They will be drawn to things like the occult, psychedelics, political ideologies as pseudo-religion, an excessive fascination with extraterrestrials, etc.

Dreher encourages Christians to cultivate an appreciation for beauty and the supernatural. He challenges us to draw attention to great art, the wonder of nature, liturgy, and the lives of the saints. He also wants us to get out of our heads and to open ourselves up to signs, the possibility of miracles, and encounters with the numinous; and, of course, to remain aware of the reality of spiritual warfare.

There is one author that I wish Dreher would have engaged that perceived similar problems in the modern world, but who also provided healthy guardrails for a true renewal of the sense of the sacred: the twentieth-century French Jesuit Henri de Lubac. In a published interview toward the end of his life, he explained modernity as, at root, a rejection of mystery. This had left modern man spiritually asphyxiated, according to de Lubac. At the beginning of his career, in an important wartime essay titled "The Internal Causes of the Weakening and Disappearance of the Sense of the Sacred," he made similar points. There he argues that doctrinalism and moralism without mystery will not satisfy the human person. Man ineluctably longs for the supernatural but is suffocating in immanence because the modern world is marked by a loss of the sacred. In another wartime essay focused on a theology of mission in such a context, de Lubac explains that this unsatisfied longing in the modern desacralized world had led to all sorts of improper enchantments—which he characterized as forms of "neopaganism."

To counter these trends, de Lubac promoted Christian mysticism. He was wary about how this can go off the rails. In the essay "Mysticism and Mystery," de Lubac argues that true mysticism must lead to God and must be grounded in Scripture. He was also emphatic that authentic spirituality cannot be untethered from Christ. In the aforementioned essay on the disappearance of the sense of the sacred,

de Lubac is clear that spirituality must be centered on Christ, who is "The Sacred." And because Christ is united to his body, this means that Christian mysticism is necessarily an "ecclesial mysticism," a point hammered explicitly in "Mysticism and Mystery." It is through their participation in the church that persons are enabled to "breathe the eternal." In his later writings de Lubac was particularly wary about forms of mysticism and spirituality untethered from the church. To counter these trends, he promoted a sacramental spirituality, and thus an ecclesial spirituality.

In some sense de Lubac also advocated for a sort of "sacramental vision." According to him, the world is a symbol and sign of God. We can find traces of God everywhere, de Lubac argues in *The Discovery of God*. "Everything," he says, "is drenched in that unique Presence." In the earlier essay on the loss of the sense of the sacred, he had argued that we can understand the world as "a first and immense sacrament, the great natural sacrament" that was intended "in the state of innocence, to lead us effortlessly to the unique Source or all that is sacred, which is to say, to God." And even in our era, de Lubac explained, nature can still function in a sacramental sense; but it must be clarified by the "supernatural sacrament," which is the church. A true Christian mysticism finds its "normal setting is the Church and normal conditions are the life of faith and the sacraments." What this provides is a sense of wonder everywhere, without losing the

Christian specificity of ecclesial and sacramental life.

Keller wanted to help us reach the West again. Dreher's new work helps us see that we must reach the West with wonder. Our contemporaries are longing for enchantment–for religion that confronts them and connects them to the transcendent. I am convinced that this can be found in traditional Christianity, including Protestantism. De Lubac's teachings serve as guardrails for any mysticism that loses sight of the common means of grace that God has provided in the sacraments, and the church, which is the great sacrament of Christ, who is The Sacred to which any spirituality must lead. Such means are available in classical Protestantism and should be promoted for the wonders that they are. We are not individuals unaffected by the world around us, merely thinking our way to God. We are those who have been united to Christ in his death and resurrection through baptism, and thereby made into a body in him. This community is unlike any other in this world, and it cannot be explained along the lines of standard sociological analysis (this is a point that Keller, inspired by Lesslie Newbigin alongside Hurtado, regularly proclaimed). And our gathered worship is loaded with ordinary means by which we participate in the supernatural. We regularly enter the heavenly tabernacle, the eternal holy of holies, to feast with (and upon) Christ. We structure our calendars to align ourselves with the rhythms of creation and the revolution of new creation--commemorating the major events of the temporal life of the eternal One, who upholds and is the goal of all creation. We join the heavenly choir of the angels and redeemed saints in our worship, following our great High Priest who leads the liturgy. And this is a particularly strong point in classical Protestantism: We regularly encounter the Transcendent through the Word--read and preached. Through the Word, the Divine Other confronts and comforts us. This is meat-and-potatoes Christianity, but it is more mystical than many realize. May we remind others (and ourselves) of these wonders as we seek to reach the West again.

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YOUNG, RESTED, REFORMED

SETH TROUTT

In 2012 I was a student at ReTrain. 21 years old, I'd just graduated from Arizona State University (#1 in Innovation!) and was simultaneously enrolling at Phoenix Seminary (because I live in Phoenix). I wanted to be a pastor, but more than that, I wanted to be a preacher and a church planter.

ReTrain, also known as, *The Resurgence Training Center* was a one-year, intensive, cohort-based program designed to train leaders practically and theologically. It was hosted at Mars Hill Church and accredited by Reformed Theological Seminary. It was the Very Cool place to be (at least in my eyes) if you were young, restless, and reformed and an aspiring Acts 29 church planter.

We all made our pilgrimage to Seattle for the first day of classes where we were called to worship by Dustin Kensrue, who led us in singing "*My Lord I Did Not Choose You.*" Arminians and pansies beware.

At Phoenix Seminary we were students, but at ReTrain we were Tribesman. All 200 of us. I was all in.
We were taught by an incredible lineup: discipleship by Bill Clem, preaching by Brian Chappell, hermeneutics by Justin Holcomb, biblical theology by Ray Ortlund, and counseling by Ed Welch. My cohort mentor was a sage and a saint: Dave Kraft.

It didn't take long to experience cracks in the armor, though. The "restless" in young, restless, and reformed wasn't lurking far beneath the surface. We were told to "sleep like a Calvinist, but work like an Arminian" and many, it seemed, took that to heart.

One man's story was held up as an example. He was working 40 hours a week at a bank and was volunteering an additional 40 hours a week at the church. He was also in our ReTrain class. His wife and kids missed him and he'd gotten shingles multiple times. One of the pastors at Mars Hill pointed him out: "This man understands the Kingdom of God. He knows what is at stake here. There are hills we must take or people will go to Hell."

Another pastor on staff at Mars Hill shared how he never worked less than 60 hours a week (and because when

he was in the marketplace he worked 70 hours a week it felt like vacation). Another pastor on staff shared about how he worked so much that the church hired a nanny to help his wife with the kids because he wasn't as available as she wanted him to be.

After a lecture from a Mars Hill staffer about how to do ministry sustainably, Dave Kraft pulled a few of us aside and said, "that advice wasn't bad, but be careful: do as he said, but never do as he does and, please, if you love your families do not work here." I felt like the Elder of Elders in my midst gave me, as a mere 21 year old, permission to break from the herd. I texted a few of my fellow pastors at my home church in Tempe: "if I ever am considering taking a job out here, please talk me out of it or punch me in the face."

Back in Phoenix, I was receiving different messaging than I heard in Seattle. My professors John DelHousay and Ted Wueste were forming the Spiritual Formation Society of AZ and encouraging us to learn from the Desert Fathers and Adele Calhoune. John Meade was encouraging us to read *Ordinary* by Horton instead of *Radical* by Platt. Wayne Grudem was rebuking students for violating the Sabbath in order to do their homework. My pastor from high school, Michael Parker, was annoyingly more interested in how my marriage was doing than in how my ministry was going.

I was drawn to the triumphalistic zeal of The Resurgence. Go big or go home. But I was also simultaneously drawn to what Paul Miller calls the "lowness and slowness" of life with Jesus. Seek not great things for yourself. I couldn't make sense of or

resolve the tension. That was until I read *Contours of the Kuyperian Tradition* by Craig Bartholomew.

The last chapter of the book is aptly titled "*The Need for Spiritual Formation*" and it's the shortest chapter, by far, in the work. He highlights the general lack of emphasis on the inner life in the neocalvinist traditions. He writes,

> "*The power of the Kuyperian vision is that it easily becomes cerebral in an unhelpful way. So too, it sometimes manifests as a kind of messianic activism and triumphalism…the problem is that neither the Reformed nor the evangelical nor the Kuyperian tradition has deep resources for the ongoing practice of prayer. I have in mind the sort of practices that over years profoundly form the individual into the likeness of Christ.*"

He later ads:

> "*Unformed persons do immense damage… shouting about sovereignty and grace while failing to manifest grace and humility in their lives.*"

Vision and mission are compelling, energizing, and clarifying. The sense of urgency and significance is attractive, especially to young men. And, that aspect of the YRR energy is simply biblical: "*How are they to hear without someone preaching and how are they to preach unless they are sent?*"

The other movement I was drawn to at the time was CrossFit. CrossFit's definition of fitness is *work*

capacity across broad time and modal domains. My first CrossFit "box" was led by an Army Ranger. Our hands bled and our backs ached after every class. We were *doing something* not like those losers on elliptical machines at the highly-commercialized Globo Gyms with mirrors.

The spirit of exceptionalism, of elitism, is what the two cultures had in common. The seeker sensitive churches and the seeker sensitive gyms weren't like us; Acts 29 was the Navy Seals of Pastors. Thank God I'm Not Like Other Pastors and Thank God I'm Not Like The Sheep at LA Fitness. Do you want to *be something*? Then you must *do something*.

In 2014 I met with another local pastor named Riccardo. He listened to me complain about my home church for about 15 minutes before he interrupted me and told me I had "Young Man's Disease": overestimation of self, lots of "you" and not enough "we" in my preaching. Lack of humility. Incongruence with the Spirit of Christ.

My triumphalist self accepted his diagnosis as simply another obstacle I'd have to overcome. "How do I cure it?" I asked, "what tips or strategies do you have?" He laughed and answered, "You don't cure it. This isn't a hill to take. You just have to believe that at this point in your life you're a liability and act accordingly. At some point you'll come to the end of yourself." I didn't take it to heart.

I asked another mentor what I could do. He said *Humility* by Andrew Murray was pretty good. So I read it and memorized Philippians 2 that week. I reported back to him at the end of the week. He

laughed. "It didn't work," he said.

Frustrated and increasingly living into the "restless" in YRR, I was working 60 hour weeks despite vowing to be different from what I'd seen at ReTrain. Another mentor at Phoenix, Darryl DelHousaye, told me I was being stupid and self-important for working that much.

What was I supposed to do? Stop caring about the lost? Make fewer disciples? Equip the saints less? Counsel and coach fewer college students? Become a lame-duck hireling pastor who just worked a gig and then went home at 5pm as though the church was a bank?

A group of leaders in my city I'd connected to through the Surge Network were reading *Spirit of the Disciplines* by Willard. "Fantastic," I thought "another way to take control of my inner life." "Discipline" is how you bench 300 pounds and run a six minute mile. Discipline and ambition were allies.

That was until I got to chapter nine in Willard's book. He has two lists of the disciplines: *Disciplines of Engagement* and *Disciplines of Abstinence.* In my mind, abstinence was what you did before marriage and a fancy way of talking about ditching class in high school. His list had chastity (the only one I was familiar with on purpose), solitude, silence, fasting, frugality (the one I was familiar with by necessity), secrecy, and sacrifice.

So, I thought I'd experiment with the discipline of secrecy where "we abstain from causing our good deeds and qualities to be known." I invited a

homeless man to lunch and we talked for 90 minutes about his life, history, and beliefs. That was easy; I was good at doing things. Then came the hard part: tell nobody about it (I guess, until this essay ten years later). It eroded at my soul like rust on a bumper. Every person I saw for *months* I wanted, more than anything else, to tell them about what I had done. It sat just beneath the surface in every conversation like I was being haunted by a ghost only I could see. I said less in conversations and meetings than ever before as I sought to keep at bay the desire to share about myself. The single, simple practice of secrecy was a mirror to me; I had not been doing great things in purity for God. I had been doing them 50% for God and 50% as a means of justifying myself before men.

Sometimes you don't know you're anemic until you faint or that you're spiritually anemic until you suffer. The difficulty of life is often the Lord taking us into "the wilderness" to learn to trust in him. The disciplines of abstinence are a way of artificially taking yourself into the wilderness. Do you want to *be* something? Perhaps, you must *not do* something.

Even recently, the disciplines of solitude and silence elude and torture me. Last year I did a five day fasting and silence retreat. The physical hunger subsided after 36 hours; the solitude tore me apart. My five day retreat turned into a three day retreat and I came home early.

This brings me to what Trevin Wax has called the "fourth wave" of evangelicalism: *spiritual formation*. Why the renewed emphasis? Why does a Rule of Life have a coolness factor among those with whom

ten years ago it would have been dismissed as soft, monastic withdrawal?

First, in Reformed circles, there's been an overemphasis on what the clergy does. I agree with Ian Harber, who has argued on his Substack and at Mere Orthodoxy, that the primary context for Spiritual formation is the local church. Preaching, sacraments, and church discipline inhabited by and led by the Spirit of God are ground zero for the people of God. But, when this is emphasized to the exclusion of the priesthood of all believers, you'll not get a Sunday-Centric Christian life, but a Sunday-Only Christian life.

Second, many of those who promote practices like the Rule of Life overcorrect the clergy-centric perspective on formation end up disparaging the Sunday gathering as ineffective; minimizing preaching and neglecting the sacraments. It's not a coincidence that the Lord's Supper, baptism, and sitting under preaching are close to absent from Willard's work, as they are in *Practicing The Way*. So much so, some have claimed, that in order to practice some of what folks like John Mark Comer are advocating, "*you will need to reject much of what you believe and practice in order to embrace new beliefs, new priorities, new convictions.*" Is that true?

That some who promote the disciplines or a Rule of Life are not thoroughly Reformed can be disappointing, but shouldn't be surprising. Perhaps, the restlessness that is so common in our tradition is the result of a real deficiency in our tradition? Do we have the stomach to entertain that possibility? For the young, restless, and reformed, it's easy to ascribe

the restlessness to youthfulness, but perhaps it also stems from reformedness. Perhaps "best practice theft" would serve us well. People can be seriously wrong about important things and be helpful guides on other important things. Bartholomew comments on this dynamic:

> *Sometimes in the name of sphere sovereignty Kuyperians have delegated spirituality to the church [leadership] while [the congregation] focuses on the tasks of the other spheres.*

No pastor wants the congregants to delegate the whole of their spiritual wellbeing to the church as organization. Recovering the church as organism without the neglect of it as organization has been a theme in modern church history. It's been said that the Reformation gave the people their Bibles back (instead of leaving them in the hands of the professional preachers) and the missional movement gave the people their mission back (instead of leaving it in the hands of professional missionaries). Perhaps it's simply the case that the spiritual formation movement is giving people back agency in their piety.

To walk the fine line here is not difficult. Pastors rightly dividing the word and administering the sacraments matter for the health and wellbeing of the church. Congregants taking responsibility for their own spiritual growth matters for the health and wellbeing of the church.

If we "rule of life" ourselves to the neglect of robust engagement with the local church, we will end up with a baptized version of the hyper-focus on individuality and a "bespoke" lifestyle that is already popular with Americans. If we dismiss the need for personalized, situation-dependent reflection on how to build a life with God, we'll end up with either a clergy-centric spirituality that nobody wants or a one-size-fits-all yolk that won't serve the actual needs of persons. Mothers of toddlers and teens need something different than single, young professionals. Retired people need something different than a pastor in his 20s.

At this point, ten years after having "discovered" Willard and the disciplines of abstinence for myself, I'm more at ease in my walk with Jesus than I've ever been. And it isn't because I "really get the gospel of grace" more than I did before; it's because I've met with the giver of grace in practices. Julie Canlis observed the tendency of the Augustinian tribe to depersonalize the Spirit into "grace." I was there, for sure. I still tend to be there. I'm still young and still reformed, but, my restlessness is turning into restedness precisely because I've practiced a personalized form of a Rule of Life for a number of years.

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On the Savior

E.J. HUTCHINSON

The late Roman poet Claudian (c. AD 370-c. 404) has traditionally been thought to have been a pagan, including by his contemporary, St. Augustine, who calls him "a stranger to the name of Christ" (*City of God* 5.26). There are, however, good grounds to doubt this description, even from so venerable a source as the Bishop of Hippo.

The chief piece of evidence that one should think twice before yielding Claudian to the heathen is the hymn translated below, now more or less universally acknowledged to be an authentic poem of Claudian. Originally written in Latin in dactylic hexameters, the poem treats Christ's generation in eternity and in time, and does so in, I would argue--insisting that we remember that this is a poem, not a treatise--a thoroughly orthodox way. Indeed, Claudian even revels in the paradoxes of the Incarnation in a manner reminiscent of the selfsame St. Augustine.

One feature calls for special comment, and that is the conclusion addressed to the Emperor Honorius. Claudian was a court poet at a Christian court. As Alan Cameron has remarked, "It is not a genuine hymn, but a *pièce d'occasion* to wish Honorius a happy Easter. The last line and a half--may he often celebrate the annual fast--is merely a neat way of wishing him a long reign." Thus the close of the poem is a nod to

Claudian's Christian patron--a fact that should not, I hasten to add, detract from the intrinsic literary and theological interest of what comes before it.

"On the Savior"
A translation of "De Salvatore"
Translation by E. J. Hutchinson

Christ, Creator of the first and second
Age, the Word and Understanding of the
Highest God, whom from his mind unfathomed
The Father issued forth, and granted union
In possession of his boundless realm:
You have brought our wicked lives to heel,
Breaking sin by suffering to wear the
Vesture of the corporeal world
And to openly profess yourself a
Man in speaking face to face with mankind.
Mary's womb enclosed you; soon, when she had
Felt the God within, the Virgin's belly
Feared. Your mother, though as yet unbrided,
Trembled now in dumbstruck silence at the
Secret birth that filled her lowly body:
She would bear her maker. Mortal flesh
Covered heaven's architect; the author
Of the world became part of the human
Race, and hidden inside one material
Frame was he who holds together all the Universe.
Yes, he who by the measured
Spaces of the earth, by waters of the
Sea, or by the very heaven cannot
Be contained, embodied in a baby's
Tiny limbs. Not stopping there, you suffered
To endure the name and noxious debt of
Punishment we owe, to rescue us from

Ruin and to rout our mortal woes by
Your mortality. Soon after you were
Carried on celestial breezes, having
Cleansed the earth, returning to your joyous
Father.

Favor our Augustus, so that
He on festal days may celebrate the
Seasons of the holy year again and
Yet again, abstaining from the ancient
Leaven, eating in sincerity our
Born and crucified Passover Lamb.

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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.

USE THE QR CODE TO ACCESS OUR SITE AND READ
FROM OUR ARCHIVES.