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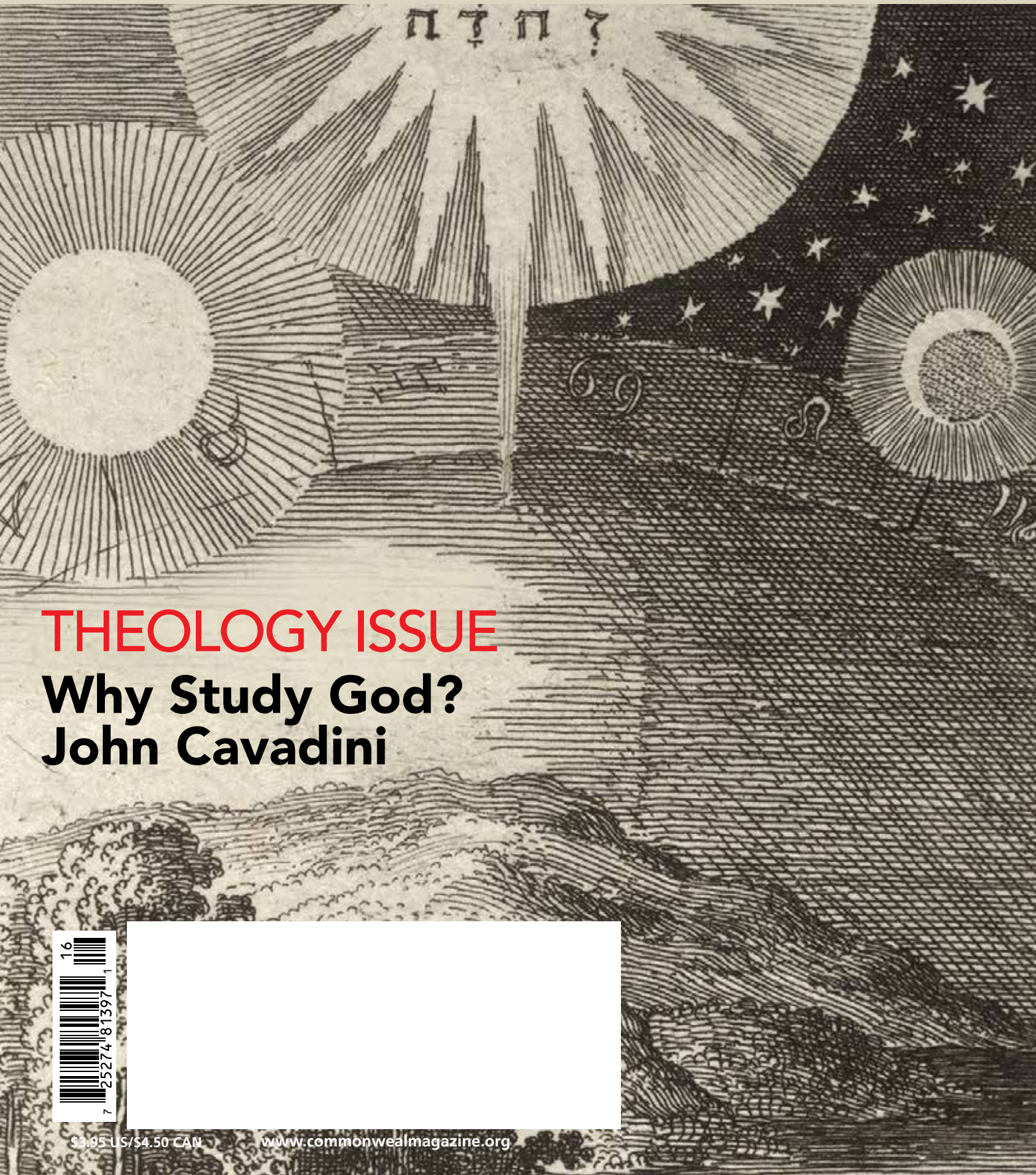

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John Cavadini

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THEOLOGY ISSUE

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LETTERS

Syria, same-sex marriage, Christians & politics

LIFE & DEATH

Joseph Bottum's important, common-sense article, "The Things We Share: A Catholic's Case for Same-sex Marriage" (September 13), has elicited scores of responses. As a result, readers may have missed the far more significant article by Gabriel Said Reynolds on Christian support for the Assad regime in Syria, as well as for the terrorist organization Hezbollah. Reynolds is both balanced and authoritative.

JUSTUS GEORGE LAWLER
St. Charles, Ill.

PAULINE PRINCIPLE

In his brilliant article, Joseph Bottum argues for U.S. Catholics to accept same-sex marriage as a gamble that may well enhance the institution of marriage itself. Catholic bishops will not be convinced, he says, because they believe it is wrong; he implies that this opposition is based on natural law, "a grand, beautiful, and extremely delicate structure of rationality." But that's not their rationale: Scripture seems to condemn homosexuality.

In Romans 1, Paul seems to view homosexuality as a punishment for turning away from God. But is that the correct reading? In putting gay people on this earth, isn't God testing the limits of our Christian love? If so, Paul may be read in a different light. He is inveighing against promiscuity—the opposite of marriage, gay or straight.

JOSEPH P. MARREN
Chicago, Ill.

DEFINE YOUR TERMS

When Archbishop (later Cardinal) William Levada requested the City of San Francisco to recognize gay civil unions with all the privileges of married persons, he was ignored because he would not use the term "marriage." I supported his position. Gay couples may well love each other with a pure love and an erotic love and be entitled to all the civil rights of a married couple, but "marriage" is a word defined by centuries of history. It did not simply refer to a man and woman who were wedded in a ceremony, because those who got married but did not engage in intercourse were not considered truly married until consummation. If a married couple splits up before they have had intercourse, they may be granted an annulment, meaning "no marriage took place." The technical term is *ratum, non consummatum*. People of the same sexual characteristics cannot consummate—that is, they cannot complete a marriage.

As Socrates noted, the historic meaning of words is not determined by polling or voting. Socrates lost his job as a vote-counter in meetings with the men of Athens because he regularly miscounted the votes. He did so deliberately whenever the vote was a matter of fact or history. I agree.

FRANK NIEMAN
Pleasant Hill, Calif.

SECTARIANISM IS NOT AN OPTION

The September 13 editorial, "America's Politics," was right on target. Anyone who thinks that Christians should be absent from political debate is forgetting our history. Lincoln pushed through the Thirteenth Amendment to stop slavery; FDR brought the end of child labor and gave us Social Security. LBJ used his political wiles to enact Medicare, Medicaid, and civil-rights legislation. And now President Barack Obama has laid the groundwork to provide millions more Americans with health care. All four of these presidents helped millions of needy Americans in ways no church could. Yet some of those measures were opposed by Christian churches.

"There is no need to choose between fidelity to Christ and our secular democratic hopes," the editors write. That truth should marshal every Christian to support the best in their politicians.

PAUL STUBENBORT
Bensalem, Pa.

From the Editors

A New Balance

Whether they describe themselves as liberal or conservative, reform-minded or traditionalist, Catholics were stunned by the interview Pope Francis recently gave to the world's Jesuit publications. So were many non-Catholics. Predictably, much attention has been paid to the pope's surprising admonition that the church has been too "obsessed" with abortion, contraception, and same-sex marriage. As welcome as that observation is, however, the real importance of the interview is to be found in the pope's clear-eyed evaluation of how the gospel should be preached in the modern world.

To be sure, many Catholics wholeheartedly embraced the change in tone and spirit in which the pope discussed difficult questions like abortion. Unfortunately, some deeply involved in the prolife movement have taken those remarks as a rebuke. That is an overreaction and misinterpretation of what the pope said. Obviously, Francis was objecting to the uncompromising and confrontational rhetoric of some Catholic activists. Why? Because that approach is simply not working. Worse, it is preventing the larger gospel message from being heard both within and beyond the Catholic community. With a third of all baptized Catholics abandoning the church, and those who remain increasingly divided on ecclesial, cultural, and political questions, the pope's diagnosis is hard to refute. Is it not time, as Francis urged, to "find a new balance" in presenting the church's teaching to an often doubting flock and a sometimes hostile secular world? "Otherwise," the pope warns, "even the moral edifice of the church is likely to fall like a house of cards, losing the freshness and fragrance of the gospel. The proposal of the gospel must be more simple, profound, radiant. It is from this proposition that the moral consequences then flow."

A careful reading of the pope's remarks reveals Francis to be preparing the faithful for a significant program of institutional reform. Especially welcome were his comments about the hierarchy of truths taught by the church. Not every doubt raised about church teaching should be treated as heresy; not every church practice is sacrosanct. "The dogmatic and moral teachings of the church are not all equivalent," he reminded us.

Even more refreshing was the pope's insistence that "thinking with the church" does not mean thinking only with the hierarchy. "The church [is]...the people of God, pastors and people together. The church is the totality of God's people." It has been a long time since that bit of orthodox wisdom has been heard from Rome. In a similar fashion, Francis warned of the dangers of certainty in the life of faith. "If a person says that he met God with total certainty and is not touched by a margin of uncertainty, then this is not good. For me, this is an important key. If one has the answers to all the questions—that is the proof that God is not with him."

Francis also used the interview to suggest how he is going to go about reforming certain aspects of church governance. He will be guided by his experience as a Jesuit provincial and later as archbishop of Buenos Aires, where he faced the challenges posed by internal church disarray as well as by secularism and the exponential growth of Evangelical Protestantism. He confessed that as a young Jesuit provincial his authoritarian style of decision-making caused him to make many mistakes. He has learned from those mistakes. "I am always wary of decisions made hastily," he now says. "The wisdom of discernment redeems the necessary ambiguity of life and helps us find the most appropriate means, which do not always coincide with what looks great and strong."

As he demonstrated by taking the unprecedented step of appointing an advisory council of eight cardinals, this pope will place great emphasis on consultation and collaboration. He is eager for the synods of bishops to become genuinely consultative bodies, not just rubber stamps for the pope or the curia's agenda. Vatican II's promise of episcopal collegiality may finally be given real institutional backing.

Francis cautions that change and reform cannot be hurried. Laying the groundwork and building consensus for renewal are essential. In the meantime, he will adopt the governing style of John XXIII: "See everything; turn a blind eye to much; correct a little." For those who want their pope to be more of a pastor than an oracle, Francis is undoubtedly the answer to many prayers. Yet even more disarming than his humility is Francis's openness to, and confidence in, the future. His every word attests to a profound faith that God continues to act in unexpected ways in the lives of his people. It is a faith secure in the knowledge that what is new in the church can be a revelation rather than a corruption. Those looking for a "countercultural" pope who is not afraid to challenge our modern skepticism and complacency should take another look at Francis. ■

September 23, 2013

John Garvey

An Imperfect Union

WHEN CHURCH & STATE MARRY

At this moment in our culture, it is hard to talk about same-sex marriage without making a fool of oneself—hard to talk about it without appearing either to defend what looks like a form of bigotry or to endorse same-sex marriage as an unalloyed and obvious social advance. Both of these positions ignore so much.

For most of its history, marriage has been about the melding of families (it's still about this, as married couples often learn after the fact) and the protection of women and children, not, or not primarily, about romantic feelings. The easy dismissal of the definition of marriage as an institution necessarily involving both male and female—sometimes one male and many females or, much more rarely, vice-versa—is a problem. This has been a basic part of our understanding of marriage until so recently that the reaction against those who would dispense with it is understandable.

But in some ways we Christians have, by acquiescing to the coercive nature of law, painted ourselves into this corner. Until the ninth century Orthodoxy did not have a separate liturgy for marriage. People married according to the custom of their country. The empires, East and West, made the church responsible for the legality of marriage and its dissolution, and the distinction between marriage as a sacrament and as a legal contract was blurred. To this day we haven't gotten over this confusion.

I find it ironic that a country that prides itself on the separation of church and state has made such a hash of this. If we were really serious about upholding that principle, we would arrange things so that couples—same-sex or heterosexual—who want a contract that affords certain legal privileges and comes with certain obligations would obtain a license for a civil union from a city or county clerk. Then, if they also wanted a sacramental union, a wedding, or some other religious bond, they would go to a priest, rabbi, minister, or imam. Some religious bodies would permit this, others wouldn't, but the distinction would be clear.

This seems to me a simple matter of justice. Anyone willing to make a lifelong commitment to another person should be allowed to. Such commitments can only strengthen our common social bonds, and in a society where so many kinds of personal bonds seem to be dissolving, anything that promotes fidelity should be encouraged.

At the same time, while such unions should provide the same legal benefits as marriage, they should also be seen as different from Christian marriage. But in America we have so confused the sacrament with the legal arrangement as it bears on insurance, hospital visitation, inheritance, etc., that the meaning of marriage as a Christian mystery has been lost in legalism. This is partly because of the country's Protestant heritage, which never recognized marriage as a sacrament in the first place. But many Catholics—including Catholic bishops—have been guilty of the same confusion, though not all: apparently Pope Francis, as a bishop in Argentina, opposed same-sex marriage but suggested that the bishops accept civil unions as an alternative. The other bishops didn't agree.

It always struck me as odd that marriage is the only occasion when I, as a priest, have to deal with an agent of the state. An Irish Dominican friend, trained in law, said, "I think the church should get out of the civil marriage business." So do I. My ideal—a sharp distinction between marriage and civil unions for both heterosexual and same-sex couples—might have worked if the church hadn't settled into such a cozy relationship with the state in the first place.

But the church long ago drank the Constantinian Kool-Aid in this and other matters, and continues to ask the state to enforce its own confused idea of what marriage entails. What we have to face now is not just a case of having lost the cultural battle over issues that matter—and should matter—to us morally. We're also dealing with the church's ancient mistake of entering into an alliance with Caesar and asking the coercive power of the state to defend the church's morality.

It seems to me a matter of justice to grant same-sex couples the same rights heterosexuals have under the law, and to require the same obligations. At the same time, to redefine marriage in terms of romance, personal feeling, and a rather Victorian sense of family, along with a sentimental approach to children, is a mistake. It is to act as if our present understanding of family, historically limited as it is, were the definitive one—the last stage in a long line of progressively more perceptive understandings of marriage rather than the contingent result of our current and, to my mind, overly sentimental presumptions.

There is and should be a radical difference between secular marriage as a legal contract and Christian marriage as a sacrament, a sign of the mystery that unites Christ and the church. If we care about the survival of Christian marriage, this difference should be our central concern. But we'll only get our priorities right when, as my Irish friend suggested, we get out of the civil-marriage business and wean ourselves from having the state enforce our way of life. ■

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Mollie Wilson O'Reilly

Wild Thing

TAMING MY TWO-YEAR-OLD

Is it only a coincidence that this year, which marks the fiftieth anniversary of Maurice Sendak's masterful picture book *Where the Wild Things Are*, is also the year our firstborn son turned two? Thanks to that milestone, plus the arrival of his new baby brother, Marty has been going through a "difficult" phase. Hoping a little time alone with Mommy would help, I took him to the bookstore. I wanted to introduce him to Max, the mischief-making wolf-boy in Sendak's story who imagines himself taming wild beasts with his powerful "No!"

After fifty years, *Where the Wild Things Are* is still unsurpassed. It's beautiful; it's lucid; it's funny, it's warm; it's *real*. And when I first read it to Marty, it made me cry.

Did I mention that I'd just had a baby? Blame it on the hormones, then, but in Max's struggle with authority and his sojourn in the wilderness I saw a reflection of my suddenly rough relationship with my sweet son.

Marty's Jekyll-and-Hyde act took us by surprise. Until recently our firstborn had been cheerful and eager to please. Now, having discovered that he can refuse to cooperate, he seems compelled to do so, even when cooperating would bring him pleasure. He wants to climb the stairs by himself—"Marty do it!"—but when we set him down, he goes slack, draping himself across the landing. The urge to assert his independence pulls him in opposite directions. We go back and forth, up-down, yes-no, until he's sobbing and we're baffled and defeated.

If he were a happy little demon it might be easier for all of us to ride out this phase, but he's as anxious as we are. He helped me fill the bathtub the other night, then ran shrieking when I tried to put him in it. When I cornered him at the end of the hall his eyes were wild with fear. He's not afraid of the bath—moments later, after I'd wrangled him into the tub, he was giggling and pouring water over his head. He seems afraid of himself, of the power he has discovered and his inability to control it. In his happy moments, we walk on eggshells, afraid of setting him off. He's a teenager in 2T clothes.

I get the brunt of his negativity, because I had the temerity to bring a baby (of all things!) into our happy family. Marty truly loves his brother, but he can't understand why my attention is suddenly divided, or why that big belly of mine disappeared just when he was getting fond of it. I am clearly not the trustworthy adult he took me for.

We sat down together with *Where the Wild Things Are* at the end of a particularly difficult day. Marty was perched on my knee, temporarily consenting to be held but ready to bolt at any moment. I wondered whether he would recognize the emotional turbulence that undergirds Max's fantasy, the way I could see Marty in each of Sendak's charming illustrations—Max's face sulking, confident, lonely, unrepentant, relieved.

Among the relatively few words in Sendak's text were many Marty didn't know: *mischief, gnashed, rumpus*. But Marty, normally full of questions, didn't stop me; he seemed to understand it all. I felt guilty for my own impatience when I read the exchange between Max and his unseen, scolding parent: "His mother called him 'WILD THING!' And Max said 'I'LL EAT YOU UP!' so he was sent to bed without eating anything." Did Marty identify, as I did, with the ambiguity of the bond between the wild things and Max? "Oh please don't go—we'll eat you up—we love you so!" they beg as Max, homesick and exhausted, prepares to leave them behind. Max, of course, answers "No!" What else would he say?

Within a couple of days, Marty could fill in all the dialogue as we read: the mother's angry "Wild thing!" as well as Max's defiant "I'll eat you up!" and confident "Be still!" And as the weeks have passed, he has regained some of his equilibrium. His wild impulses are a little tamer, his happy moments not so fraught. "It's nice to see you two getting along," my husband teased when he saw Marty sitting in my lap one evening—not tentatively, but comfortably, with no tantrum on the horizon.

Marty still puts on his wolf suit now and then. I think of Max's mother and try not to yell. I try to let him explore the wild places in his rapidly expanding world. I know he can't always control where his emotions take him. I know I can't always comfort him. But I can read him books, and I can keep his supper warm while I wait for him to come back home. ■

MAURICE SENDAK

John F. Haught

Darwin's Nagging Doubt

WHAT THOMAS NAGEL COULD LEARN FROM THEOLOGY

"With me the horrid doubt always arises," wrote Charles Darwin, "whether the convictions of man's mind, which has been developed from the mind of the lower animals, are of any value or at all trustworthy. Would anyone trust in the convictions of a monkey's mind, if there are any convictions in such a mind?"

Darwin never followed up on his "horrid doubt" about whether we can trust our minds if they are products of an aimless process of natural selection, nor have most other scientists and philosophers. It is quite remarkable, I think, that the esteemed New York University philosopher Thomas Nagel now wants to do so. Nagel's writings about mind have long provoked controversy, but his latest book, *Mind and Cosmos*, is quite unexpected and, to many of his fellow intellectuals, outrageously wrong. I think he's on to something. Recently in *Commonweal,* a biologist, a physicist, and a philosopher weighed in on the book ("Nagel's Untimely Idea," May 17). I believe *Mind and Cosmos* is theologically important as well, not so much for what it says as for who is saying it—and why.

Some critics have taken *Mind and Cosmos* to be an attack on science, but this charge is misplaced. The book's subtitle reveals its main point: *Why the Materialist Neo-Darwinian Conception of Nature Is Almost Certainly False*. Nagel has no problem with the standard evolutionary narrative of how living and thinking beings emerged gradually over the past 4 billion years. Rather, his concern is whether a *materialist* worldview can make that narrative intelligible. His answer is no, it cannot. Is there a credible alternative?

Materialists, both ancient and modern, believe that lifeless and mindless "matter" is the ultimate origin and final destiny of all that exists. Nagel claims that when materialist belief is alloyed with evolutionary biology, as is usually the case today, it only clouds our understanding of life. "Evolutionary naturalism," as Nagel labels the materialist slant on the story of life, is not science but a spurious nonscientific interpretation of science. Instead of illuminating evolution, materialism only dulls our understanding of it. It reduces living things to lifeless elements and in effect denies that when life and mind emerged in cosmic history anything truly new or revelatory was happening.

This muddling becomes especially evident, Nagel argues, in materialism's failure to explain satisfactorily how "mind"—evolution's most exquisite outcome so far—came into being from an utterly mindless universe. Moreover, if, as materialists believe, minds are reducible to physical stuff that has been blindly shuffled and reshuffled by a long and mindless evolutionary process, why—as Darwin wondered—should we assume these same minds can lead us to a correct understanding of anything?

Science, as Nagel appreciates, has now shown that mind and cosmos are in fact a package deal. Dualism, of the sort advocated by Descartes and others, is untenable. As far as science is concerned, there can be no privileged spiritual world where minds exist in isolation from the rest of nature. Mind, as cosmologists have shown, was beginning to stir in the heart of matter 14 billion years ago. The precise physical conditions and constants required for the universe to give rise to consciousness were already in place at the very beginning of the cosmic story. The universe as understood by contemporary astrophysics, in other words, has never been fundamentally mindless.

Materialists disagree. For them mindlessness is the ground state of being, and the actual emergence of mind has to be a fluke that tells us nothing significant about the nature of the real world. For Nagel, however, since mind is fully part of nature, as even materialists must admit, it would be silly to ignore its remarkable properties when we try to understand the universe. Doesn't the fact that nature has produced minds capable of discovering the mathematical principles operative in the physical universe from which minds have emerged tell us something essential about the universe?

The problem is how to understand mind as truly part of nature without dragging it back into the mud of materialism's original cosmic mindlessness. Perhaps we can avoid this dead end, Nagel proposes, by restoring to the cosmos an inherent purpose (teleology) or directionality. Purpose is a quality that science has deliberately subtracted from its picture of nature for the past four centuries. Yet if we want

AT THE END

of a late August evening
comes a light through maples
and over orange marigolds
a light that eddies over fallen apples
a butterfly light that slows
and begins again
a light like a snake's shed skin
a shiver of light you carry home
like the remains of a season
all but over

—Harry Humes

Harry Humes has published several collections of poetry, including Butterfly Effect*, selected for the 1998 National Poetry Series and published by Milkweed Editions.*

a full and accurate portrait of our mind-making universe we may need to bring it back. For all we know, Nagel suggests, the making of minds is what the cosmos is really all about. This is a startling proposal, especially in today's intellectual climate, since for most scientists and philosophers the idea of cosmic purpose has no explanatory value at all. On the other hand, according to Nagel, materialist naturalism makes the universe look so blank and pointless from the outset that Darwin is right to ask why we should ever trust the minds that have emerged from it.

The main difficulty Nagel faces is that the majority of scientists and philosophers still think of "Darwinism" as inseparable from a materialist worldview. Evolutionist philosopher Michael Ruse, for example, declares that Darwinism is "the apotheosis of a materialist theory." Little wonder, then, that Nagel seems to Ruse like "a horse who broke into the zebra pen." According to Nagel, however, the unreasonableness of materialism shows up especially in its failure to illuminate the most impressive chapter in natural history—namely, the universe's awakening into consciousness that began to take place with the arrival of humans. What we need is a way to stitch the phenomenon of consciousness tightly and intelligibly into the natural world while leaving the materialist baggage behind. The materialist is content with the idea that mind came from mindlessness and unto mindlessness it will return. In this vein the Oxford physical chemist Peter Atkins announces imperiously that science has exposed the entirety of life and mind as nothing more than brute physical simplicity "masquerading as complexity." But Nagel rightly considers such proclamations to be self-sabotaging. If cognitive complexity were reducible to mindless simplicity, why should we expect the splendid qualities of insight and truthfulness to accompany any propositions emanating from Atkins's mind or that of any other exponents of materialism?

In earlier writings Nagel had already complained that scientific analysis has no access to the minds or inner experience of living organisms, whether bats or humans. Readers, however, did not take these qualms to be a rejection of materialism. Nagel's latest book, by comparison, is full-blown heresy. In reaction Nagel's most vocal critics complain that he is injuring science by making room for miracles, divine intervention, or intelligent design to account for the improbable emergence of mind. Clearly, though, he has nothing against science. His critique of "neo-Darwinism," for example, is directed not at biological research but at the materialist ideology that has hijacked biological science for nonscientific reasons. Nor does the atheist Nagel have any theological agenda whatsoever. He is convinced that any consistent thinker, religious or not, should acknowledge the blatant irrationality of materialist attempts to squeeze mind into a world from which any place for mind has already been removed.

Annoyed at Nagel's incredulity, materialist evolutionists such as Richard Dawkins typically insist that fitting mind into a mindless universe is no problem if you have a deep enough sense of time. Nagel, they would say, fails to consider what surprising things can be accomplished by innumerable minute organic modifications and natural selection if given sufficient time. If time is abundant, mindlessness can give rise to minds. Nagel would reply, however, that evolutionary naturalists like Dawkins are still pulling a rabbit out of a hat. True, evolution has taken place over 4 billion years, involved innumerable accidents, and unfolded thanks to the impersonal "laws" of nature. Yet a materialist view of nature still can't show—without seeming like alchemy—how the lustrous gold of human intelligence emerged from the dross of primordial cosmic mindlessness simply by adding the elixir of deep time. Something else must be going on.

Nagel still has work to do in convincing his critics that materialist accounts of mind are incoherent. Good luck. Devotees of materialist naturalism, as I have experienced personally, are true believers. Although they boast about an adherence to empirical "evidence," they refuse to look carefully at the most immediate and palpable experience all of us have—namely, the felt performance of our own minds. Nagel wants a cosmology based on an empirical survey of the world wide enough to include close attention to what goes on in our minds. Understanding the universe requires our attending not only to the world "out there," but also to the mind's insatiable demand for understanding and truth. Everything that goes on in our minds, after all, is just as much part of nature as rocks and rivers. Doesn't it say something important about the universe that it has produced beings who not only eat and sleep but who also raise questions, seek understanding, and long for truth and goodness?

Although he has no use for theology, Nagel's attempt to make mind essential to our understanding of the universe would find support in two science-friendly theological thinkers. Before the middle of the last century the Jesuit geologist Pierre Teilhard de Chardin (1881–1955) was already calling for a "new physics" that makes the phenomenon of "thought" essential to our understanding of the cosmos. He lamented the fact that the materialists of his own day were unwilling to "see" that the emergence of the human mind in evolution is not a local, terrestrial anomaly but a key to what the cosmos as a whole is all about. Nagel could find additional support for his proposals in the work of the Jesuit philosopher Bernard Lonergan (1904–84). No one has more brilliantly linked mind to evolution and the cosmos while simultaneously giving us a good reason to trust our minds. Unfortunately, it is hard to find well-known contemporary philosophers of mind who are familiar with Lonergan's work. That's a pity. In his magisterial *Insight* (1957) and elsewhere, Lonergan demonstrates that if our worldview is out of joint with what goes on in our minds—in every act of attending, understanding, knowing, and deciding—then we need to look for another worldview. He would agree with Nagel that materialism doesn't work, not least because it logically subverts the trust required for our minds to work at all.

Nagel would be disappointed, of course, that Lonergan's quest for a worldview that can adjust the cosmos to the human mind must ultimately enlist—for the sake of its coherence—the help of theology. A lifelong atheist, Nagel still suspects that science and theology are incompatible. He should be reassured, though, that theology properly understood never competes or conflicts with science. If there is a place for theology in the human quest for understanding and truth, it is not one of providing information that science can gather by itself. Rather, theology can enter the conversation about mind and cosmos least obtrusively and most disarmingly by addressing the big "worldview" question that Nagel seems on the verge of asking but from which he finally backs off. That question is: Why is the universe intelligible at all?

The materialist would answer that the world's intelligibility, like the universe itself, has no explanation. It "simply is." A theological worldview like Lonergan's, on the other hand, offers an entirely reasonable alternative: It is the presence and lure of infinite being, wisdom, truth, and goodness that grounds both the world's intelligibility and our own intelligent life. Through natural processes the inexhaustible love of God evokes an anticipatory restlessness that we call evolution and, in our newly emergent minds, an unrestricted desire to know. Such a theological vision not only makes the world a favorable place for scientific inquiry; it also provides good reasons for entrusting ourselves to the mind's spontaneous quest for understanding and truth. ■

John F. Haught *is professor emeritus of theology, Georgetown University. His latest book is* Science and Faith: A New Introduction *(Paulist).*

Why Study God?

The Role of Theology at a Catholic University

John C. Cavadini

Why does Notre Dame require all undergraduate students to complete theology courses and why do other Catholic universities and colleges sometimes have similar requirements? What is theology, anyway? How does it benefit students? How does the university benefit from having a faculty of theology? What benefit, in turn, does such a university offer the world of higher education? The presence of a theology department is unique to religiously affiliated colleges and universities, though certainly far from ubiquitous there, and even at Catholic schools theology requirements have dwindled over the years, and are often challenged to justify their existence. What does it mean to accept a faculty of theology as an academic unit in a university community? Its presence implies something about the whole academic community because other academic communities exclude such departments. Secular universities and colleges do not even recognize theology as an academic discipline. What, then, does the fact that a Catholic university welcomes theology tell us?

Thursday, *Wenceslaus Hollar (1607–1677)*

"By its very nature, each Catholic University makes an important contribution to the church's work of evangelization. It is a living institutional witness to Christ and his message, so vitally important in cultures marked by secularism." This passage from John Paul II's apostolic constitution *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* provides a characterization of the distinctiveness of a Catholic university. It is, he says, a kind of "witness." This term can sound somewhat strange in an academic context, and I draw attention to it, in part, for that reason. Witness is not a category that one finds applied to secular universities very often, if ever, though I imagine that even secular universities would count themselves as bearing witness in some way to values such as social justice, equality, and inclusiveness. According to *Ex corde*, however, the witness of a Catholic university is connected to the church's work of evangelization, and that seems to up the ante. A Catholic university, though proceeding "from the heart of the church," is still not the same as the church itself, and its witness can't take exactly the same form as the witness of a parish or a diocese. So what would that witness be—"so vitally important," as the pope says, "in cultures," such as our own, "marked by secularism"? Of course, this witness may take many forms in various campus activities, but here I am looking for the "institutional" witness, the witness that must be encoded into the very thing that makes a university a university—namely, its intellectual life, its mode of intellectual inquiry. Here, we find a crucial connection to theology as a discipline.

Theology is the "study of God" (*Theos-logos*). That sounds weird and pretty subjective. After all, God seems rather reclusive, not normally offering the divine self as an object of study. How could God be studied? How could one ever control such study? How could one keep it from becoming hopelessly subjective and fanciful? The study of God (as opposed to the study of religion) might sound like the study of an illusion of our own making. Unless, of course, one believes that God has in fact presented the divine self to us. It is God's self-presentation, God's "revelation," that is the subject of theological study. Theology begins from faith in God's self-revelation and moves toward "understanding" what God has revealed. It is in that way the study of God—or, as St. Anselm famously put it, "faith seeking understanding." Theology is the only discipline that has as its proper object God's revelation.

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One might wonder whether there's really a need for a special discipline to study God's revelation. Can't we just read it in the Bible and leave it at that? For Catholics, though, "revelation" is not only what is in Scripture; it is also contained in the apostolic tradition of the church. There was no New Testament around when Jesus lived, died, and rose. The church preceded the New Testament and only gradually accepted its writings as Scripture, just as Israel preceded the Hebrew Bible, and only gradually ratified it as Scripture. The church's struggle over how and (even) whether to accept the Hebrew Bible as Scripture was itself complex. There is no book that dropped out of heaven with a self-verifying label reading "FROM: GOD; TO: WORLD; CONTENTS: CERTIFIED INSPIRED SCRIPTURE." Whether the Book of Revelation is Scripture was contested until the fifth century in some churches, and in fact Christians still disagree about what constitutes inspired Scripture. The Bible is "the church's book," and Catholics have always valued the oral traditions and the living liturgical practices in which it was used. Not every practice or homily is as valuable as every other, and the magisterium of the church—its teaching authority—is there to clarify what is and what isn't authentic tradition, as well as what is and what isn't an acceptable interpretation of Scripture.

Studying God's self-revelation is therefore not equivalent to studying Scripture. But even if it were, one encounters problems in the scriptural texts—what St. Augustine called *quaestiones* in his sermons. Many of these problems or questions are posed by the learned disciplines, the arts and sciences, which one finds at any university. To take a simple example, if according to science the earth seems much older than the six thousand years or so the Bible reports, then we have a problem. Do we give up faith in revelation, or do we "seek understanding"? Are we so sure we understand what Scripture is saying, or how it is saying it?

Nor are these questions limited to the modern period. Sophisticated intellectuals both Jewish and Christian have for the past two millennia wondered about difficulties in the Book of Genesis: What kind of God creates supposedly precious human creatures and then loses track of them in the garden, having to walk around calling out and asking where they are? For that matter, what kind of a God walks around in a garden at all? One doesn't have to be a Scripture scholar to notice that, in the first few verses of Genesis, God divides the light from the darkness and calls the light day and the darkness night, but the sun and the moon are not created until a few verses later. Where was the light coming from? We moderns think we are the only ones burdened with such questions, but learned Jews and Christians of the first, second, and third centuries were possibly more troubled than we are by these passages, and yet they pressed on, "seeking understanding."

What was the "day" created before the sun and the moon that define our days, and what was the "light" that preceded these heavenly bodies? Was it the light of created intelligence (the rational incorporeal spirit, not mentioned anywhere else in the narrative)? Was it the light of understanding, which pervades the text as a whole? Is God's creation of the first "day" a way of saying that God created time and that time is older than the sun and the moon?

No matter how they answered these particular questions, theologians of the early centuries agreed that the most important truths contained in these scriptural texts were that the origin of the world is God's creative act and that creation is not simply a matter of mechanical origin but of God's "speaking." God doesn't just create the world as the first in a series of mechanical causes. Rather, he creates it in his "word," or intention, which continues to sustain the world ever after. Another crucial truth: Everything God created is good—indeed, the whole of creation is "very good." And one more truth: Human beings have the special dignity of being created in the "image and likeness" of God.

Have we fully understood the "goodness" of the cosmos and all that is in it? Or what it means to be in the "image and likeness of God?" Of course not, but the "seeking" never stops because, for one thing, the questions never stop. Today we have, in addition to biblical texts, the benefit of this tradition of consensus, built up from the earliest centuries, about the central meaning of these texts, and we can study that consensus, along with the texts themselves, as we attempt to further our "understanding" in light of modern versions of the ancient questions.

How, then, can we square the texts of Genesis with what science tells us? We can do so primarily by noticing that the elements that the traditional consensus finds central—the dependence of the world on God, the goodness of the world, and the dignity of human beings as God's "image and likeness"—are none of them measurable or empirically observable. In other words, Genesis is not a scientific text at all, primitive or otherwise, and cannot in principle be replaced by one. Science cannot determine or measure the goodness of anything, no matter how sophisticated the instruments of detection. These are not statements proposed for scientific verification, but truths proclaimed unto faith, in the context of the rest of revelation. One responds to them by faith and by seeking, in turn, to understand what one has come to believe, not by observing and testing and verifying the hypothesis of goodness, as would be appropriate for a scientific theory. Faith in the goodness of creation proceeding from God's love is precisely that—faith. And if our faith is challenged by the obvious presence of evil in the world, that is grounds for working to understand further what is meant by the "goodness" we believe in and how the doctrine of creation fits into the broader revelation of God's love.

Once we stop thinking of the text as some kind of primitive science, we might glimpse how self-consciously it proclaims that its subject is a mystery too great for words. The six-day creation scheme is obviously a construct intended to underscore that very fact. No one can have observed the creative "speech" of God. Isn't that the point of reserving the creation of the only possible observer until the sixth "day," after all the speaking is done? The fact that the framework of "days" precedes the creation of the sun and moon is the text's way of telling us that the six-day scheme is a construct, used to direct our attention past the text to the ineffable mystery it proclaims. The text makes itself a vessel containing the great light of a mystery that can shine through it, casting the very words of the text as its shadow. The six-day scheme, oriented toward the seventh day of rest, is of course a liturgical construct, which proclaims that creation itself is oriented toward rest—that is, toward the praise of God's goodness. No science can prove, disprove, or even observe this mystery. It transcends scientific questions without denying their validity.

It is important to observe that science is affirmed in this example, even as its results inspire questions pointing to something beyond science. In this way, science itself becomes oriented toward an integration of knowledge transcending science. One learns to recognize that some concepts, such as "creation," are irreducibly theological: they can't be reduced or translated into scientific categories because they arise from mysteries, such as the goodness of the cosmos, that are proclaimed to, and apprehended only by, faith. Language of "transcending" science is not meant as an insult to science, but only as a way of affirming it in its own methodology. A culture of "faith seeking understanding" is not a culture that holds that there is a Catholic or Christian science or that faith alone offers a sufficient answer to all questions. The very point of theology is to engage the truths of faith in a "dialogue with reason"—that is, with all the other disciplines that arise from the questioning human spirit and our observation of the world. Theology affirms the truths of other disciplines even as it integrates them into a discourse that transcends their methodologies. This discourse generates a kind of thick intellectual culture, in which faith generates new questions about what we learn through scientific research rather than replacing or preempting such research.

Nor does this apply only to the natural sciences. If research into other cultures of the world discovers religious teachings of undeniable and exquisite beauty, these results are left standing, but they also occasion new questions. How can we understand their truth relative to revelation? "Faith seeking understanding" can afford to acknowledge truth wherever it may be found without fearing that the universal significance of God's self-revelation in Christ is somehow threatened. Truth cannot be threatened by truth. Seeking in this case means deepening our own understanding of revelation even as we deepen our own thinking about other religions.

Now we can see why a university community that accepts in its midst a theology department is not different simply because it accepts one more discipline than secular universities do. In accepting that discipline, a university isn't just adding another element to the paradigm already in place at

secular universities; it is accepting an altogether different paradigm of the intellectual life—a paradigm of intellectual culture as a dialectic between faith and reason, to use the traditional expression. Having a theology department means accepting a commitment to the intellectual life as oriented toward an "understanding" of something that integrates and transcends all the disciplines. Such an understanding keeps each discipline from closing in on itself and proceeding as if the truths it discovers were incommensurable with the truths discovered by other disciplines. It means openness to a conversation that necessarily transcends each discipline but is not merely "interdisciplinary." If the disciplines converge at some point, it must be at a point "above" them all, in a discipline that has as its explicit object of study the mystery that transcends all other objects of study. Otherwise one must either force nondisciplinary solutions of questions onto the disciplines (e.g., claiming that faith is an adequate answer to scientific questions), or declare that knowledge is hopelessly fragmented into incommensurate disciplinary truths.

The task of seeking an integration of knowledge has been called a "sapiential task"— sapiential because it is a search for the ultimate and overarching meaning of life. The Catholic intellectual life is never finished or settled. It is, as John Paul II put it, a quest: "Integration of knowledge is a process, one which will always remain incomplete." This quest tends toward wisdom, and so the Catholic intellectual life, in its open-endedness, can be thought of as a wisdom tradition. It is inescapably theological because it grows out of faith in the God of revelation, and because theology performs the essential integrative function. Philosophy is a partner to theology in the integration of the intellectual life, since it, too, asks questions that transcend the disciplines—questions about the nature of knowledge itself, for instance, or of language, or of meaning, or even, as St. Thomas Aquinas points out, of

God. Still, philosophy does not in the end have as its defining object of study God's self-revelation and everything as seen in the light of God's self-revelation, as Thomas also points out in the first article of the *Summa Theologiae*. Philosophy can remain philosophy without asking the question of the relation of its own results to revelation; and if that question is asked, it cannot be answered without theology. Further, much contemporary philosophy does not even concern itself with questions of transcendence or ultimate meaning, and yet it remains philosophy. But if theology ceases to address itself to God's self-revelation, it ceases to be theology.

Yet theology achieves no understanding apart from the other disciplines (because, as John Paul II puts it, "reason discovers new and unsuspected horizons," because "faith and reason mutually support each other; each influences the other, as they offer to each other a purifying critique and a stimulus to pursue the search for deeper understanding"). Thus, the Catholic intellectual life, as a theologically integrated wisdom tradition, provides a middle ground between secularism and sectarianism. This is the "witness," specific to a university, that a Catholic university can—and does—provide in our culture.

What benefit does this witness offer to the American academy in general? Without this witness, the intellectual culture in our country will remain dominated by, and limited to, the increasingly sterile polarity between aggressive secularization and aggressive anti-intellectual fideisms. These two poles are equally unattractive, and they tend to perpetuate each other. Seven years ago, Stephen Pinker famously observed that "universities are about reason, pure and simple," and that "faith—believing something without good reasons to do so—has no place in anything but a religious institution" (*Harvard Crimson*, October 27, 2006), by which he meant a church, synagogue, mosque, or the like. Such a caricature of faith is itself anti-intellectual, but persons of faith may be tempted to respond to such hostility by turning to a self-isolating fundamentalist position that finds in faith an intellectual world sufficient unto itself. But that position is so narrow and anti-intellectual that it prompts a kind of intellectual revulsion, and so feeds the growth of the opposite position—secularization, which at least seems open to all questions (if not all answers). Part of the Catholic university's mission is to provide an alternative to these two extremes, to heal an intellectual imagination wounded by the antagonism between secularism and sectarianism, where these are understood as the only two options. The "witness" of a Catholic university involves offering another option.

It should be noted that this witness may appear to "pinch" both faith and reason. It will appear to pinch reason because of its commitment to faith in God's self-revelation as entrusted to the church. This requires links to the church. Without these links, the intellectual culture of the university will, beyond any doubt, be secularized. Apart from the community of believers, no one will care whether faith seeks understanding or not. In a way, the church protects this intellectual environment. On the other hand, the dialectic between faith and reason has to be free enough that real thinking is possible, and so to some this freedom will seem to pinch faith. Academic credibility is a sine qua non of any witness appropriate to a university, while fidelity is a sine qua non of any real witness to the church's distinctive intellectual culture. The question for a Catholic university is: Are its connections to the church accidental and occasional or programmatic and consistent? Is its project rooted in the church, linked to ecclesial persons, and accountable in some way to authority in the church? Is dissent the default mode of its theological culture? Or is refusal to tolerate critical reflection in the public domain on various magisterial positions the default mode? If the answer to either of these last two questions is yes, then the appropriate balance has not been struck.

Now we are in a position to answer the other questions this article began with. Why should undergraduates be required to take courses in theology? An undergraduate course in theology is essentially different from, say, an undergraduate course in history. Even if both courses use some of the same texts, they will use them in different ways. The history course will examine the circumstances of their production, the culture behind them, the social situation for which they provide evidence. But the point of a theology course is to find out about God, in and through the properly disciplined study of these texts. If a student asks a question about God in a history class, the instructor is free to answer, "That's not a relevant question in this class" (or, as it was put to me somewhat indecorously in a class at the non-Catholic institution where I studied as an undergraduate, "Please leave your theological baggage at the door"). But for a theology instructor to reply in the same way would be to violate the very identity of one's discipline. Students are right to ask about God, and all matters related to God, in a theology class, where the question is not finally "What influences were operating in Julian of Norwich's social setting that caused her to have visions?" or "What did Thomas Aquinas think about God?"—though such questions are certainly and necessarily involved—but rather "How has this study helped me think about God and God's self-revelation?"

From theology classes, students can also learn that faith in revelation isn't something that has to remain purely private, a matter of individualistic piety without reference to the intellectual life. Rather, faith—the very faith that connects them to all believers, learned and unlearned—can acquire a level of "understanding" as sophisticated as that of any other discipline of study in the university. I find that this is the single most important benefit of the study of theology for undergraduates: the discovery of the sophistication of the "science of God," of the perspective of faith. It comes to

many of them almost as a shock. If anything is likely to bind them more fully to their faith—or, if they are not believers, to make them take the faith of others more seriously—it is this discovery, and not unchallenging courses that seem to replace teaching with preaching. I intend here no devaluation of preaching, but the special witness of the university takes place in the context of a classroom. The witness of a university is not the same as that of a parish or a diocese, where preaching is the proper modus operandi.

Through required courses in theology, students are exposed to a mode of inquiry that belies the false dichotomy between secularization and sectarianism, a mode of inquiry in which faith is not excluded as irrelevant to reason but is itself the opening to a rich intellectual world. What Augustine calls the *initium fidei*, the starting point of faith, drives this inquiry rather than cutting it short. Nor are we talking about faith in the abstract, but a specific faith: the basic doctrines or mysteries of the Catholic faith, considered as part of a living tradition and not an artifact of the past. Basic knowledge of these teachings, and exposure to a mode of inquiry that neither opposes faith to reason, nor reduces faith to reason, is a benefit to any student no matter what his or her own particular "starting point" may be.

As students come to understand the sophistication of the Catholic theological tradition, I find that their sympathy for it increases. They see riches where before they saw only old, irrelevant texts. They come to appreciate that there were difficult challenges in the church long before our own time, controversies much more heated than some of those we observe today. They discover a beauty they had not expected, a variety where previously they had assumed there would be only uniformity. They find out that Scripture is not as "primitive" as they had thought. They learn that, while not reducible to reason, faith has its own logic. They learn to distinguish between what is reasonable and what is provable. They learn some of the basic doctrines of the Catholic faith, not as doors that close off all questioning, but as openings to lifelong reflection on the ultimately ineffable mystery of God's love, which is the ultimate referent of all doctrine. It is the formation of an intellectual life continually engaged with this mystery that is the principle benefit of theology as a field of study.

Thus a Catholic university that welcomes a theology department and requires theology courses for its undergraduates endorses an academic approach that is essentially integrative. Even without any specific integrating programming, the university thereby identifies its whole intellectual project as distinctive. In such a university, the other disciplines remain themselves; their different disciplinary methodologies are not erased or homogenized. But each disciplinary conversation is experienced as part of a larger whole. Since one part of the curriculum is explicitly oriented toward understanding the mystery of God's self-revelation, the whole is thereby implicitly oriented toward such understanding. The kind

of integration such an approach makes possible is never complete, always a work in progress. It is the character of a conversation, rather than a settled intellectual accomplishment or system.

Let me offer a small example of how the integrative potential of the conversation might be actualized in a specific way. Contrary to popular belief, the "preferential option for the poor" is first and foremost a doctrine about God, and not about the poor. In his book *On Job*, Gustavo Gutiérrez writes, "The ultimate basis of God's preference for the poor is to be found in God's own goodness and not in any analysis of society or in human compassion, however pertinent these reasons may be." If the poor and the "little ones" are "the privileged addressees of revelation," this is "the result not primarily of moral or spiritual dispositions, but of a human situation in which God undertakes self-revelation by acting and overturning values and criteria. The scorned of this world are those whom the God of love prefers."

All good universities want to be committed to social service of some kind, and the Catholic university most of all. But it is important to note here that, from a Catholic point of view, the reason for such service is first and foremost found in God's manner of self-revelation. We are, in the first place, confronted with a mystery of God's transcendent love that cannot be reduced to human reason, because it is a "preference" based in God's "goodness." It cannot be derived from any notion of justice based on human reason alone, on the supposed merits exhibited by the poor (or lack thereof). Theology is a contemplative discourse that is defined by its attempt to understand this goodness as well as it can be understood, and to arrive at a notion of justice that flows from it. The language appropriate to theology, according to Gutierrez, is the union of the contemplative and prophetic, of the contemplation of God's love and the "overturning" it implies in its very mode of revelation. Isn't this language—which could only arise in a department oriented by definition to the mystery of God's self-revelation—itself an example of the integration required of a Catholic university? Other disciplines can then contribute to an understanding of this language of contemplation and of justice, spoken as it must be in a world of science, technology, law, literature, social studies, and art. A Catholic university might even offer clusters of linked courses, each speaking its own disciplinary language, but all integrated theologically into the language of contemplation and prophecy.

Thus does the mere presence of a theology department orient a university, quietly and almost imperceptibly, toward the transcendent mystery of God's solidarity with the "little ones," the mystery of the Cross. Is there a better way to prepare students for a lifetime of active, conscious immersion in the mystery of God's love? ■

Rand Richards Cooper

Fearsome Correctives

'THE SPECTACULAR NOW' & 'BLUE JASMINE'

At the outset, James Ponsoldt's *The Spectacular Now* looks like a throwback to such 1980s teen comedies as *Risky Business* and *Say Anything*. Based on an eponymous novel by Tim Tharp, the film chronicles crucial weeks in the life of high-school senior and party monster Sutter Keeley (Miles Teller). Boisterous, wisecracking Sutter is the guy who never stops talking, never stops bluffing; he expresses a certain kind of rampaging and sarcastic joie de vivre, and in return enjoys a certain kind of popularity—one not untinged by envy and contempt. He's part king, part buffoon.

Beneath such swagger presumably lie large insecurities, and it's unclear at first whether Ponsoldt and his scriptwriter, Michael H. Weber, understand this—whether the film is going to explore Sutter's near-pathological extroversion, or (à la *Risky Business*) merely celebrate and enact it. The movie itself seems amped up, and the opening scenes, in which the notorious lothario Sutter and his nerdy best friend exchange notes on girls, leave us uncertain whether it will reach for more.

And then it does. Looming in Sutter's life are graduation, college, and The Future—none of which he is facing with equanimity, or at all. "This is our time," he pleads with his hot girlfriend, Cassidy. "Live in the now!" The importance of living in the moment draws forth poetical raptures from Sutter; but when his girlfriend asks about his future plans, he goes mute. It's clear why. He's failing at school, has no father at home to guide him, and has reached the ominous point where sipping from a stylish pocket flask begins to look like alcoholism. On the other hand, he's good with people, he's generous, and he's honest. When his boss at his part-time job in a clothing store tells him he'll take him full-time as long as he promises not to drink on the job, he demurs: "You know I can't promise you that."

What Sutter needs is a stiff dose of perspective and—as antidote to his rampant outward-directedness—some practice in solitude. He gets both when he meets the sweetly shy Aimee Finecky (Shailene Woodley, of *The Descendants*). Like Sutter, Aimee lives in a single-parent family, but unlike him she has accustomed herself to self-sacrifice (she has a paper route whose proceeds go directly to her mother) while spending her spare time immersed in books and art. We understand, better than she, that she's invisible in Sutter's social circles not because she isn't pretty—she is—but because she hangs back, with a shyness that is not fearful but deliberate; she's busy marshaling inner resources for the life ahead.

In other words, she's the exact opposite of Sutter. Enjoyably *The Spectacular Now* explores the contours, in a Briggs-Myers kind of way, of the introvert/extrovert romance. The contrast draws us in, sparking both curiosity and worry. Will Aimee's sincerity spur the latent goodness we sense in Sutter, or will he gobble up her affection and break her heart? Does Sutter even understand how precious a person has fallen into his life? Ponsoldt has found a canny, slightly off-center way to structure his romantic comedy, grounding us in thrilled recollection of the vehemence of first love, but also in a protective worry. This is a film about teens that is slyly pitched to their parents.

Eventually, Sutter's live-for-the-moment credo receives a fearsome corrective in the form of his father (Kyle Chandler), who bailed on the family years ago and who turns out, when Sutter and Aimee hunt him down, to be a shiftless barfly, his aging good looks and rambling bar patter presenting a scary vision of Sutter's possible future. Bit by bit, Sutter's defenses crumble, leading to a moving scene in which his mother (a deft cameo by Jennifer Jason Leigh) consoles and reassures him. "I'm just like him!" Sutter wails, meaning his father. "You aren't," she insists. "You aren't like him at all. He can't love anyone. But you have the biggest heart of anyone I've ever known."

Like Ponsoldt's two earlier films, *Smashed* and *Off the Black*, *The Spectacular Now* is situated amid broken marriages, absent fathers, and alcoholism. And like them it is a movie in which—its title notwithstanding—nothing spectacular occurs. Ponsoldt proceeds straightforwardly, even earnestly; you quickly see what is in the mix, the lessons that are to be learned. And yet somehow the film avoids triteness and makes you care. Thanks goes in part to beguiling performances by Teller and especially by Woodley, who resembles a young Laura Linney and delivers something of the same bright-eyed vulnerability mixed with deep reserves of strength. You watch this romance and its sweet and faltering exchanges the way you watch your children living their lives—with joy, recollection, hope, and a clenched and nervous anticipation of their being hurt.

It's difficult to pinpoint what bothers me about Woody Allen's movies over the past decade-plus without sounding ad hominem. But the films he continues to churn out, one per year, leave a sour aftertaste of ennui. I find their youthful bonhomie meretricious and evasive; the films themselves feel like refuges from his own ennui. Allen uses them to "keep himself busy," as he said in an interview. Is it surprising that they often seem like busy work? I find myself beginning to dread his movies' invariable soundtrack—that jaunty background refrain of Parisian chansons and up-tempo blues. Critics, praising one movie then damning the next three, portray the seventy-seven-year-old director as declining but still dangerous, an aging slugger who's batting .200 but can still knock it out of the park—as he did in 2005 with *Match Point*.

And now there's *Blue Jasmine*, "a vital and vibrant knockout of a movie," pro-

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James Hannan, Business Manager

claims one critic; "a film that builds to a mighty emotional pitch," writes another. The movie is an homage to *A Streetcar Named Desire*—or adaptation, or loose reworking, or parody, or something—with the lead role played by Cate Blanchett, whose triumphant portrayal of Blanche DuBois anchored the 2009 Broadway revival of the Tennessee Williams classic. Allen reconfigures Blanche as Jasmine French, a Manhattan socialite married to a hedge-fund manager, Hal (Alec Baldwin), who masterminds a Bernie Madoff–like Ponzi scheme and then, when it implodes, kills himself. Adrift and penniless, Jasmine goes to stay with her plain-Jane younger sister, Ginger (Sally Hawkins), whose drab working-class life in San Francisco she has always snootily maligned. The film skillfully interweaves flashbacks of Jasmine's golden years in New York, where she proceeds in willful blindness to her husband's reckless philandering and his financial skullduggery, with scenes of her disdainful and fumbling attempts to assemble some kind of life in the real world. The clash of her arrogant superiority with the humiliating comeuppances of her reduced status rings those American notes of class, money, power, and sexuality that made *Streetcar*—both the play and the Elia Kazan film—so powerfully resonant.

What you get when you run this material through Woody Allen's comic mill is a fascinating mish-mash of a film. The menace of Marlon Brando's Stanley Kowalski is replaced by the clownishness of Bobby Cannavale's Chili, who as Ginger's tattooed and leering boyfriend looks scary enough (especially to viewers who recall his glowering turn as the beast Gyp Rosetti in the HBO series *Boardwalk Empire*)—but who, when confronted with Ginger's dalliance with another man, breaks down crying in a supermarket, pathetically thanking the manager for handing him a Kleenex. Where Brando's character moved relentlessly toward misogynistic violence, Chili is all conciliation. "Let's let sleeping dogs lie," he advises Ginger, in the face of Jasmine's withering contempt.

Many aspects of the film are unsatisfying, not least the *nostalgie de la boue* expressed in the portrayal of Ginger and Chili, those friendly dumb mutts, forever quarreling and then lustily reconciling. A clumsy subplot with Jasmine struggling as a receptionist in the office of a bumbling and love-besotted dentist (Michael Stuhlbarg) barely rises above the old TV show *Love American Style.* And Peter Sarsgaard as a wealthy State Department employee who materializes as Jasmine's suitor and rescuer, only to fall afoul of her deceptions, emanates nothing of the contemptuous rage churned up by Karl Malden in his Oscar-winning role in *Streetcar.*

But *Blue Jasmine* is redeemed again and again by Blanchett's mesmerizing performance. Javier Aguirresarobe's camera lingers on closeups of the actress's face, now defiantly serene, now furtively calculating, now harrowed and absent. Narcissistic anxiety and self-preoccupation have been a constant motif of Allen's work, both as a standup comic and in his movies. *Blue Jasmine* takes that as its starting point—and then, faithfully following the *Streetcar* roadmap, pushes it toward something Allen has rarely if ever touched, namely, psychosis. Increasingly tormented and muttering to herself, Blanchett's Jasmine is a frighteningly convincing portrayal of mental anguish. In one bravura scene she takes Ginger's two little boys out to a diner, where she brazenly drinks and pops pills and, in answer to their innocent questions about her former life, embarks on a long, twisty confessional that leaves them with their mouths hanging open.

Admirers of *Streetcar* will miss the side of Blanche that was brave and strong. Allen skips over this while ramping up the narcissistic, greedy, and delusional aspect of Jasmine's character. One thing you can say about Woody—he nails the monstrous nihilism of a certain kind of wealthy New Yorker. It is both a personality pathology and a type bordering on caricature; and with someone else in the lead role one can imagine *Blue Jasmine* played more as farce than tragedy. It might actually make more sense that way—at any rate, it would fit the soundtrack! But while you'd forget that movie overnight, like most late-Woody efforts, Blanchett's operatic and annihilating performance makes *Blue Jasmine* a keeper. ■

Thomas Baker

Bring Out Your Dead

The Good Funeral

Death, Grief, and the Community of Care

Thomas G. Long and Thomas Lynch
Westminster John Knox Press, $25, 272 pp.

According to the country's largest publisher of online obituaries, "passed away" remains our favorite euphemism for death by a wide margin. But I wonder if they are keeping up. Lately, more and more people I meet seem to abbreviate it simply to "passed"—"She passed last night." Is "away" now too explicitly directional for polite company?

When it comes to both death and God, it has always been less risky to use words sprinkled with a pinch of sugar. But it is not only our talk about the dead that has been bowdlerized, but, increasingly, the rituals at which we remember them. *The Good Funeral* is an extended conversation on what has been lost in the process, and especially on what its authors feel is our most egregious death-avoidance tactic: the gradual disappearance of the dead themselves from the rituals at which their presence is indispensable.

Both authors should be familiar to *Commonweal* readers. Long is a prominent Presbyterian professor of homiletics at Emory who has written on funerals before (*Accompany Them with Singing*), and Lynch, a past contributor to these pages, both runs a small chain of funeral homes in Michigan and is a highly regarded poet. (He notes that he has not one but two occupations that can clear a space around him at any party.) Together, the preacher and the funeral director have apparently become something of a popular roadshow at funeral-industry gatherings, and in this collaboration they contribute alternating chapters but aim relentlessly at one target: the de-funeralized remembrance service at which, it often seems, there is "a guest list open to everyone except the actual corpse." Here Lynch describes what many Americans now experience, either in a church or outside of one, as the typical "funeral":

Display at the Museum of Funeral Customs, Springfield, Illinois

> The living gather at their convenience to "celebrate the life" in a kind of obsequy-lite at which therapy is dispensed, closure proclaimed, biography enshrined, and spirits are, it is supposed, uplifted...the corpse has been dispensed with in private, dispatched without witness or rubric.

The authors' primary complaint is not the posthumous narcissism of many funeral tributes, although all of you, I am sure, have endured at least one seemingly endless lineup of eulogists, a testimonial dinner without the necessary open bar. Instead, they want us to remember that the physical presence of the dead "is an essential, definitive element of a funeral," and that their absence drains modern rituals of the larger questions that funerals are meant to ask. Simply being in the presence of the dead, claim the authors, brings us to a deeper level of feeling, challenges us to wonder what we believe about death, promotes serious and unexpected conversations, brings tears that it might be good for us to shed, and poses questions that only life's turning points can confront us with.

All that, of course, is something that many people are not sure they want. Even some Christian clergy, apparently out of a sense of compassion, believe that having a corpse around can be an unnecessary trauma for the bereaved. Those who plan their own funerals in advance now frequently ask to have their body gotten out of the way with as little fuss as possible, perhaps out of a sense that they will be doing their family and friends a financial and emotional favor (see Paul J. Schaefer's "Looking Away," August 16).

How did we get to this point? Lynch points to the funeral industry's most savage and effective critic, Jessica Mitford, whose *The American Way of Dying*, now fifty years old, can apparently still rankle a funeral director as if it had been published yesterday. Mitford's tales of expensive caskets and pointless vaults, packaged up with laughably flowery marketing language, created a stereotype of the smarmy, predatory undertaker that hasn't disappeared. Yet the greater damage was done not by Mitford's claim that funeral directors cheat people but by her implication that what we do at funerals is mostly a waste of time. Mitford, writes Lynch, refused to mourn her own losses and thought other people shouldn't make such a big deal about it either; she helped build a cultural move-

ment toward dispensing with the dead as quickly and cleanly as possible.

More powerful than Mitford's muckraking in the long run, however, is our culture's obvious loss of a common sense of what funerals are intended to tell us. Even with Americans' widespread reported faith in God, death finds these faithful tongue-tied (or theologically wrong) about what has happened to the dead, and starved for images of life after death that are either believable or appealing. Since we lack a larger, agreed-upon understanding of what death means, what we are left with is not that story but the dead person's story, often with an upbeat gloss on his or her qualities and quirks. And if that's mainly what we have gathered to hear, the corpse's presence is indeed a needless downer.

We might hope that Catholic funerals would be less prone to sanitization and ritual timidity, and they are—but not entirely. Even in Catholic cemeteries, these days you might pay extra for the privilege of saying the prayers of interment at graveside; the cemetery's preference is often now for mourners to leave the deceased at a drop-off chapel and be on their way, so that cemetery workers can do their final tasks unseen whenever they get around to it. Yet this "burial" without dirt, or a hole in the ground, or the graves and names of other family members nearby, hardly seems worth the drive. Surely we can all traipse through a little mud as a sign of our solidarity with the dead, and as a memento mori for the living that isn't always unhealthy.

The authors emphasize that their insistence on the physical presence of the dead is not meant to denigrate cremation as an alternative to burial. But they rightly point out that, too often, cremation is chosen simply to get the deceased out of the picture as soon as possible. Lynch also asks unexpected and challenging questions about why members of the family and their clergy don't insist on being present for the cremation itself. It is, after all, no less of a ritual moment than the traditional burial, and he points out that, among cultures that practice cremation, ours may be the only one in which it frequently takes place at an unknown, unvisited processing facility.

Perhaps inevitably in a book structured in alternating chapters, and with such an intense focus on a single cause, *The Good Funeral* suffers from some tiresome repetition. More disappointing, those who minister in parishes will wish that many other ingredients of a "good funeral"—music, preaching, family eulogies, wake services—got at least some attention here from these experienced, wryly humorous practitioners. But despite these flaws, this passionate, highly readable primer is an effective reminder of what funerals, at their best, do for the living: through them, "we enact and interrogate yet again what we believe about life and death...and who we are called now to be." ■

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Gary Dorrien

Not Dead Yet

Reinventing Liberal Christianity

Theo Hobson
Eerdmans, $30, 327 pp.

Theo Hobson believes that liberal theology disintegrated decades ago and needs to be reinvented. The last liberal theologians worth mentioning, in his telling, were Reinhold Niebuhr and Paul Tillich, both of whom did their major work over half a century ago. Every noteworthy theologian since their time has "dismissively" rejected the liberal tradition—and even Niebuhr and Tillich attacked liberal theology for its idealism, rationalism, and sentimentality. Hobson, a Cambridge-trained theologian who has written extensively about reform in the Anglican Church, allows that there are still a few liberal theologians out there, but they are either "dispersed among single-issue theologies" or reduced to "low profile" invisibility. In the academy and the church, he says, "identity politics has conquered all." This judgment covers both Britain, where Hobson grew up and was educated, and the United States, where he now lives.

According to Hobson, three theologians have broken the stranglehold of identity politics to win recognition and influence the field of theology: the U.S. American theological ethicist Stanley Hauerwas, who is loosely connected to Yale School "postliberal" theology, and British theologians John Milbank and Rowan Williams, who are leaders of the Radical Orthodoxy movement. (Williams was also archbishop of Canterbury.) These theologians share one thing with proponents of liberation theology: all get their bearings by blasting the liberal tradition. Nobody counters this bashing in a compelling way, Hobson believes, because a bad version of liberal theology overtook the good version long ago, and ruined the entire enterprise.

Hobson explains that there are two traditions of liberal Christianity. Bad liberal Christianity is rationalistic, humanistic, and prejudiced against the ritual practices of the church. Intertwined from its conception with liberal humanism, this tradition began with Thomas Hobbes and John Locke, who taught that toleration is natural to the rational state, which exists to protect the natural rights of citizens. Once in place, this bad tradition swiftly produced varieties of deism and Christian rationalism holding a merely pragmatic conception of liberty and developed radical forms of biblical criticism.

The good tradition of liberal theology, according to Hobson, goes back to John Milton and other radical Puritans of the English revolution, who contended that the state has a sacred duty to protect liberty. Good liberal theology slightly predates the Enlightenment anthropology and rationalism of Hobbes and Locke, and holds fast to the primacy of faith and religious liberty. It affirms the secularization of politics but does not affirm Enlightenment rationalism or secular liberal culture. Hobson stresses that, contrary to the story told by contemporary secularists and conservative Christians alike, liberalism is not a secular invention. Seventeenth-century radical Puritan idealists invented the liberal state, which sought to disenfranchise religion and to establish a new positive ideology resting on a religious (liberal Protestant) basis.

In this reading, liberal theology experienced a moment of vitality before it became infected by a rationalistic liberalism that defended Christianity in a bad way. Embarrassed by Christian myth and ritual, the rationalistic children of Locke and Kant devised liberal theologies that correlated Christian faith with Enlightenment reason

and morality; later they learned about socio-historical consciousness and tried to Christianize that too. Hobson acknowledges that this approach kept theology from getting thrown out of German universities, and that it subsequently played a similar role in the elite universities of England and the United States. But modern criticism scorched everything it touched, leaving liberal theology with little dogmatic content and setting it up for a mighty fall. World War I and Karl Barth's otherworldly polemics provided the barely needed push. Liberal theology has been falling, falling, falling ever since, to the point that liberal theologians today try to get by without being noticed.

Hobson's argument has four parts. Part one details the radical Puritan founding of good liberal theology. Parts two and three set forth the development of bad liberal theology and the crash that followed the Barthian revolt. Part four explores the cultic basis of good liberal theology today, a tradition not embarrassed by myth and ritual, which describes a few Anglican congregations that Hobson likes.

The normative parts of this argument—parts one and four—conflict with each other, for the Puritans emphatically opposed everything smacking of ritual, myth, and sacramentalism. For Milton and others in his school, ritual was a tool of reactionary clerical power, whether Roman Catholic, High Church Anglican, or even Calvinist. Hobson reasons that the contradiction between his normative claims helps to explain what happened to liberal theology. Liberal Protestantism was a breakthrough for freedom, but its word-fixated, anti-sacramental bias made it vulnerable from the beginning to secularization and deracination. The rationalistic party prevailed, identifying liberal theology with anticreedal intellectualism. Liberal theologians from Locke to Schleiermacher to Tillich turned gospel wine into humanistic water, yielding sterile forms of religious expression that mimicked secular culture—unsurprisingly, since their proponents wanted to be respected by secular culture, especially the academy.

There is only one way to revive liberal Christianity, Hobson says, and that is to reinvent it. Liberal Christians must rip apart their two intertwined traditions, get rid of the humanistic/rationalistic one, embrace their cultic sacramental basis, and reclaim their role as Christian defenders of the liberal state. Hobson acknowledges that liberal theology, even in its bad version, was right to stand up for intellectual freedom and religious liberty. Liberal Protestants fought long, hard, and alone in this cause, to their immense credit. Today, theologians need to fuse liberty-loving Christian liberalism with the cultic. This prescription, Hobson allows, strikes most liberal theologians as an impossible contradiction, but that is precisely the problem with progressive Christianity. Liberal Protestantism, having made the idea of a cultic liberal Christianity seem like an absurdity, drove spiritual consumers to find nourishment elsewhere. Dismembered aspects of Christian worship—theater, carnivals, icons, meditation, performance art—thrive under postmodern conditions, while churches continue to offer dull and sterile fare for dwindling audiences.

Hobson is a bold, engaging, and assertive writer, and much of what he says is dead-on. He has a lucidly aggressive style, which he honed by writing religious journalism, and he renders brassy judgments with a declarative flair, supported by an ample scholarly knowledge base. In graduate school he specialized in Luther, Kierkegaard, and Barth, writing a dissertation on the role of authoritative rhetoric in Protestantism. He then authored a polemic, *Against Establishment* (2003), declaring himself a "post-Anglican" theologian and announcing that the Church of England was doomed. His next book, *Anarchy, Church, and Utopia* (2005), debunked the ecclesiology of Rowan Williams, describing it as standard Anglo-Catholicism sandwiched by an unwieldy Radical Orthodox compound of anarchy and utopia. In subsequent articles Hobson has argued that theatricality is an essential component of religion, that carnival-style celebra-

tion must replace church worship, and that Protestantism suffers from a serious drama deficit.

Reinventing Liberal Christianity imagines a better liberal Christianity than the one skewered by Kierkegaard, Barth, Hauerwas, and Milbank. Hobson's training during the high-water mark of Radical Orthodoxy, however, shows through in every chapter. He takes Milbank's antiliberal rendering of modern theology very seriously, recycling its trademark tics and biases, and he has nothing to say, apart from a few sweeping dismissive judgments, about the liberal theologians over the past half-century who have continued to struggle with the implications of biblical criticism, the social and physical sciences, religious pluralism, and much more. Hobson would not be able to dismiss recent liberal theologians if he studied the works of Edward Farley, Robert Neville, David Ray Griffin, Langdon Gilkey, David Tracy, Sallie McFague, Gordon Kaufman, Peter Hodgson, Catherine Keller, Roger Haight, Elizabeth Johnson, and James Gustafson, religious thinkers who compare favorably to theologians of any generation for creativity, depth, and insight. Neither would he remain comfortable ignoring recent Catholic theology if he absorbed the work of Tracy, Haight, Johnson, Rosemary Radford Ruether, Paul Knitter, David Hollenbach, and Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza. On Hobson's telling, strong and creative liberal theology has not existed for fifty years. Having written three large volumes on liberal theology in the United States, and having struggled to hold volume three under seven hundred pages, I disagree.

Moreover, if Hobson actually reads liberal theologians for his next book and tries to apply his "good versus bad liberalism" argument to them, he will run into difficulty, as there are more than two kinds of liberal theology. His scheme has some affinities with the evangelical-liberalism-versus-modernist-liberalism distinction that ruled this field for decades, with similar limitations. But at least that distinction had a real history, as major theologians did actually identify with these catego-

ries (or variations of them). Evangelical liberals claimed an essential continuity with historic Christianity, and modernist liberals emphasized the discontinuities between the premodern and modern contexts. Two questions were fundamentally defining: Is it possible for a modern theology to be based on material religious norms from the past? And is God transcendent to, or located wholly within, the historical realm?

Hobson's dichotomy does much less work in handling the historical data, because his fusion of cultic and Miltonian liberalism has no history, and his rationalist pole describes only a small part of the field. For example, throughout the first half of the twentieth century, two works of liberal dogmatics dominated introductory theology classes at leading Protestant divinity schools and seminaries in the United States: William Newton Clarke's *An Outline of Christian Theology* (1898) and William Adams Brown's *Christian Theology in Outline* (1906). These textbooks shaped and represented the broad mainstream of American liberal theology for decades, and neither of Hobson's categories applies to them. Rationalism was not a defining factor, as Clarke and Brown were not rationalists. Both were ecumenical and robustly evangelical theologians, gospel-centered Pietists who taught that historical criticism recovered the Jesus of history. On the other hand, mythic sacramentalism was not in play for Clarke and Browne either, as both were emphatically nontheatrical, noncultic, low-church types, like most liberal Protestants. Moreover, Milton versus Locke was not a subject of debate, as the legitimacy of the liberal state was taken for granted in the Social Gospel of Clarke and Brown. The Social Gospel was about transforming social structures in the direction of social justice and infusing the moral values of Christianity into society and culture, not re-litigating the separation of church and state.

The latter issue marks a key difference between the American and British contexts. Some of Hobson's argument does not cross the ocean very well, and a half-century of liberal Catholic theology should have dissuaded him from using "liberal Christian" and "liberal Protestant" as interchangeable terms. But Hobson is addressing something familiar, with keen insight: the rise of postmodern theologies and the fundamentalist right, the ubiquity of spiritual-but-not-religious spirituality in the middle class, the upsurge of militant atheism, and the crumbling of nonfundamentalist churches. This chaos, Hobson believes, requires an assertive response. Liberal Christians need to ditch their "false humility" and

be the meta-discourse that Milbank calls Christians to be. In this telling, Milbank is right to be feisty and aggressive in speaking to postmodern disarray; he is wrong only in condemning liberalism in the process. Hobson urges liberal Christians to stand up for both liberalism and Christianity, resisting "progressivism" (which is regressive) and insisting that the best context for speaking and living the gospel is the liberal state.

I would put a similar point differently. In my field of social ethics, all three of the dominant perspectives associated with progressive Christianity—the Social Gospel, Niebuhrian realism, and liberation theology—have tended to reduce Christian ethics to political or ideological causes. As a consequence, progressive Christianity has not had enough to say or do in its own language, in its own way, and for its own reasons. The figures who made liberal Protestantism compelling to millions—Henry Ward Beecher, Walter Rauschenbusch, Harry Emerson Fosdick, Martin Luther King Jr.—were gospel-centered modernists who spoke with conviction about God's holy and gracious presence, the way of Christ, and the transformative social and ethical mission of Christianity. The civil-rights movement thrived on its gospel-centered belief in the sacredness of personality and the divine good, and the Social Gospel movement would have been nothing without it.

Though I am an Episcopal priest, I do not believe that sufficiently imaginative worship will save the churches from expiring. But I share Hobson's regret that the churches have missed every opportunity thus far—notably nineteenth-century Romanticism, twentieth-century existentialism, and twenty-first-century postmodern disarray—to make themselves less boring. Hobson provides a sparkling antidote to boring theology. ■

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Scott D. Moringiello

Serious Fun

Waiting for the Barbarians

Essays from the Classics to Pop Culture

Daniel Mendelsohn

New York Review Books, $24.95, 423 pp.

Daniel Mendelsohn

In his play *The Frogs*, Aristophanes imagines Aeschylus and Euripides meeting in Hades and arguing about which of them is the greater poet. Aeschylus claims to present noble ideals to which his audience can aspire; Euripides, to present a democratic view of his audience as they really are. The two settle their dispute by weighing their collected works. Aeschylus wins because his plays are physically heavier, not because they are more beautiful. His reward is to return to the land of the living.

Here Aristophanes treats literary comparisons—and perhaps all criticism—as little more than a joke. But his contemporary Aristotle thought criticism very serious indeed. In his *Poetics*, he carefully defines literary genres and methods and compares poets and their works on the basis of their themes and technical skill. Aristotle is more exacting, Aristophanes more fun. Good criticism needs to be both.

Daniel Mendelsohn, who is both a classical scholar and a critic, is no stranger to either Aristophanes or Aristotle. And there is a hint of both in a piece called "A Critic's Manifesto," which he wrote for the *New Yorker*'s website. "All criticism," he writes, "is based on the equation: KNOWLEDGE + TASTE = MEANINGFUL JUDGMENT." For a critic to be knowledgeable, he must be able to place the work he's discussing in its proper context, and this context might include the other works the author has written (or composed or directed), the works that have influenced the author, and the work's historical circumstances. So far, so Aristotle. Yet knowledge itself is not enough. The critic must also have "taste," which Mendelsohn defines as the critic's ability to give his "judgment authority in the eyes of other people, people who are not experts." Aristophanes's comparison of Aeschylus and Euripides may be ridiculous, but his presentation draws people in. The critic, then, is the person who, "when his knowledge [is] operated on by his taste in the presence of some new example of the genre he's interested in…hungers to make sense of that new thing, to analyze it, interpret it, make it mean something."

Mendelsohn's definition both expands and contracts the numbers of people who are critics. Those who rave about a favorite book are not critics unless they bring a wider knowledge to bear on their reactions. A Jane Austen scholar whose interest in the novels seems to begin and end with their relationship to the Napoleonic wars is not a critic, because his or her taste is either not engaged at all or engaged in a way that will interest only fellow scholars. When we think about criticism in this way, we see how rare and valuable it is.

A good critic is distinguished partly by the range of his curiosity. Mendelsohn told *Interview* magazine, "In graduate school, to the horror of my fellow graduate students, I used to get *Interview*, *W*, *House & Garden*, *Architectural Digest*. My thought was, beauty is beauty. If you're interested in a beautiful Sophoclean drama, shouldn't the same impulse make you want to appreciate a beautiful slipper chair? I was interested in all kinds of things, whether it be *Avatar*, *Mad Men*, *Troy*, *300*, *Battlestar Galactica*, or the poems of Horace and Sappho." The academy rewards careful work on specific topics. One's books and articles must build on previous scholars' arguments. The standards of scholarship, especially classical scholarship, do not often allow for the sort of range that Mendelsohn's essays evince. But if readers are grateful that Mendelsohn decided to turn his attention to criticism, they should also acknowledge that his criticism benefits from the scholarly training he brings to it.

In *Waiting for the Barbarians: Essays from Classics to Pop Culture*, Mendelsohn has collected essays originally published for the *New York Review of Books*, the *New Yorker*, and the *New York Times*. His range is impressive: there are reviews of movies, plays, and television shows; of new translations of Greek and Roman classics; of classic novels and new memoirs. Mendelsohn has made me rethink works I had previously written off (for example, James Cameron's *Avatar*) and made me reconsider works I had previously enjoyed (for example, Anne Carson's introduction to, and translation of, Sappho's poems).

Mendelsohn's essay on Herodotus, originally published in the *New Yorker*, is a good example of how his knowledge and taste combine to form something the general reader will find both instructive and interesting. The occasion of the essay was the publications of Andrea L. Purvis's *The Landmark Herodotus*, a new translation of Herodotus's *Histories* that includes footnotes, maps, charts, and illustrations. But Mendelsohn does far more than review the volume at hand. Yes, he compares Purvis's translation unfavorably to previous ones. And yes, he offers important historical background to Herodotus's world and vision. Perhaps not every classicist could do this, though many could. But Mendelsohn also argues for Herodotus's contemporary relevance. He sees Herodotus's scope in light of

MATT MENDELSOHN

Tolstoy's *War and Peace*; he understands Herodotus's style in light of David Foster Wallace. Finally, he points out that if we read Herodotus carefully—as carefully as he deserves to be read—we won't be surprised to see a superpower losing its way when it becomes embroiled in a drawn-out war in a distant land.

Mendelsohn's essays remind us that all good criticism is personal. Unlike the literary critic James Wood, whose critical north star is the great nineteenth-century realist novel, Mendelsohn lacks a single fixed point of reference: he is a critic without a neat criterion. Instead, each essay works out its own set of criteria. This is in part because, as Mendelsohn notes in his brief introduction, many of the essays deal with what he calls "the reality problem" in contemporary art, which is "how the extraordinary blurring between reality and artifice that has been made possible by new technologies makes itself felt not only in our entertainments…but in the way we think about, and conduct, our lives." And Mendelsohn stays true to this assessment: his reviews—whether of Julie Taymor's *Spider-Man*, Stephen Mitchell's *Iliad*, or Alan Hollinghurst's *The Stranger's Child*—explore how the director or translator or novelist creates a world, and how he, Mendelsohn, has tried to inhabit that world, if only briefly.

One such world is the offices of *Mad Men*'s advertising agency Sterling Cooper Draper Pryce. Mendelsohn throws some cold water on the feverish hype that has surrounded the show. He argues that even though *Mad Men* pretends to be exploring important social issues, the result is more often melodrama than drama. The people who watch the show every week—and to whom a new generation of marketing executives peddle everything from suits to beer to cars—would have been children during the 1960s. Do they take delight in viewing the mistakes their parents or grandparents made? Do they presume to forgive their transgressions? Mendelsohn leaves us to answer that for ourselves.

Mendelsohn has written about how as a teenager growing up on Long Island, he eagerly awaited the delivery of the *New Yorker* to his house. When the magazine came, he would first turn to the back of the book to see what the magazine's critics had to say. Mendelsohn's true gift as a critic is that he puts us, whatever our age, in his position as a teenager. We are old enough to want to develop our tastes, and to see such development as important, but we have not reached the age where we are self-conscious about what we think is beautiful or interesting. We look for vocabularies to shape our inchoate thoughts into organized ideas. At its best, of course, that's what criticism provides. And Mendelsohn's essays are criticism at its best. Reading them took me back to the excitement I felt as a teenager (also on Long Island), reading magazines and thinking that I, too, could one day take part in these conversations that began long before me. I knew they were serious, but they also looked like fun—and the seriousness was part of the fun: the rigor of Aristotle combined with the excitement of Aristophanes. ■

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Past Perfect

Peter Quinn

"The past isn't dead," William Faulkner famously remarked. "It isn't even past." Now, thanks to a breakthrough experiment with lab mice conducted by scientists at the Riken-MIT Center for Neural Circuit Genetics, not only is the past not past, it's whatever we care to make it.

As recently announced in the journal *Science* and widely reported by the media, researchers at the center have managed to rejigger neurons in the mice's hippocampus, the part of the brain in which the mechanism of memory is located. As a result, the mice were made to remember being given an electric shock in a place different from where it was actually inflicted.

When it comes to mammals, whether mice or men, the basic function of memory is quite similar. In the words of one neuroscientist, at certain levels of mental activity, "the difference between a human and a mouse is quite small." (Anyone who followed the conduct of certain candidates in New York City's contests for mayor and comptroller will immediately apprehend the validity of this assertion.)

False memory, of course, is a familiar phenomenon. A common occurrence in criminal cases, it's most often associated with aging. At one time or another, couples married for any length of time will recall in dramatically different ways experiences they've shared. Sometimes they even recall events that never happened at all.

He clearly remembers, for instance, the winter before they were married when he braved a blizzard and walked halfway across the Bronx to be with her on Valentine's Day. She, on the other hand, has no memory of that ever happening but will never forget the night he stood her up because he and his pals had too much to drink at opening day at Yankee Stadium, an event he knows beyond the shadow of a doubt never happened.

The scientific manipulation of memory is a horse of a different color. (The one time they went horseback riding in Colorado, she remembers the horses were piebald. They weren't. They were chestnut. And it was New Mexico, not Colorado. He'll swear to it.) In pinpointing the position of memory in the brain, and in deliberately manipulating a mouse's memory so that it recalls being shocked in a spot where it wasn't, science has opened the door to the eventual recreation of our individual and collective pasts.

If it's true that those who forget the lessons of the past are doomed to repeat them, then the lessons we can learn will provide examples to emulate and not regret or run away from. Useless handwringing over the cruelties and injustices that characterize so much of the human saga will be replaced by the desire to replicate the wisdom, decency, and compassion that have marked our journey through time.

The implications are nowhere greater than in our own country. We Americans have never had much use for the past. We've always preferred to look forward rather than back. In good part, that's because of the bad history that so many of our ancestors came here in hopes of leaving behind—famine, poverty, political tyranny, ethnic and religious persecution.

Today, with memory management in our grasp, we can see to it that the past lives up to our great expectations of the future and that there's a great big beautiful yesterday shining behind each and every day. To paraphrase John Lennon, imagine behind us skies that were only blue. Imagine we learned to live in peace with Native Americans. Imagine slavery- and civil war–afflicted Canada, not the United States. Imagine presidential elections won by Hubert Humphrey and Al Gore. Imagine disco, the repeal of Glass-Steagall, and Operation Iraqi Freedom never happened. (People of various political persuasions are free to choose altered memories of their own.)

Imagine Baby Boomers as they approach the sunset of their lives sharing the same happy memories of honeymoons, anniversaries (he never forgot a single one, and she agrees), and the smooth, easy, frictionless years of childrearing. At long last, a past worthy of our future is within our grasp. Onward and backward we go! ■

Peter Quinn's *most recent novel is* Dry Bones *(Overlook).*

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