



community through conversation

SPECTRUM



To Create | *Adventist Hospitals Work to Influence National Healthcare Policy* | **Illustrating Sacred Stories: An Argument for Artistic Interpretation** | *When Philosophy Killed God* | **Creating Music** | *Too Adventist to be Adventist? The Paradox of Adventist Atheism* | **Why I Try to Believe**

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SPECTRUM

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wanted to do more than
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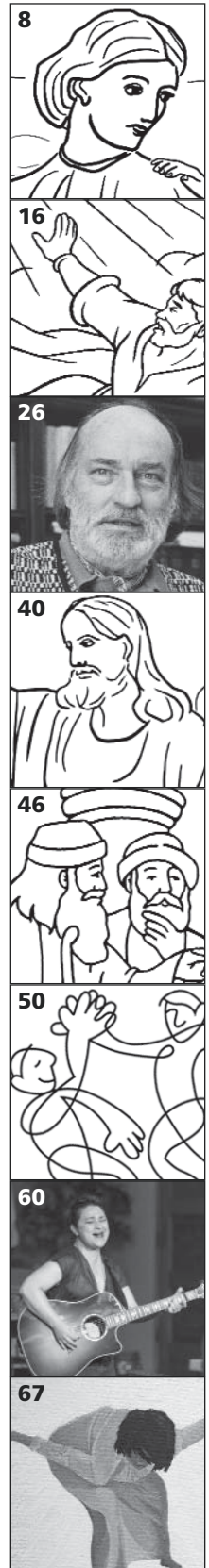
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In Search of the Beautiful | BY BONNIE DWYER

*It's the art of sitting down to create with intention
—to practice creativity and view the world creatively—
that makes all the difference.*

—Aaron Beaumont

What does it mean to practice creativity? You can read Aaron Beaumont's take on the process of creating music in this issue. You can also practice your creativity by coloring the cover and illustrations herein. Coloring books are the latest way for adults to relieve stress, it seems. Recently I have been inspired to look creatively at Adventist history and community, and I invite you to join me in that intentional act of creativity, too.

My inspiration came in Atlanta at the annual meetings of religion and Biblical scholars where everyone from Adventists and atheists to Wiccans and Zoroastrians gathered to exchange papers, network, and buy books. Theological talk filled the air, the restaurants, the hotels, the city. Famous authors were honored. Two huge exhibit halls were filled with the wares of book publishers hoping to interest university professors in requiring their texts for classes.

As an observer rather than scholar, I find these sessions to be a wonderful time to listen to major voices. This year it was the comments by Marilynne Robinson that helped me look at Adventist history and community in a new way.

Having just picked up Robinson's latest book of essays *The Givens of Things* and spent the plane ride to Atlanta

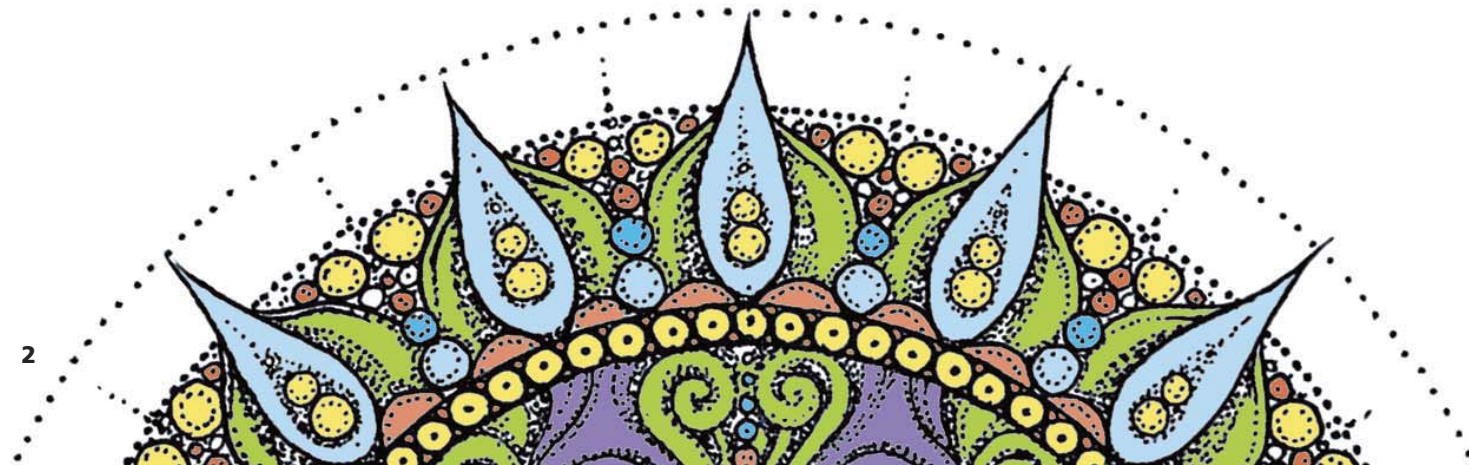
reading them, I was happy to see the American Academy of Religion present her with its "Religion and the Arts Award." At a special session, one of the panel of questioners put this one to her: "How do we turn around the story of religion in our culture?"

"That's a hard question," she responded, noting that one of the things that we have done is to engage in anti-reading, cynicism. Known as an admirer of John Calvin, she said that when she began reading his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, she looked for the beautiful passages and found a celebration of humankind.

In our culture, media seek out the negative and give it as much attention as possible. Robinson thinks that the thing that should sustain religious people is the beautiful, and that we should forgive that which is less beautiful. "Give people a positive access to what is theirs," she said. "Undercutting impoverishes the narrative."

Looking for the beautiful in a fractured community has its challenges. It does take practice. But the process creates an openness for joy and hope that is pure serendipity. We hope that you will find some of that Adventist beauty in this issue, and that you will create some, too. Send us copies of what you color, stories of good news within the community to share. Let's intentionally practice creativity together, looking for the beautiful in the people we meet, the community we share. ■

Bonnie Dwyer is editor of *Spectrum* magazine.





Why Does Jesus Christ Give Offense? | BY CHARLES SCRIVEN

As the 2015 General Conference session was about to end, a delegate moved that during the next five years, church leaders oversee official discussion of the theory of biblical interpretation (“hermeneutics”). The motion passed. One question now is whether this initiative will prop up the scriptural reading strategy that undergirds the church’s policy, reinforced at the same GC session, of female subordination to men.

That was in the background when religion teachers belonging to the Adventist Society for Religious Studies (ASRS) turned their attention, at the organization’s annual meeting in November, to the question of hermeneutics. ASRS officers, hoping members would express themselves early, proposed adoption of a statement entitled “The Centrality of Christ for the Interpretation of Scripture.” It was meant as a *biblical* approach to resolving questions (concerning women, or violence, or whatever) that arise when biblical passages seem to conflict. Their draft statement noted how “selective” mining of inspired texts may lead to dangerous conclusions (as it did when Bible-quoting pastors defended slavery in the American South), and argued that “internal evidence” from the Bible makes “the risen Christ the ultimate criterion for interpretation.”

When the statement met with objections, a small taskforce was asked to revise it. The next morning the taskforce came back with a substitute statement that had...edited Jesus out. The thesis in the officers’ draft title, “The Centrality of Christ for the Interpretation of Scripture,” had been eliminated. As the Bible’s decisive voice, as a methodological principle for interpreting scripture, the man God had made “both Lord and Messiah” was...gone.

The taskforce’s substitute statement is printed along with these remarks. Reading it, you may scratch your head as you recall how adamant the New Testament is about the centrality of Christ. He is the “image” of the divine, in whom God’s “fullness” was “pleased to dwell.” He is, in a *singular* and *ultimate*

sense, God’s human face, the Word made “flesh,” the “exact imprint of God’s very being.” What is more, he is our goal; we are to reach for “the measure of the full stature of Christ,” to grow up, with others, “into him who is the head, into Christ.”¹

All this is said of no one else: not Moses, not Malachi, not anyone. Taking it seriously would simplify our journey toward hermeneutical unity, and yet the taskforce set it aside. We may be grateful, of course, that ASRS members referred the substitute statement back to the officers (where it now remains), but you still wonder how a Christ-less draft could have come to expression at all. Does this reflect some current of present Adventist thinking?

Notice that the substitute statement makes no straightforward reference to a key problem in biblical interpretation, which is, as Shakespeare put it, that “the devil can cite Scripture for his purpose.” You just *can* find proof texts that undergird violence and injustice; the Bible teaches, for instance, that you may “acquire” slaves from neighboring nations and then pass them on to your children as their “property.”² Did the taskforce want to sweep biblical reality out of view?

Notice, too, that the substitute’s first use of “plain reading” comes inside of quotation marks. This acknowledges that the phrase is borrowed, and recalls how some insiders use it to urge that Genesis 1 and 2 *not* be understood as involving metaphor. Did the taskforce want ASRS to pander to these insiders?

Whatever the taskforce thought, “plain reading” does not, in fact, resolve all problems. Applied to Leviticus 25 it would underwrite slavery; applied to Deuteronomy 21 it would (to take one further example) underwrite stoning of rebellious sons. Still, I hasten to add that the idea of scripture’s plain sense does have a place. If only trained scholars could get God’s point in the Bible, after all, then only scholars could be faithful, and how would we account, say, for Mother Teresa? Nevertheless, when real puzzles come to light we do need some form of supplementary discernment.

The draft statement of the ASRS officers said the decisive source of supplementary discernment is Christ. Faced with puzzles from an inspired and inspiring book,³ you weigh your options against standards suggested by the *whole* story, especially its culmination in Christ's story, Christ's teaching, Christ's resurrection. Yet as the incident in Atlanta shows, even among (some) Adventist scholars, this appears to give offense; the taskforce seemed, certainly, to pay it no attention.

One response to the incident, and a good one, could be that when you overlook diversity and development in the Bible, or feel ill-at-ease confessing Jesus as God's ultimate voice, you ignore and betray *the plain sense of Scripture*. Could some sources of discomfort with Christ go deeper than hermeneutical disagreement? Christian thinkers have long understood, after all, that Christ just does *give offense*. In 1930s Berlin, Bonhoeffer lectured on Christ as the "center", and it was offensive. Eighty years before, in Copenhagen, Kierkegaard extolled the "god-man," and it was offensive. And a long time before that, the New Testament pioneered the point, and it was offensive. Perhaps the Christ who challenges humanity—not only by offering forgiveness and generosity but also by *requiring* them—is still offensive. Still offensive to *us*.

So, one source of discomfort with the centrality of Christ for interpreting the Bible is likely our ambivalence about his deeply challenging presence and perspective. It is easier, after all, to read scripture for what we want to see than for what *he* wants us to see. One thing, in any case, seems sure: no one will bother to refute the main point I am making here. That won't happen because, *on the basis of scripture*, it can't be done. What you can do is set Jesus Christ aside. The incident in Atlanta shows how compelling a temptation that continues to be. ■

Adventist Society for Religious Studies' (Unvoted) Hermeneutics Draft

As our church community gives renewed study to how Scripture is read and interpreted in the church, the members of the Adventist Society for Religious Studies believe that it is important to participate in this process. ASRS affirms that an adequate hermeneutic asserts the full authority of Scripture in its plain and intended meaning. The "plain reading" of Scripture, however, is not to be confused with a selective or superficial reading of the text.

An adequate hermeneutic facilitates the sharing of the wonders of Scripture so God's Word can live anew in our worship, min-

istry and mission. It affirms the unity of Scripture even as it acknowledges the diversity within it. It affirms the full authority of Scripture as the inspired word of God, even as we admit that we always read the Bible as broken people who need the Spirit of God and each other's correction in order to read well.

The hermeneutic needed suggests that a true plain reading of Scripture is not a superficial reading. As scholars, we long to assist our church as it seeks to be ever more faithful to the Word.

Charles Scriven chairs Adventist Forum.

References

1. In order of appearance, the scriptural allusions are to: Acts 2:36, Colossians 1:15, John 1:14, Hebrews 1:3 and Ephesians 4:13, 15.
2. Leviticus 25:44–46.
3. 2 Timothy 3:16.



FEEDBACK

■ letters, e-mails, and comments

Letter to the Editor

I first met Roy Branson when we were students at Atlantic Union College (AUC) in 1955–57. I learned that he was the grandson of W. H. Branson, a former president of the General Conference, whom I had seen and heard as a boy in Barbados, West Indies.

When I was a senior medical student at the White Memorial Hospital, Dr. Bruce Branson, Roy's brother, an instructor in Surgery, was known as a martinet: rigid and cracking the whip. One morning as we were making rounds on the surgical ward, the door opened, and in walked Roy. Instead of greeting his brother, Roy enthusiastically greeted me, saying how happy he was to see me. Dr. Bruce quickly asked, "Do you know him?" Roy replied, "Sure, he used to keep us straight at AUC". From then there was a distinct change in Dr. Bruce.

[Before] Dr. Bruce went to Peru on sabbatical, he asked me to look after the house he was building in Loma Linda, and to see that his wife and son got their exams, tests and vaccines to get their passport visas to join him later.

All this because of his brother, Dr. Roy Branson Requiescat in pace.

LINBROOK BARKER, MD, FRCSC, FACS.



Adventist Hospitals Work to Influence National Healthcare Policy | BY ALITA BYRD

Adventist healthcare providers around the country have joined forces to talk to Washington’s lawmakers about transforming healthcare and a focus on prevention. Dr. Gerald Winslow (*below*), director



Dr. Gerald Winslow

of the Institute for Health Policy and Leadership at Loma Linda University Health, was one of the representatives of the Adventist Health Policy Association who traveled to Capitol Hill to present a plan called *Five Steps to Health in America* to members of Congress. He talked to *Spectrum* about the plan and the association behind it.

Question: *The Adventist Health Policy Association, representing five major Adventist health systems in the US, presented its ideas for healthcare policy and reform to members of Congress recently. In a nutshell, what do you believe needs to change in healthcare in America, and how should the focus be adjusted?*

Answer: We might be able to put this in a “nutshell” if the nut is very large. The big message is that we need to redirect some of the immense sums of money and time we invest in healthcare to the work of disease, accident, and violence prevention and the work of health promotion.

Our nation is more ready for this move than at any time in my memory. The reason is that more policy-makers understand that we must find more cost-effective ways to secure health for our nation’s citizens. Of course, thoughtful peo-

ple have made this case for decades, but the financial incentives simply didn’t foster investment in health promotion. There was little or no monetary reward for efforts to prevent encounters with illness care.

Now this is beginning to change, and the five Adventist health systems are prepared to help lead the way.

Question: *Your 72-page booklet, titled Five Steps to Health in America, listed seventy-five recommendations to “improve the physical, emotional and spiritual health of the communities we serve.” That’s a lot of recommendations. How did the Adventist Health Policy Association decide on these specific ideas?*

Answer: Each of the five hospitals and healthcare systems convened focus groups of knowledgeable professionals who work at the intersection of healthcare and public policy. From the work of these groups, we developed the framework of the “five steps” within which we organized the seventy-five proposals.

Question: *Your group met forty congressional officers on October 21 to present the document, I believe. Was that a good turnout? Did it meet your expectations? What do you think the members of congress will do with the booklet and its suggestions? What impact do you expect it to have? Are the Adventist health systems you represent a big enough chunk of American healthcare to catch the attention of the national government?*

Answer: Let me answer the last of those questions first. Yes, the five systems do represent a potentially powerful force for good in the arena

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diligent work.

of health policy. One of the systems (AHS) is the largest Protestant faith-inspired healthcare organization in the nation, and it includes one of the largest private hospitals in the country. Taken together, the five systems represent over eighty hospitals, hundreds of clinics, and well over 100,000 employees. Often our healthcare institutions are among the largest private employers in their region. So, yes, this magnitude of healthcare services does get the attention of the nation's policy-makers, but there is a much more important reason than the size of the Adventist systems. We are known for our commitments to health promotion, disease prevention, and community health development. We have well over a century of experience in this work. And there is evidence that we are trusted to do the work well.

Yes, we were pleased with the participation of all five of the Adventist systems, all of which sent representatives to Washington, D.C. for "Advocacy Day." We were able to visit with over forty offices and more than two dozen members of Congress or their staff. As might be expected, we concentrated our efforts on those members of Congress who have Adventist facilities in their districts or states. This is the second year we have made the trek to Capitol Hill, and I believe we are learning to be more effective in this work. The number of participants on our teams increased this year, including CEOs who joined in the work.

One of the main purposes of the *Five Steps to Health in America* was to present non-partisan initiatives that we believe are both aspirational and potentially transformational. We were met with considerable gratitude for the work. One congressman from Missouri, for example, voiced his appreciation because he said he felt he and his colleagues needed some fresh ideas in the often highly charged environment of our current political scene. Others expressed both surprise and thanks for the fact that instead of asking for some special favors, we were offering our services.

Beyond whatever effects the booklet may have in the various offices of Congress, and with the presidential campaigns to which the work was also given, there was the energizing reality of having our five systems work together to clarify what we see to be our best opportunities for the betterment of our nation's health.

Question: *Besides the presentation a few weeks ago, how else are you getting your policy recommendations into the hands of lawmakers?*

Answer: The process of sharing our perspectives on healthcare reform doesn't begin or end in a day. This is ongoing work that the Adventist Health Policy Association is doing constantly. Representatives from each of the five Adventist systems meet telephonically on a regular basis to ensure continuing collaboration on many different issues. We believe that it's imperative for our nation's leaders to understand that we are eager to collaborate in evidence-based interventions for whole community health. Going forward, we will be seeking other avenues for sharing this basic commitment, which is an outgrowth of our Adventist faith.

Question: *Why is it important to have this dialogue with American lawmakers?*

Answer: Most members of the US Congress are not experts in healthcare. They are constantly pressured by special interest groups. Our hope is that we can be influential in providing information and proposals that are genuinely motivated by an abiding commitment to improve health outcomes in communities all across the nation.

Question: *Do you feel that members of the Adventist Health Policy Association, including its eighty-four hospitals and 400 other health centers and entities, are already implementing these policies to the extent possible?*

Answer: The answer would have to be a mixture of yes and no. We are in a period of major transition. One executive described this as having one foot on the dock of the existing payment system and another foot on a boat that is headed into new waters. Along with all healthcare organizations in our nation, the Adventist systems are navigating their way through this time of transition. The advantage we have, in my view, is the foundational purpose that gave rise to Adventist health ministries—namely our faith.

Question: *What impact do you feel the upcoming US presidential election is having/will have on healthcare policy in America?*

Answer: Well, the topic will certainly be front and center again. And this will give us new opportunities to express our convictions about focusing on health and not just healthcare.

Question: *Has the Adventist Health Policy Association, since its founding five years ago, previously made similar recommendations/presentations to congress?*

Answer: Since the Adventist Health Policy Association (AHPA) was founded, it has produced a steady stream of position statements and policy briefs. Examples of these can be found on the organization's website. In addition to organizing "Advocacy Day" for two years, there have been many other communications with members of Congress, and with policy-makers in various departments of government, at both the federal and state levels.

Question: *Does the Adventist Health Policy Association have any full-time staffers and/or a permanent presence on Capitol Hill?*

Answer: Some of our systems do engage individuals or firms that help to convey our messages at both the state and federal levels of policy making. AHPA itself does have full-time employees, but they do not spend most of their time on Capitol Hill.

Question: *Do you feel that the Adventist health message has evolved over time in its basic principles? As the tenets of wholistic health and preventative medicine gain more adherents generally, are they receiving more widespread acceptance? Or are they becoming subsumed by the way healthcare is now generally perceived, and thus less relevant as it is no longer unique?*

Answer: My belief is that the Adventist health message has developed an increasingly strong basis in evidence that has been gathered over decades of diligent work. I'm often amazed these days by the high level of interest in principles we Adventists have espoused for generations. Paradoxically, at the same time, we live in a society beset by a rising epidemic of poor health resulting from lifestyles that lead to chronic diseases.

The basic tenets of the Adventist health message are not going out of style. They are increasingly being recognized as effective for better

health and greater longevity. But it would be impossible to contend that these principles are being adopted by the vast majority of our fellow citizens. There is a lot of work to do!

Question: *You are the vice president for mission and culture for Loma Linda University Medical Center and director of the Institute for Health Policy and Leadership at Loma Linda. What do you most like about your job/s? What do you find the most challenging? Did you help to create the Adventist Health Policy Association?*

Answer: I wish I could claim to have helped with the founding of AHPA, but others have that distinction. I'm proud of what AHPA has accomplished and of its current goals.

The Loma Linda University Institute for Health Policy and Leadership was established in large measure to aid AHPA in its work by having an academic institute, with faculty scholars sharing their expertise. I'm pleased to have helped with the founding of the Institute. I have been working in different roles within what we now call Loma Linda University Health (our corporate name for our University and its health system) for over twenty-five years. And this is now my forty-seventh year as a professor in Adventist higher education.

Since I genuinely enjoy nearly all of my work, it's impossible to single out one superlative aspect. But I'd answer your question this way: I find greatest satisfaction in taking the best of Adventist beliefs and seeking to make them practical in our world. My academic field is Christian ethics. My work in health policy is simply an outgrowth of the belief that our ethical convictions are not intended only for the elevated towers of academic reflection, but should find expression in the ways they shape better lives for whole communities. I believe this is why Jesus sent out His disciples to share the good news of the Kingdom, and to heal. ■

Alita Byrd is a member of the *Spectrum* web team, and a freelance writer from Dublin, Ireland.

I find greatest satisfaction in taking the best of Adventist beliefs and seeking to make them practical in our world.

THE BIBLE



Biblical Parables *and the Public Square* | BY JANIS LOWRY

I am not a theologian. In the world of theological scholarship, I am a consumer rather than a producer. However, I do read and teach the Bible in my Philosophy of Healthcare classes, and I especially love the stories of the Bible. There are times, though, when I wish that the church and some of its theologians weren't so industrious about turning the stories of the Bible into lifeless doctrine. Doctrine seems to have a strange flattening effect on story. It takes story/narrative which is large and elastic and turns it into something less vital and less inclusive. Story is a form to which the reader surrenders, taking it in with eager eyes and ears, absorbing the images, and imagining the plot and characters as we read.

In Western culture the Public Square has usually been thought of as an open area, bordered by important public buildings, which typically included a church. For Jesus the "Public Square" seemed to be more of a moving target. The Public Square of Judaism might arguably have been the temple, with its impressive Herodian buildings and open spaces. While Jesus did spend time in the temple and its courtyards and did speak there, he was more often on the hillside and lakeside drawing in crowds with his parables and healings. The outdoors was Jesus' Public Square and stories were his teaching method of choice. For Jesus, the Public Square was people and society in general.

This article looks at four stories in Matthew 24 and 25, and seeks to discover whether or not they can help Adventists determine how to be more effective in impacting the Public Square before Jesus' return. For the past fifty years at least, society has been evolving at a very rapid pace. Unfortunately, methods employed by the church to reach people with the story of Jesus' certain return have not kept pace with those changes. Fifty years ago people had lots of relationships but not much

information. The church had a very informational model of outreach, which fit well. People were exposed to far less information and thus craved it, and the church model of preaching and teaching got good responses.

However, the Public Square has done a 180-degree turn in recent years, and now there is a glut of information. Where people once had many close relationships, they now have hardly any. This has affected even my chatty family. My wise sister-in-law, observing us together in the family room one evening, all of us hunched over iPads and laptops, observed, "Oh, look we're all alone, together." The church has seen a declining response because people now long for relationships, but the church still uses the same "informational model of evangelism."¹

I find in the stories of Matthew 24 and 25 a helpful approach to the "good news" of Jesus' return that can help us with this problem. The stories imply a more effective way of impacting the Public Square.

One wonders if these four interdependent illustrations or stories, located at the end of Matthew 24 and finishing in Matthew 25, were presented as a cluster in the same way that closed-circuit TV cameras are set up, in order to capture a variety of angles on the same general area. One view alone cannot possibly capture the complexity of what must be seen in order to understand what is happening or has happened. All of the illustrations in the Olivet Address are centered on the certainty of both the return and the delay of the Master. That is not to say that Jesus never spoke of preaching, teaching and baptizing, since he clearly does in Matthew 28:19. Each of the stories in Matthew 24 and 25 approaches the Second Advent differently, pointing to the need for complete engagement by the principle characters in their work. Significantly, the "work" in these stories seems to be fairly mundane earthly work. None of the work appears to

Story is a form to which the reader surrenders, taking it in with eager eyes and ears, absorbing the images, and imagining the plot and characters as we read.

advance or speed up the return of the Master. It is not “work” of the kind that church leaders have presented frequently in sermons and church literature. The Olivet Address is not about preaching, knocking on doors, handing out truth-filled literature or holding evangelistic crusades. The work is far more practical and relational than that.

It is important to point out that in Matthew 24 Jesus does speak about signs in verses 4–31; he also says “but the end is still to come.”² Those events, traditionally read as signs of Jesus’ return, concern both the suffering of the earth and the suffering of people—but these things in themselves “cannot be signs of the imminence of the end.”³ That this passage finishes with four stories or parables seems to be especially significant when put together with verse 36, where Jesus is recorded as saying “But about that day or hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.”(TNIV) Jesus seems to be preparing His listeners for something different from suffering and signs as a signal of the end and his return—he is preparing them for engaging in work during that period of time which they will experience as “waiting” or “delay.”

The four stories, The Unfaithful Servant, The Ten Virgins/Bridesmaids, the Bags of Gold, and the Sheep and Goats, have several common elements. Matthew has placed these stories together at the end of the Olivet address, following Jesus’ assertion that the timing of the coming of the Son of Man is not only unknown to anyone but the Father, but that the coming may/will be delayed (24:36–44). The disciples ask the question “when and what shall be the signs?”—each of the pericopes speaks instead of a delay, and of the work to be done as Jesus’ followers wait by feeding their fellow servants, lighting a wedding procession and investing the master’s resources.

In each of the illustrations the Master does return. So to underline the certainty of Jesus’ return is important. Despite the certainty of the return, in each of the illustrations there is

a character or group of characters that are not prepared, although for different reasons. In literature, two characters or sets of characters who, although to all appearances are completely equal, make choices that lead to vastly different outcomes in story, are referred to as foils. It is useful in our reading of the stories of the Bible to think about the choices we are making, and how those choices impact our place in the larger story.

In Matthew 24:45–51, the wicked servant thinks he can predict when the Master will return. His strategy is to enjoy himself at the expense of his fellow servants, with whose care and feeding he was charged by the departing Master. The Unfaithful Servant grows so arrogant in his belief that he can predict the time of the master’s return that he “beats his fellow servants and passes his time in eating and drinking” (verse 50). The illustration says clearly that in this case the master will come on a day when the unfaithful servant does not expect it. Although he felt certain he could predict the time and get his act together in order to greet the Master wreathed in smiles, he failed to anticipate either the timing of the return or how seriously the Master would take his dereliction of duty. The unfaithful servant seemed not to have really known the master and his end is a most unhappy one. But what about the work he was assigned? It was simply feeding his fellow servants at “the proper time.” Davies compares this story to that of Joseph in Potiphar’s house.⁴ Joseph’s work was not glamorous either, but it was his work that made Potiphar’s work for the pharaoh possible. Keener draws a parallel between the exploitative servants and ministers who use “the flock for their own interests.”⁵ The servant’s work in Matthew 24 mirrors the title of Eugene Peterson’s book, borrowed from Nietzsche—*A Long Obedience in the Same Direction*. Faithfully caring for one’s fellow servants, the ordinary tasks of life, make possible both simply being in the Public Square, and having some larger role in the



Public Square. The unfaithful servant is not called to a starring role—merely a supporting one. Feeding is as mundane as it necessary.

The behavior of the unfaithful servant is contrasted with that of the faithful servant. When the Master returns “It will be good for that servant,” because he is faithfully doing what he was assigned. As a result, the returning master puts him in charge of “all his possessions.” For the faithful servant, busy doing faithful things and being faithful to the master, the master’s return is not an interruption but a continuation and an enlargement of what he has already been doing. So, upon the master’s return he is promoted. This suggests that our work after Jesus’ return is in some way a con-

tinuation of what we were already doing. The returning master enlarges our work instead of ending it or abandoning it for something else. Note that the faithful servant was doing faithful things, not giving speeches.

The Bridesmaids in Matthew 25:1–13 were charged with lighting the procession to the wedding banquet. To be asked to participate in the joyful celebration of the wedding procession was an honor, and being asked implied a close relationship to the bride and or groom.

All ten of the bridesmaids were given the same responsibility—but this story seems to turn on knowing what

could happen, as well what the job was. The job implied the need to understand eventualities and contingencies. The job description was relatively simple, lighting the procession. But the five bridesmaids, referred to as “wise,” prepared for a delay. They prepared to wait. One might also speculate that their handbags had cab fare, a sewing kit, a spare pair of hose, and possibly a granola bar.

The five bridesmaids, who earn the unenviable appellation of “foolish,” find that their supply of oil for the torches to light the procession is dangerously low when the cry that announces the arrival of the bridegroom goes up (verse 6). Finding a place to purchase additional oil does not seem to have been a prob-

**The outdoors
was Jesus’
Public Square
and stories
were his
teaching
method of
choice.**

The church has seen a declining response because people now long for relationships, but the church still uses the same “informational model of evangelism.”

lem (verse 9), but it is too late. The Bridegroom announces that he does not “know” them when they arrive late at the bridegroom’s house. Timing had a lot to do with the job. If you missed out on the timing, you had missed out on the job. They simply got along without you. The procession had arrived at the location for the banquet before the Foolish Bridesmaids returned—the procession was underlit because of their unpreparedness. If the five foolish bridesmaids had been there and had done the job of lighting the procession at the appointed time they would also have enjoyed the banquet that followed.

All the bridesmaids were certain that the bridegroom would come. But the wise bridesmaids also understood that there could be a delay and they prepared for it—the foolish did not. Regrettably one cannot borrow preparedness,⁶ nor even the cautious mindset that entertains the idea that things often take longer than we think when many people are involved. We can and should prepare for the worst case scenario, which also results in our being prepared for the best case.

Waiting for the bridegroom didn’t seem to be worrisome or a chore. The bridesmaids were all relaxed, and confident that the bridal



party would arrive. This story once again invites us to read ourselves into the plot. It reminds me that though I love my younger brother and his family with all my heart, and I am ready to join their excursions the moment they arrive to collect me, I know that they are often late. My handbag and shoes are in readiness by the door but I factor in an overage of 15–20 minutes in the departure time for each person included in the excursion. But let the record show that I am also ready for them to arrive at the announced time, because sometimes they surprise me! If we understand who we are waiting for we are not bothered by the wait, but we are also prepared for it. No amount of talking or harrumphing on my part

will change the situation. Note that, like the faithful servant in the preceding story, the wise bridesmaids focused on the work assigned, in their case lighting the procession, and not on making speeches.

Matthew 25:14–28 is referred to in the TNIV as the Parable of the Bags of Gold. In this parable we have three servants entrusted with the wealth of the master as he leaves on a journey. The amounts entrusted are different—according to the ability of the trustee (verse 15). The story is told somewhat differently in Luke 19,⁷ where readers are informed that the amounts of money are the same for all the servants. There are no specific directives given by the departing master in this story but there may be something implied by the assignment itself. They are each given gold, an important resource. The first two servants immediately set to work with their bags of gold investing on behalf of the master. The third servant is concerned only with “keeping” the gold entrusted to him.

After a long time the master returns and “settles accounts” (verse 19). Each of the first two servants increased the amount entrusted to them, earning both approving words and additional responsibilities from the Master. The third servant duly presents what was entrusted to him—nothing is missing—the original amount is still there intact, unused. He tells the master, “I knew you are a hard man, harvesting where you have not sown and gathering where you have not scattered,” which appears to be a gross distortion. This is not a very promising start to their verbal exchange. The servant then proclaims his fear of the master and says, “See, here is what belongs to you” (verse 24).

The unfaithful servant commits at least three serious blunders: (1) misunderstanding the true character of the master, (2) not using the resources in useful ways to advance the interests of the master, and (3) then seeking to excuse himself by saying it’s because he believed the master to be harsh. It is difficult to say whether the master reacts from his actual character or whether he reacts based on the servant’s assess-

ment of him. Nonetheless, the master says—be judged both by your lack of action and by your harsh assessment of *my character!*

Commitment to the master and the proper investment of his resources is rewarded by more participation with the master in his business affairs. A lack of commitment and participation leads to being totally cut off from resources and relationships, which the lazy servant apparently didn’t understand anyway. The worthless servant is thrown outside, “into the darkness, where there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth” (verse 30, NIV). Again, this story is about doing and being rather than talking and sharing information.

The last illustrative story is a judgment scene—a reminder at the end of this cycle of stories that there is a real return of the Son of Man and a real judgment. Once again there are two groups of characters; but this time it is the Son of Man who does the dividing. Those designated as Sheep are placed on the right and the Goats on the left. The Sheep are identified as “blessed inheritors of a kingdom long in preparation for them since the creation of the world” (verse 34). The Son of Man speaks of the “actions” that identify them as inheritors—they fed, clothed, invited, and visited *him*. The sheep are taken aback. While they may remember doing these things for others they have no recollection of doing these things for the Son of Man. The King replies that by faithfully serving the “least of these brothers and sisters of mine” (verse 40) they have fed, clothed, and comforted Him.

The Goats gathered on the left are undoubtedly also waiting for approving words and a place in the Kingdom, and are startled when the King announces quite a different recompense for them. They apparently had been looking very hard for The Son of Man, but had failed to see him embodied in the “least of these.” Unfortunately, by neglecting to feed, water, clothe and visit the “least of these,” they had also missed The Son of Man dwelling among them in the very forms of those to whom they failed to give care.⁸

So are any of these interrelated stories and

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sayings useful for instructing us on how Adventism should be relating to the Public Square? The Public Square in the twenty-first century is enormous and it is no longer just one or even several physical places. It is many—wherever people are assembled becomes a kind of Public Square. Additionally, it has expanded to include a huge variety of media as well. The Public Square has become a very noisy place. There are many competing and conflicting voices and many of them are raised voices—vying for attention. Adventism of the didactic kind is being drowned out.

Each of the stories in Matthew 24 and 25 is about action and activity, about doing and being rather than speaking; and each of these interdependent illustrations are about characters making choices that result in very different outcomes. For me this is the refreshing part of applying these stories to the Public Square. These passages emphasize the certainty of Jesus' return! These illustrations also indicate that our role as servants of the Son of Man, anticipating the return of the master, is that of working, doing, feeding and investing in others. There is enough noise in the Public Square and many people, even Seventh-day Adventist church members, are choosing to tune out the noisiness. I need stories that instruct me on how to wait and that remind me there is dignity in the work I do as I anticipate Jesus' return.

The Public Square will find us if we care enough for people. It has certainly found us recently as one of our number attempts a run for the highest public office. I think Seventh-day Adventists should be bothered by this line from a recent New York Times article by Alan Rappeport, when he said Seventh-day Adventists "tend to be vegetarians, and they continue to wait patiently for the Second Coming and the end of the world."⁹ The church should be unhappy about being identified by what we eat instead of being identified as those who "feed others," either literally or figuratively. Nor should we be unconcerned about the last half of that sentence, "they continue to wait

patiently for the Second Coming and the end of the world." This assessment is too passive, too disengaged and lacks anything relational.

If Seventh-day Adventists are the active, engaged presence presented in the stories of Matthew 24, and 25, then we will be in the Public Square not as a noisy, clamorous source of information. We will be there as servants seeing to the needs of "least of these." Active, relational engagement does not go unnoticed. In response to the question, "Why do you serve?" faithful servants can answer, "We serve because of the Master!" ■

Janis L. Lowry presented this paper at the 2015 meeting

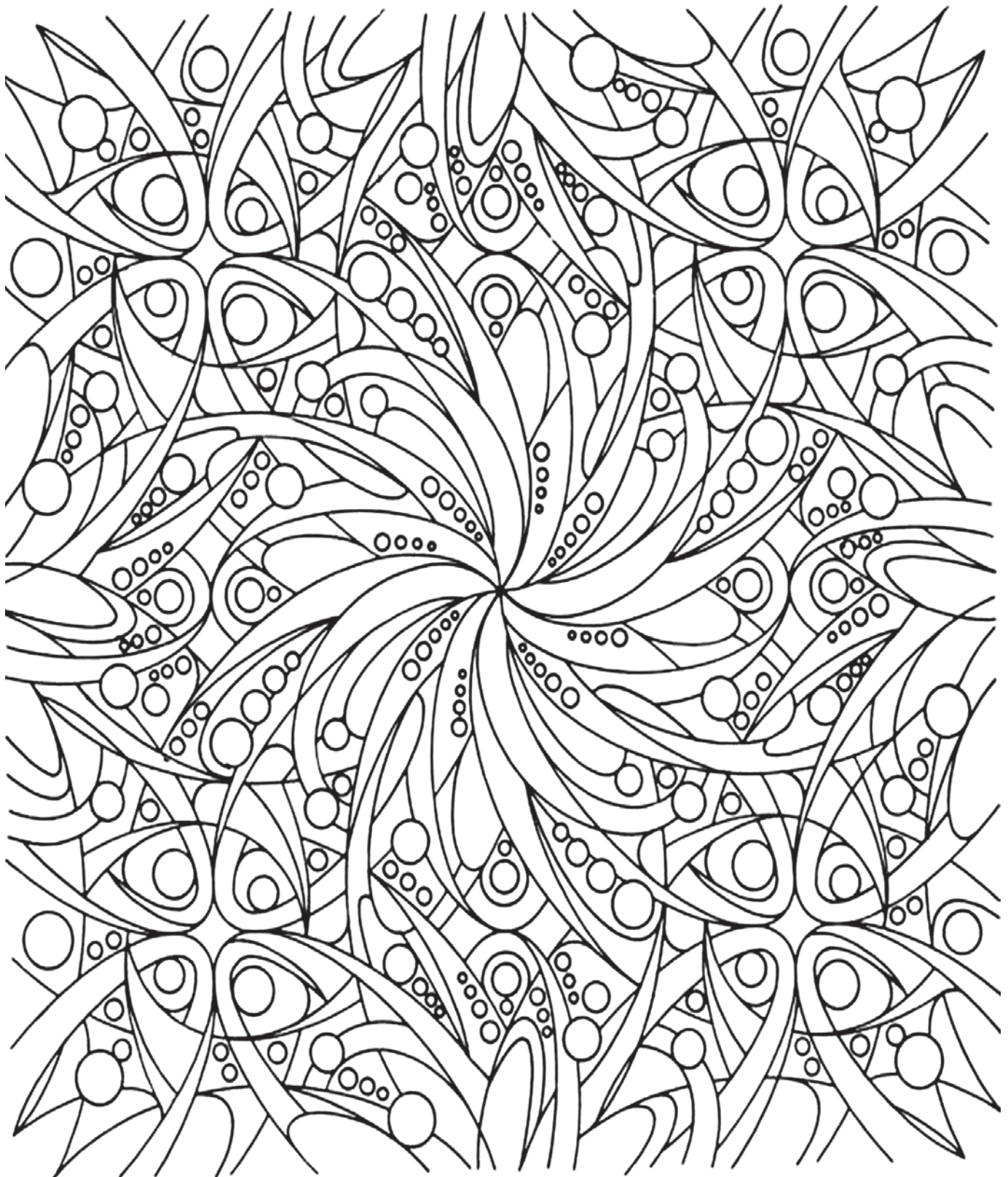


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ATHEISM AND ADVENTISM



Too Adventist to be Adventist?

Catch-44: The Paradox of Adventist Atheism | BY TOM WEHTJE

*"There lives more faith in honest doubt,
believe me, than in half the creeds."*

—Alfred Lord Tennyson, "In Memoriam"

In a dystopian nightmare that doubles as an apocalypticist's fantasy, the inquisitor (an Adventist witch-hunter in one scenario, persecuting priest in the other) places before you an ultimatum with the following stark choice:

- I am an Adventist.
- I am not an Adventist.

Do you answer honestly if your life, job, family ties, or reputation are on the line? The melodramatic scenario is rife with the either/or, us/them, all-or-nothing logic of remnant, a winnowing of wheat and tares. But what if your most honest answer is to check both boxes? What if you both are and are not an Adventist?

I'm not referring to a casual Laodicean luke-warmness of weak or divided loyalties, the indecision of having one foot in each camp, or of mere indifference to spiritual matters. I mean a more complex conundrum in which one identity generates its supposed opposite. By upbringing, habits of thought, and core values (such as a perhaps obsessive preoccupation with questions of truth and belief), I am an Adventist. Some of those very qualities, however, I am convinced, have led me away from religious belief. Paradoxically, I am perhaps never so much a true, earnest, even idealistic child of Adventism than when I challenge, doubt, or ultimately disbelieve Adventist dogma.

The paradox cuts both ways, a double "Catch-22."¹ When I think most like a traditional Adventist, then I conclude that I am not an Adventist. Surrounded by worshippers in church, I kneel during prayer or hear the preacher refer inclusively to what "we believe," and I

open my eyes wide during that prayer, and bow my head during that sermon, feeling the more an outsider, almost guilty for being there. Of course, I know that the assembly is not really so united in belief—admission is open, and I'm aware from private conversations with other skeptical thinkers who attend and participate, if only for family reasons or the soaring organ music. But I also know that Adventists like to think of themselves as a community of believers, a church defined by a list of fundamental doctrines. Just how many of those beliefs a believer must believe to qualify as an Adventist isn't clear to me (must it be 100 percent? 90? a passing C's worth?), or whether one ought to remove one's membership if those beliefs have shifted since they were affirmed through baptism, at the impressionable age of twelve or fourteen (or twenty).² Wherever one places the bar, however, on strictly doctrinal grounds—grounds of personal belief that Adventists themselves like to think determine religious identity—I know that I am not an Adventist.

When I think like a non-Adventist, however—perhaps like a sociologist observing myself and my lifestyle and worldview from outside the bubble—then I realize how deeply Adventist I still am. Some telltale traits are immediately recognizable. A close friend I met in grad school, himself nonreligious, laughs good-naturedly at "superstitious" behavior he says belies my pretensions to free thought. I don't drink, swear, or eat meat. I wouldn't even sample the celebratory wine a professor brought to my dissertation defense. (Tellingly, the dissertation itself explored disturbing connections between early modern theologians' obsession with documenting the reality of witches, and their desperate need to believe in God and immortal souls.)

The Adventist ethos is stronger in me, however, than loyalty to a lifestyle, by itself a sort of cardboard-cutout



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Adventism. Mere cultural observance does not an Adventist make. Rites and ceremonies might define membership in some religions, but Adventist identity—at least in theory—is a function of interiority, of core beliefs and values. Indeed, even assent to a list of doctrines is itself arguably only a superficial marker of membership. More essential principles, down in the engine room as it were, power the ship of faith and determine those outlying doctrinal positions. In Matthew 22 and John 13, Jesus boils down the Decalogue to two principles, and, ultimately, a single law of love. On such liberal terms perhaps even an unbeliever like me can own the label Christian.

Taking Truth Too Seriously?

Thanks to my Adventist and educational heritage, however, I don't think I can boil it down so far. Not even love trumps truth (although integrity to truth need not be understood to trump love either). The two principles coexist in a sometimes complicated equilibrium. In Joyce's *Ulysses*, Stephen Dedalus is mocked as something of a prig for refusing to pander to his dying mother's wishes and pray with her at her bedside; but I understand his reticence.³ Her request demands of him a self-abnegating obeisance before cultural norms and even a certain dishonesty. He would

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make a mockery or empty form of prayer if he were to go through with it, though unbelieving. Some skeptical Adventists, acknowledging the social function of public prayer, are willing to lead out in it, and perhaps their stance is more sensible than my own somewhat superstitious scruples. I am happy to close my eyes and bow my head out of respect to the believers present, just like I am happy to attend church respectfully, for that implies nothing about my own belief or unbelief. I generally appreciate the words of the prayers and sermons as meaningful expressions of human joys and longings, even though I don't believe they ascend to any divine ear or consciousness. If asked to say grace before a meal, I feel bound by conscience to frame the speech act as an open, unaddressed statement of gratitude that I fear must seem too bland and impersonal for most appetites (which is why it may be politest to defer).⁴

What an awkward tightrope walk that must seem—especially to friends who have abandoned the Adventist scene altogether, or others who wholly acquiesce in its official teachings, and don't understand why I can't just go along with them. Yet, I think my predicament describes not merely a balancing act between Adventist and non-Adventist elements of identity, but a taut wire of tension inherent within Adventism itself, that both the abandoner and the easy acquiescer have in some sense let go. (Perhaps it is a double bind from which there is no easy escape unless one's private thoughts and beliefs happen to flow precisely in officially prescribed pathways.) The Protestant primacy of individual conscience on the one hand competes against the strong ties of a communal and family faith on the other. Personal integrity pulls against loyalty to the tribe. Love and truth vie as cardinal virtues. Love of truth is called down from its airy flights to accommodate sensitivity to the feelings of others (as well as to the emotional needs and existential longings of the self).

My behavior is quintessentially Protestant and Adventist, then, not only when I refuse to accept authoritarian prescriptions of doctrine, demand-

ing to think it all through for myself and to follow truth and the weight of evidence wherever they lead, but also when I nevertheless still cleave to my home community out of a strong sense of loyalty and identity. We all know the paradigmatic mission story of the girl or boy who converts to Adventism against the commands of overbearing Hindu or Catholic or Muslim parents, sacrificing family ties in devotion to the truth. This illustrates one of the core values of Adventism that would seem to support Stephen Dedalus's privileging of private conscience over his mother's prayer request—but of course the reality is more complicated. Adventism is not really so unreservedly individualistic or libertarian, for a double standard is at work. The Catholic girl or Hindu boy may be celebrated for abandoning the family faith because that faith is benighted. In such a case the idealistic pursuit of truth for truth's sake may be taken as admirable, even heroic. If that young person were a dissenting Adventist, however, suddenly communitarian values and family loyalty might seem more important; the heroic pursuit of truth becomes instead a betrayal.

The supposed difference, of course, is that as Adventists we know we have the truth, so there can be no question of leaving Adventism in pursuit of it. Some other motive must be assigned to wayward seekers. Perhaps they are rebellious by temperament. Perhaps their home church was not warm enough. Perhaps they were not raised right by their parents. Such theories shield the institution itself and any dubious truth claims (what doubters actually doubt when they lose faith), casting blame instead upon individual members and their supposed parenting failures or shortcomings as teachers. It grieves me to think of myself and others like me as a stigma upon people we love and admire. Sadly, it may be easier psychologically for loyal members to take that guilt upon themselves as scapegoats for their church, or to lay it upon wayward loved ones, than to admit the even more shattering possibility that their own faith and eternal hopes are mistaken.

Ontological Crisis

My sensitivity to the vital importance of that hope, as well as its fragility, makes me silent, often, when Adventists express fundamentalist opinions in ways that seem nonnegotiable.

"I'm certainly not willing to believe that humans evolved over millions of years," a relative of mine stated recently, and all I could do was nod my head slightly in recognition that I understood his position (while not intending to imply that I agreed with it).⁵ Actually, his statement did not impugn science so much as register his own unwillingness to believe it. His choice of phrasing nevertheless betrays a certain uneasiness, as if he perhaps ought to be willing to believe in human evolution upon the authority of science, if only it didn't contradict necessary theology (as he went on to argue that it does). Behind the surface denials is a respect for science—even a religious earnestness about it—that is characteristically Adventist and I think admirable. To be sure, the most strident and least informed creationist denials come across as dishonest or frantic, casting for evidence among discredited conspiracy theories and hoaxes, tracing human footprints in the Jurassic sands of time. Such deniers sustain the ideal of a supernatural theology that is neatly wedded to natural fact by inventing their own alternative science.

Many Adventists, however, recognize the discrepancy and have to make a hard choice—or at least a complicated exegesis. As a student writer observes in *The Collegian's* February 2 (2012) special issue on origins, "At its roots, evolution is a theory that is irreconcilable to Christianity." I agree. So are advanced biblical scholarship, anthropology, archaeology, geology, and any number of other -ologies.⁶ As an argument against evolution, however, this merely begs the essential question—we don't actually have to examine the evidence once we discern inadmissible theological implications.⁷ Such statements, often heartfelt and earnestly intended to uphold Adventist doctrine, nevertheless reveal a fracture

within the Adventist world view. They drive a wedge between theology and the book of nature, threatening to make a mockery of Adventist higher education. They are politically inconvenient—and yet, I think, the underlying fears are perceptive.

Despite the efforts of liberal Adventists to apply a splint and limit the damage, making the best of an awkward situation, the fracture is serious and extends beyond Adventism as a crisis for Christian supernaturalism in general, which (to shift metaphors midstream) is unequally yoked to scientific naturalism in a marriage of convenience. An ontological schizophrenia results that accommodates miracles or intercessory prayer in the chapel on Sundays while restricting itself to naturalistic explanation in the lab on workdays, or on the evening news. A stubborn philosophical consistency on the part of Adventists, exemplified by a distinctive and often overlooked doctrine, makes it especially difficult for us to overlook such contradictions. The result is a pair of unlikely twins, Adventist fundamentalism and Adventist atheism, unsightly offspring of the Adventist monistic union who come by their warts honestly (although they take after different parents).

The Perils of Monistic Thinking

Like atheists, Adventists are monists. We don't believe in immortal "souls" or in body/soul or spirit/matter dualism. Such monism was actually quite influential during the early modern period and made a play to become mainstream: Hobbes and Milton were monists and mortalists, for example, as was Tyndale before them.⁸ During that age of rising science, theologians pointed to witches as empirical proof of the reality of spirits, their bodies the mediums where flesh and spirit conjoined during sexual congress with demons. Eventually, however, the hope for an empirically-validated faith on such sensational terms turned into an embarrassment, both for religion and for science. The mainstream solution has been an ontologi-

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tism than when I
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mately disbe-
lieve Adventist
dogma.**

**An ontological
schizophrenia
results that
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prayer in the
chapel on Sun-
days while
restricting itself
to naturalistic
explanation in
the lab on work-
days, or on the
evening news.**

cal split, a great chasm opened up in the order of things. Despite the fracture (due to irreconcilable differences), it is widely considered an amicable divorce with a mutually beneficial settlement. Religion inhabits the high Judean hills, ceding the fertile vales of Sodom to science. Thus it is comparatively easy for dualist Christians to have their faith and science too, each sovereign over its separate fiefdom, impervious to assault from the other.

Not so for Adventists! Science matters. The body matters. Matter matters religiously, not just spirit. Hence the Adventist emphasis upon the second coming and a bodily, whole-person resurrection. Hence the Advent health message. Hence ADRA. Hence Adventist involvement in science—the Madaba Plains Project and Geoscience Research Institute (despite the latter’s quick dive into apologetics).⁹ Even the Sabbath maps the sacred upon real-world space-time. All these Adventist beliefs and pursuits participate in a single, coherent, integrated world view that is an admirable—even heroic—alternative to the convenient evasiveness of mainstream Christian dualism, which can strike Adventists as a sort of ontological schizophrenia or split personality disorder. That heroic consistency,¹⁰ however, comes at a price. I believe it makes educated Adventists especially prone to slide not merely into apostasy or religious indifference, but outright atheism.

In the first fifty pages of his skeptical treatise *The Illusion of Immortality* (1935), humanist philosopher Corliss Lamont chips away at the dualistic foundation for belief in an afterlife, asserting what he calls “the essential unity of the body-personality.”¹¹ On the path to atheistic annihilationism, in other words, Adventists have a head start! On the following page Lamont awards that dubious recognition:

Today in the United States the religious sects known as Russellites [i.e. Jehovah’s Witnesses] and Seventh Day Adventists [sic] adhere to the same general notion of a sleeping or unconscious soul between the death and resurrection of the body. In spite of the fact that this solution has never gained any large or important

group of converts, it must be conceded that it has the advantage of a certain heroic consistency. And its defenders, of all those who have called themselves Christians subsequent to the earliest days of the faith, come nearest to admitting monism in its pure and simple form. . . . It would, however, be rather tragic for these stalwart dissenters if the long-promised and long-heralded resurrection never took place after all. For then, according to their own theory, neither they nor anyone else would ever taste the joys of immortality.¹²

This is the boldness of the Adventist position, a fitting reason to feature that word “Adventist” in the church title. Like the earliest Christian believers,¹³ Adventists stake all their hopes for an afterlife upon resurrection at the promised second coming—a risky, historically-contingent gamble. Indeed, so great is the human longing to go on existing¹⁴ (preferably in a better existence), despite the evident fact of mortality, that mainstream Christianity developed a telling redundancy in the denial strategy. The dead do not have to wait until doomsday to live again, it was decided, for their souls are already immortal and at death are released from the prison of the mortal body like birds from a cage. Until the resurrection (or should the resurrection never take place), ongoing life—or one’s vital consciousness, at least—is thereby assured. Adventists lack that safety net, that redundancy, in the theology of immortality. The unresurrected must sleep forever in oblivion. The failure of the promised second coming would be a catastrophe to any hope of long-term personal survival.

What Lamont doesn’t mention is that just such a tragic disappointment as he projects in the quotation did in fact take place early in Adventist history. Many in the Millerite movement lost faith, but some remained steadfast, and they did so for the very reason that Lamont suggests the disappointment would be so tragic—that is, precisely because so very much depended on it. A high emotional investment can cause believers to hold onto faith even more tenaciously in the face of adversity and apparent disconfirmation, as the branch of



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social psychology known as cognitive dissonance theory explains. In their classic application of this theory, Leon Festinger, Henry Riecken, and Stanley Schachter describe how members of a UFO cult that predicted the end of the world would occur on December 21, 1954, nevertheless maintained their faith and reinterpreted the prophecies when the apocalypse failed and no spaceship descended to take them home to the skies.¹⁵ All of this hits home. Indeed, in the introductory chapter the authors devote eleven pages to the parallel

pattern of predictions, sacrifices, reschedulings, disappointments, and reinterpretations by the Millerites.¹⁶

Of course most tests of belief are not so dramatic or definitive. Prophecies that imprudently target specific dates and make falsifiable predictions are characteristic of young cults, not seasoned religions which grow up to be more reticent or sophisticated, and perhaps Adventism has been maturing in that direction.¹⁷ Adventist believers are nevertheless still subject to emotional pangs and existential longings similar to

those recalled by the disappointed Millerites,¹⁸ experiencing as it were their own private Great Disappointments or quiet Awakenings, each on his or her own personal schedule, when faith perhaps gradually ebbs away through a series of discoveries, or suddenly reappears.

**The play is
tragic precisely
because
it examines
unflinchingly
the disparity
between human
values (values
the play affirms
feelingly) and
events in a
mute, uncaring,
amoral universe.**

Belief as a Guilty Pleasure?

A few summers ago an Adventist friend and I exchanged a series of email messages exploring the reasons for belief and disbelief in God. In a climactic message my friend announced with relief and excitement that he had experienced a breakthrough. "I had an epiphany of sorts," he wrote. "I chose to believe." He said he felt greater peace of mind than he had in a decade. I was happy for him—he's a wonderful person who gives Adventism a good name through his integrity, intellectual acuity, tolerance, and life of service. His testimony to the joys and psychological benefits of belief, however, was not by itself a convincing argument for me to believe. Indeed, in an odd sort of way the very convenience of his newfound faith seemed to make my friend himself suspicious of his own motives.

Being the "substance of things hoped for" has never seemed to me a very solid foundation for belief. Our legal system recognizes the distorting power of bias upon decision making and disqualifies judges and jurors who have a vested interest in a case. In questions of personal belief, we cannot so easily opt out of the hot seat, but we can still try to beware the biasing motives of our hopes and needs which, contrary to William James's arguments, seem rather to cast doubt upon a convenient truth than to confirm it.¹⁹ C. S. Lewis, for one, is so wary of the skeptical charge that Christian faith is a projection of wish-fulfillment that he goes to rather absurd lengths to suggest the opposite. In his spiritual autobiography *Surprised by Joy* he represents himself, unconvincingly, as a "most dejected and reluctant convert,"²⁰ dragged kicking and screaming, as it were, from atheism to belief in God. Perversely, he makes the Christian gospel sound as if it were the bad news of salvation and

eternal life! Thus Lewis comes off as agreeing with today's neoatheists who, in an apparent effort to make atheism more salable, represent it as a gospel of liberation from the oppressive weight of religious belief. ("Good news! God doesn't exist and humans have no hope for eternal life!") For opposite reasons, then, both Lewis and the neoatheists distort the obvious psychological attractions of belief, which in Paul's own formulation are faith's defining motive.

My introspective friend seems to share my (Adventist?) discomfort with this Pauline hoped-for-faith or Jamesian willed-belief. Later in the same eureka email message celebrating his newfound freedom to believe, he added:

Of course there are lots of negative things to say about such a decision . . . Is this a utilitarian decision? I don't know if it's possible to sort that out. I'm well aware of the utilitarian benefits, not least including 'smoother' group membership. I'd like to think that it's not utilitarian, but that could easily be self-delusional.

His anxiety on this point, and my own unbelief, stem from the same commitment to truth over convenience, convention, and authority. Thus we find ourselves in our own Catch-22, a freethinking Adventist's dilemma. Either path we take—belief or unbelief—can seem like a betrayal: his sense that he might have sold out by "choosing" belief out of convenience, or my own rejection of my parents' faith due to an impractical—and to some eyes, callous—adherence to core principles (truth? integrity? idealism? a Protestant independence of mind?) that my parents themselves, and other Adventists, tried to teach me.

Desire does not imply gratification, nor wishes fulfillment. Of course, I'd like to believe in eternal life and an end to injustice and suffering; I'd like even more not just to believe it, but for it really to be true. Christianity at its best is a powerful expression of these human longings. Sadly, however, our wishes and ideals do not determine reality. Perhaps this is what can give even statements of hope and comfort a tinge of heroic sadness. At a recent funeral I attended for a man I

myself never knew, I nevertheless felt the loss deeply, and noticed the tremor in the voice of the pastor as he read the Bible promises. Those promises express life as it should be, and we mourn in part at the incommensurable gap between that should and what is. That gap is not diminished by our wishes or denials. The sufferings and questions of Job are not resolved by the tacked-on epilogue (although the desire to tack it on is itself revealing of human nature). The Bible, like other great literature, explores the full range of human experience—not just the comic or melodramatic, genres with a crowd-pleasing finish. Indeed, the greatest of Shakespeare’s plays, in which he probes most profoundly the depths of human experience, are tragedies.

A Life-Affirming, though Tragic, Vision

I had the privilege of acting alongside that same friend in Atlantic Union College’s final English department theatrical production, *King Lear*. After bearing the lifeless body of Cordelia onstage in the final scene of Shakespeare’s great tragedy, Lear utters some of the most heart-breaking lines in all of literature, words that press toward a stark unchristian conclusion:

*Why should a dog, a horse, a rat, have life,
And thou no breath at all? Thou’lt come no more,
Never, never, never, never, never!*²¹

What a powerful expression of loss and the value of a human life, accompanied by the absolute negation—reiterated five times in the same bleak line—of any hope of an afterlife. Death is final.²² Our sense of the old king’s sorrow and affection for his daughter, however, is not diminished by this stoic denial—to the contrary. The play is tragic precisely because it examines unflinchingly the disparity between human values (values the play affirms feelingly) and events in a mute, uncaring, amoral universe. At the conclusion corpses litter the stage. Nevertheless, neither my believing friend nor I would trade Shakespeare’s searching treatment

for Nahum Tate’s cheerier 1681 revision in which divine justice prevails, Cordelia lives, and Lear never speaks those searing, truthful, and remarkably doubt-laden lines.²³ ■

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Andrews University (MA), and Stony Brook University (PhD), where his dissertation was “Out of Darkness, Light: The Theological Implications of (Dis)Belief in Witchcraft in Early Modern English Literature and

Thought.” He has published several poems in *Spectrum*. He teaches English classes at Walla Walla University and is a member of the Seventh-day Adventist Church.

References

1. Ok, so that doubleness is already present in the title conundrum of Joseph Heller’s *Catch-22*, but let’s call it “*Catch-44*” anyway, with the echoes of 1844 and 144,000 ringing in our ears.

2. Or what about adherence to a fundamental doctrine that has been added to or revised since one’s baptism? Would there be a grandfather clause to allow ongoing membership under the old rules?

3. James Joyce, *Ulysses* (1914; New York, 1961), 5, 8. Despite his apparently stoic refusal, Stephen is evidently moved enough by guilt, or love, or sorrow for his mother that he is haunted by this memory (9ff). Perhaps truth-finicky Adventist atheists, as well as Adventist fundamentalists, share something of what Stephen’s friend Buck Mulligan refers to as “the cursed jesuit strain in you,” which for the Adventist atheist, as for Stephen, however, is “injected the wrong way” (8).

4. “We are thankful for . . .” is one formula for beginning such an NDR (Non-Deity-Referencing) expression of gratitude before meals. I think it is not disrespectful while remaining honest.

5. Likewise, after a funeral, an Adventist expressed to me how difficult she thought it must be for nonbelievers to face the fact of death without our hope. I did not interpret that as an invitation for real discussion, and so of course just nodded my head, as much as to say that I understood that she did indeed find the hopelessness of unbelief inadmissible. But of course we can feel sympathy for all humans faced with the fact of our mortality! Indeed, her own statement suggests that belief functions for her as a necessary shield against the very fear of mortality that she projects onto the unbeliever. (Behold the “bare, forked animal” beneath our cultural clothing! All of us, it seems, are afraid of the dark.)

6. Assuming we are talking about a fundamentalist, biblical, supernaturalistic Christianity. Of course we can also speak of a selective ethical or philosophical Christianity, the Christianity of the Golden Rule or the Sermon on the Mount (or the Jefferson

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gamble.

Bible), to which secular humanitarian activists might be said to adhere as well as anyone. A toned down, wholly naturalistic Christianity can avoid contradiction with biology and the other -ologies (the narrator of Martin Gardner's novel *The Flight of Peter Fromm*, for example, is both a Unitarian minister and an atheist), but at the cost of some of its most popular features in the form of miracles, special providence, and transcendence of natural mortality (liberal sects such as Unitarianism don't exactly offer patrons the same metaphysical punch).

7. During a Sabbath dinner years ago when a disparaging remark was made about the theory of evolution by another guest, and my friend the host went into his study and returned with a tall stack of scholarly books on the subject, he was probably wasting his effort because the first step to discovery seems to have little to do with science itself. (The willingness even to consider evidence that goes against one's own wishes and beliefs seems to be the necessary preliminary leap of unfaith.) Compare what the prosecutor does to demolish the arguments of intelligent design theorist Michael Behe in the Dover, PA evolution trial, as reenacted according to the court records in NOVA's documentary "Intelligent Design on Trial" (viewable online at www.pbs.org/wgbh/nova/evolution/intelligent-design-trial.html). In response to Behe's assertion that the bacterial motor flagellum is an example of irreducible complexity, the sudden eureka appearance of which scientists could not account for and whose component parts in residual form could have had no prior function, the prosecutor produced a tall stack of research demonstrating the contrary. The scene is emblematic of the mass of evidence that makes evolution both "fact and theory," as Stephen Jay Gould explains in his classic and still helpful essay, "Evolution as Fact and Theory," *Discover Magazine* (May 1981), reprinted in Gould, *Hen's Teeth and Horse's Toes* (New York, 1983), 253–262. Gould's suggestion in *Rocks of Ages* (New York, 1999), that science and religion comprise two "non-overlapping magisteria" (or NOMA), on the other hand, seems merely to recapitulate the dualist compromise, a God-of-the-gaps philosophy that would render supernaturalist or revealed religion obsolete, leaving room for the "spiritual" only in the interstices left vacant by scientific explanation—apparently, for Gould, roughly the territory covered by philosophy, ethics, and of course theology.

8. Primary early modern texts include Tyndale's *An Answer unto Sir Thomas More's Dialogue* (1531), Milton's manuscript "De Doctrina Christiana," Hobbes' *Leviathan* (1651) and *An Answer to a Book Published by Dr. Bramhall* (1682), and Richard Overton's *Man's Mortality* (1644), in addition to many other lesser-known controversialist treatises and pamphlets; modern historical studies of the history of mortalism (or soul sleep) include Norman T. Burns, *Christian Mortalism from Tyndale to Milton* (Cambridge, MA, 1972); Ann Thomson, *Bodies of Thought* (Oxford, 2008); Bryan W. Ball, *The Soul Sleepers* (Cambridge, 2008) with an Adventist slant; and earlier, also Adventist, and at great length in two volumes, L. E. Froom, *The Conditionalist Faith of Our Fathers* (Washington, D.C., 1965–66).

9. On the history of the Geoscience Research Institute see Ronald L. Numbers, *The Creationists* (Berkeley, 1992), 290–8. The book is required reading for all would-be controversialists on the subject of creation/evolution.

10. To coin a phrase from Lamont; see the block quotation embedded in the following paragraph of this essay.

11. Corliss Lamont, *The Illusion of Immortality* (New York, 1935), 49.

12. Lamont, 50.

13. Philippe Aries, *Western Attitudes toward Death* (Baltimore, 1974),

29–33. Oscar Cullmann's landmark study *Immortality of the Soul; or, Resurrection of the Dead! The Witness of the New Testament* (New York, 1958) demonstrates that body/soul dualism featuring belief in an unconditionally immortal soul was an import from Greek thought not native to the eschatology of the earliest Christians, who looked to a resurrection of the whole person.

14. As philosopher Thomas Nagel explains in *Mortal Questions* (Cambridge, 1979), "It is being alive, doing certain things, having certain experiences, that we consider good. But if death is an evil, it is the loss of life, rather than the state of being dead, or nonexistent, or unconscious, that is objectionable" (3). This is accurate to my own intuitions, and fits well with Adventist mortalism. Many Christian apologists during the early modern period argued that the atheist's motive was to deny the reality of the afterlife out of fear of eternal hellfire, which would be worse than not existing at all. Likewise Lucretius argues in *De rerum natura (On the Nature of Things)* that religion created an artificial fear of the gods and torment in an afterlife, whereas there was really nothing to fear because both the gods and life after death were illusions. In his Pulitzer Prize winner *The Denial of Death* (New York, 1973), Ernest Becker demonstrates to the contrary that fear of death is natural for all humans as a basic existential anxiety that fuels our various neuroses and other denials (including belief in immortality). See also *Love's Executioner* (New York, 1989), Stanford University psychology professor Irvin Yalom's powerful application of this theory during therapy sessions with ten patients for whom fear of death is the underlying cause of dysfunctional behavior.

15. Festinger, Riecken, and Schachter (*When Prophecy Fails* [New York, 1964]) write with an objectivity and an implicit compassion generally absent from the caustic intolerance of the so-called neoatheists. "Religion poisons everything" is the refrain of Christopher Hitchens's bestseller *God Is Not Great: The Case Against Religion* (London, 2007), and of course we know that pious zealotry has indeed cost countless lives and caused untold suffering. But surely, even in the absence of religion, sorrow and tragedy would continue—"everything," compared to human perceptions of how things ought to be, would still be "poisoned." No, religion is not so much the primal cause of human ills as a reaction or response to them, an attempted solution, or escape, or willful denial. It is the dream of a better world, the waking up from which is cause for genuine sorrow. Witness the desolation expressed by one disappointed Millerite:

Our fondest hopes and expectations were blasted, and such a spirit of weeping came over us as I never experienced before. It seemed that the loss of all earthly friends could have been no comparison. We wept, and wept, till the day dawn. I mused in my own heart, saying, My advent experience has been the richest and brightest of all my Christian experience. If this had proved a failure, what was the rest of my Christian experience worth? Has the Bible proved a failure? Is there no God, no heaven, no golden home city, no paradise? Is all this but a cunningly devised fable? Is there no reality to our fondest hope and expectation of these things? And thus we had something to grieve and weep over, if all our fond hopes were lost. And as I said, we wept till the day dawn. (quoted in Festinger, Riecken, and Schachter, 22)

Even unbelievers must read this as a human tragedy. How much has been lost that is good and noble and idealistic! Such dreams are not easily abandoned.

16. Festinger, Riecken, and Schachter, 12–23. Biblical scholarship presents another fascinating parallel to the Millerite experience—appropriately enough, in the book of Daniel, so important to the Millerites themselves, which seems to have been written and/or compiled by an apocalyptic community also anticipating the imminent end of time, apparently even involving some recalculations and reinterpretations of the predicted dates. Norman K. Gottwald concludes his treatment of Daniel in his book *The Hebrew Bible: A Socio-Literary Introduction* (Philadelphia, 1985) with the observation: “A realistic estimate of the apocalyptic devotees as activists, probably combatants, within the limits of their situation accords with the interesting fact that they did not discard or repudiate their apocalypse when it turned out that Daniel’s visions were wrong about the time of the end. Apparently, like other apocalyptists who have been studied in terms of social psychological cognitive dissonance theory, they reinterpreted events and carried on the struggle” (594). For such a community, under duress, the overarching theme that God is in control must have been very meaningful, and I think our understanding of this can add to our appreciation of the book.

17. The bold prediction that the Second Coming would take place on October 22, 1844, for example, was reinterpreted after the fact by the unfalsifiable claim that an event had then taken place in the heavenly sanctuary. Dualism in particular removes the objects of religious truth claims to an abstract/ethereal realm where they are less vulnerable to disqualification through the evidence of the senses. During our postmodern era in particular, it seems, seekers are invited into a sort of consumer-friendly, duty-free, reason-free, science-free, unempirical zone in which the will becomes the unfettered arbiter of reality. Thus the religious marketplace pitches faith as an arbitrary choice or free form of personal expression governed by consumer rights after a fashion parodied by Woody Allen as he literally shops around for a religion in *Hannah and Her Sisters*.

18. See for example the block quotation in note 15 above.

19. As William James asserts in his essay “The Will to Believe,” in matters of religion, which necessarily carry some doubt, he has “the right” to believe in line with his own wishes (*Essays on Faith and Morals*, Ed. Ralph Barton Perry [Meridian, 1962], 60; cf. 32.). Of course he has the right—it’s a free country. But many truth seekers are not satisfied with a belief founded upon such unsupported and avowedly subjective grounds. Note Thomas Nagel’s critique in *Mortal Questions* (Cambridge, 1979): “As a last resort, those who are uncomfortable without convictions but who also cannot manage to figure out what is true may escape by deciding that there is not right or wrong in the area of dispute, so that we need not decide what to believe, but can simply decide to say what we like so long as it is consistent, or else float above the battle of deluded theoretical opponents, observant but detached” (xi).

20. C. S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy* (Collins, 1959), 182. The phrase is used by David C. Downing in the title to his biogra-

phy of Lewis, *The Most Reluctant Convert: C. S. Lewis’s Journey to Faith* (InterVarsity Press, 2002).

21. William Shakespeare, *King Lear: A Conflated Text*, in *The Norton Shakespeare: Tragedies*, 2nd ed. (New York, 2008), v. iii., 305–7.

22. By contrast to the New Testament and Christian beliefs, death is represented as final in the Hebrew Bible, where the dead go down to “sheol” or the pit and one lives on only figuratively in one’s descendants. Likewise, a central theme of *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, previewed in even earlier Gilgamesh poems, our earliest surviving world literature dating back to the third millennium BCE, is the hard lesson that no one can return from the grave (*The Epic of Gilgamesh*, trans. Benjamin R Foster, [New York, 2001]). The hero cannot even pass a sleep test and stay awake for seven days, never mind overcome inherent mortality (fittingly, the clock that marks the time of the test is the rate of decay of each day’s freshly baked bread). In the Sumerian poem “The Death of Gilgamesh” the god Enlil, speaking in a dream, tries to reconcile Gilgamesh to death as the unavoidable and irremediable fate of mankind, and this is the keynote both for this poem and the later epic:

Gilgamesh, your fate was destined for kingship, it was not destined for eternal life,
 May your heart not sorrow that human life must end,
 May your spirit not be crushed, may your heart not be aggrieved.
 The misfortune of mankind has come for you, so I have decreed.
 What was set at the cutting of your umbilical cord has come for you, so I have decreed. (lines 78–82)

Referring to “Mankind, whose descendants are snapped off like reeds in a canebrake,” Utanapishtim (the “Noah” figure in the epic) leaves us with this image of transience:

Dragonflies drift downstream on a river,
 Their faces staring at the sun,
 Then, suddenly, there is nothing. (Tablet X, lines 312–314)

For evidence of radical unchristian doubts during the early modern period as an interesting context for Shakespeare’s dark vision in *King Lear*, see especially Robert N. Watson, *The Rest Is Silence: Death as Annihilation in the English Renaissance* (Berkeley, 1994) and secondarily, William R. Elton, *King Lear and the Gods* (San Marino, CA, 1968) and Jonathan Dollimore, *Radical Tragedy* (2nd ed., Durham, 1993).

23. In ameliorating and Christianizing Shakespeare’s dark vision (the play is set, after all, in pagan pre-Christian Britain), Nahum Tate has Edgar conclude his revision of the play with the following Panglossian moral: “Divine Cordelia, . . . / Thy bright Example shall convince the World/ (Whatever Storms of Fortune are decreed)/ That Truth and Vertue shall at last succeed,” *The History of King Lear . . . Reviv’d with alterations* (London, 1681), 67.

Prophecies
that imprudently
target specific
dates and
make falsifiable
predictions
are characteristic of
young cults,
not seasoned
religions...

When Philosophy Killed God: *Analytic Philosophy and the Death of God—What the Sixties Have to Tell Us* | BY RICHARD RICE



“Is God Dead?”

The most famous cover in the history of *Time Magazine* appeared on the issue of April 8, 1966, just a few days before Easter. In huge red letters, against a stark black background, screamed a three-word question, “Is God Dead?” The effect was sensational. The striking cover—and the article, which described the suggestion that we eliminate the word “God” from religious discourse—elicited thousands of letters to the editor, aroused impassioned commentaries and inspired

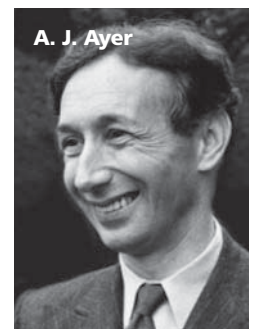
countless sermons. An Adventist evangelist on the verge of retirement, for example, said it was that cover that made him determined to keep going. “What had the world come to,” he asked a class of seminarians, “when the very people entrusted with defending the Gospel were actually trying to get rid of God?”

The article itself recounted the growing challenge theologians faced when they applied contemporary philosophy to traditional religious language. It also featured the relatively small number of theologians who had taken the position that it was not only necessary, but possible and even desirable, to dispense with God-language in their efforts to express the meaning of religious faith.¹

The Quest for Cognitive Meaning

The back-story of the God-is-dead, or radical theology of the sixties, as it was known, lies in analytic philosophy—in particular, in logical positivism. Analytic philosophy was the dominant stream of philosophical reflection among Anglo-American philosophers during the twentieth century. One of its most important features was the quest for a criterion of cognitive meaning. What, exactly, its practitioners persistently asked, qualifies as a meaningful assertion? When do sentences actually communicate information and when do they only purport to do so? The quest moved through several stages—from empirical verification, through empirical verifiability, to empirical falsifiability²—but all of them presupposed that putative assertions must satisfy empirical standards of meaning.

The quest for a criterion of cognitive meaning led a number of philosophers, such as A. J. Ayer (right), to conclude that all meaningful discourse, that is, cognitive discourse, could be placed in two



categories: tautologous statements and assertions capable of empirical verification.³ As Ayer formulated the “verification principle,” “all propositions which have factual content are empirical hypotheses. . . . [A] statement which is not relevant to any experience is not an empirical hypothesis, and accordingly has no factual content.” The implications of this conclusion for other forms of philosophy, in particular for metaphysical speculation, were profound. In Ayer’s words, “as tautologies and empirical hypotheses form the entire class of significant propositions, we are justified in concluding that all metaphysical assertions are nonsensical.”⁴ The problem is not that metaphysical theories are wrong, it’s that they have no meaning. The response of the analytic philosopher to the metaphysician is not, “I disagree with you,” or “I think you are mistaken,” but “I don’t know what you are talking about.” “You may be using familiar words, but you are not saying anything comprehensible.”

Though analytic philosophy was particularly interested in the mistakes of traditional philosophy, its criticisms had profound implications for theology as well. Note the memorable title of Malcolm Diamond’s article, “The Metaphysical Target and the Theological Victim.”⁵ The impact of this development on theology came to a head in the famous symposium, “Theology and Falsification.” Here Antony Flew (right) observed that believers characteristically refuse to specify any factual conditions that would lead them to deny that God exists. Since an assertion is meaningful precisely to the extent that it specifies what would refute it, he insisted, God-language is meaningless.⁶ An utterance like “God loves the world” sounds like a vast cosmological assertion, but it doesn’t really say anything. It may express subjective attitudes or aspirations—as R. M. Hare and Basil Mitchell suggest in their responses to Flew—but it conveys no information.



Antony Flew

Flew drove this point home with his famous parable of the gardener.

Once upon a time two explorers came upon a clearing in the jungle. In the clearing were growing many flowers and many weeds. One explorer says, “Some gardener must tend this plot.” The other disagrees, “There is no gardener.” So they pitch their tents and set a watch. No gardener is ever seen. “But perhaps he is an invisible gardener.” So they set up a barbed-wire fence. They electrify it. They patrol with bloodhounds. But no shrieks ever suggest that some intruder has received a shock. No movements of the wire ever betray an invisible climber. The bloodhounds never give cry. Yet still the Believer is not convinced. “But there is a gardener, invisible, intangible, insensible to electric shocks, a gardener who has no scent and makes no sound, a gardener who comes secretly to look after the garden which he loves.” At last the Skeptic despairs, “But what remains of your original assertion? Just how does what you call an invisible, intangible, eternally elusive gardener differ from an imaginary gardener, or even from no gardener?”

In this parable [Flew concludes] we can see how what starts as an assertion, may be reduced step by step to an altogether different status. A fine brash hypothesis may thus be killed by inches, the death by a thousand qualifications.

Now it often seems to people who are not religious [he continues] as if there was no conceivable event or series of events, the occurrence of which would be admitted by sophisticated religious people, to be a sufficient reason for conceding “There wasn’t a God after all” or “God does not really love us then.” What would have to happen not merely to tempt us but also to entitle us to say “God does not love us” or even “God does not exist”?

The Secular Meaning of the Gospel

One of the radical theologians who embraced this critique of religious language was Paul M. van Buren. In *The Secular Meaning of the Gospel Based on an Analysis of Its Language*, he ventured

In huge
red letters,
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screamed
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“Is God
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The article itself
recounted
the growing
challenge
theologians
faced when
they applied
contemporary
philosophy
to traditional
religious
language.

an interpretation of Christianity that dispensed with God-language entirely and focused instead on the figure of Jesus. According to van Buren, the principal problem facing contemporary Christian theology is the possibility of meaningful theological discourse.⁸ The problem arises from the fact that the world we live in today is secular, and Christians are very much a part of it. “Being a Christian” does not deny one’s involvement in the secular world—believers are not distinguished from “unbelievers” by a different sort of logic. So, the question facing contemporary theologians is not “How can the Christian communicate the Gospel to the secular unbeliever?” but “How can Christians who are themselves secular understand their faith in a secular way?”⁹

According to van Buren (*below*), secularity is simply a given for people today. It is not



Paul M. van Buren

something we may or may not choose to embrace; it is part of what we are. So, the choice facing modern Christians is not whether or not to be secular. It is whether or not they can find a meaningful understanding of their faith within.

Our interpretation of the Gospel must be “secular this perspective. Their choice is either a secular Gospel or no Gospel at all,” because modern thought is grounded in the “empirical attitudes” that characterize believers and unbelievers alike.¹⁰ In order to identify the secular meaning of the Gospel, theologians must find a way to interpret the faith that conforms to the empirical canons of meaning embraced by secularity.¹¹ The specific difficulty our secularity poses is that of finding any meaningful use of theistic language. As we have seen, the empirical attitudes of contemporary secularity call into question the logic of any use of the word “God.”¹² In a word, “the word ‘God’ is dead.”¹³ So, unless we can find a way to interpret Christian faith that dispenses with the word, there is no way to make Christianity intelligible to secular people

today, including ourselves.

While acknowledging their perspective as secular persons, believers must also remain faithful to the kerygmatic core of traditional Christian witness,¹⁴ and this is where the Gospel comes in. Since the figure of Jesus is central to Christianity, Christology must be central to any Christian theology. Since Christian faith has always had to do with the New Testament witness to Jesus of Nazareth and what took place in his history, Christology must be central to theology, and the norm of Christology must be Jesus of Nazareth as the subject of the apostolic witness.¹⁵

Van Buren’s objective is thus a theological formulation which will both satisfy secular criteria of meaning and reflect the characteristically Christian interest in the history of Jesus of Nazareth. As he sees it, there is no conflict between these two concerns; if anything, they are mutually reinforcing. On the one hand, empirical interests lead us to focus attention on the history of Jesus. On the other, loyalty to the intention of the apostolic message leads us to bring the assertions of apostolic preaching and the Chalcedonian Christological formulations into conformity with empirical standards of meaning.¹⁶ The primary resource in this endeavor is linguistic analysis, which determines the meaning of words and statements by logically analyzing how they are used.¹⁷ Recognizing that different kinds of language function in different ways, appropriate to different situations, the “modified verification principle” does not immediately rule out all religious language as meaningless, as does the more narrowly conceived verification criterion of logical positivism.¹⁸

The “secular meaning of the Gospel” emerges with a careful, functional analysis¹⁹ of the language of the New Testament, the Fathers, and contemporary believers.²⁰ While it rejects both literal and qualified literal theism, such analysis finds meaning in the language of faith, not as a set of cosmological assertions, but as the description of a particular way of life, as an expression of a certain basic conviction.²¹ When we look at the New Testament documents, we see that Jesus of Nazareth was a unique individual, whose most

distinctive characteristic was his personal freedom—a freedom manifested both in his conduct and in the content of his teaching. On the negative side, he was remarkably free from external authorities, domestic, civil, and religious, and on the positive side, he was uninhibitedly free for service to his neighbors.²²

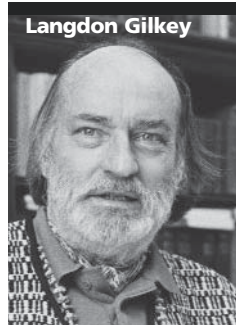
In addition to historical knowledge of Jesus, Christian faith also depends on “Easter,” an event which stands between every believer and the figure in whom he or she places faith.²³ Indeed, the essence of the Gospel is the Easter proclamation concerning Jesus of Nazareth.²⁴ The language of this proclamation, however, reveals nothing definite about a physical return to life. Instead, it reflects a dramatic transformation in the way Jesus’ disciples looked at him.²⁵ Easter was something that happened to them, not something that happened to Jesus.

In the unique perspective that Easter represents, the distinctive freedom that Jesus displayed was experienced as “contagious.”²⁶ The disciples were caught up in something like the freedom of Jesus himself. To speak of Jesus as risen, therefore, is to express the fact that one has experienced the liberating effect of his freedom. The function of the language of the Gospel is to express, define, and commend this particular historical perspective.²⁷ The fundamental expressions of these attitudes are meaningless as straightforward empirical assertions,²⁸ but as expressions of a historical perspective having far-reaching consequences in a person’s life, the utterances of faith do meet the verification principle of meaning.²⁹ To summarize “the secular meaning of the Gospel,” as van Buren describes it, “A Christian who is himself a secular man may understand the Gospel in a secular way by seeing it as an expression of a historical perspective.”³⁰

The short-lived attention radical theology received, animated though it was, suggests that it was but a passing episode in the history of twentieth century theology,³¹ but the phenomenon has something of lasting significance to say about the relation between theology and philosophy, and about God-language in particular.

Langdon Gilkey on Radical Theology

Along with the furor surrounding the Death of God theologians in the popular media, their proposals also generated a good deal of serious scholarly discussion. Two of their contemporaries were Langdon Gilkey (*below*) and Schubert M. Ogden, professors at the University of Chicago Divinity School and, according to Gary Dorrien’s history of American liberal the-



ology, important contributors to twentieth century religious thought.³² Both men subjected Death of God theologies to rigorous criticism, and both formulated constructive treatments of religious language in direct response to the challenge that radical theology posed.

They also take specific issue with van Buren’s project, arguing in different, but somewhat complementary, ways, that his attempt to salvage the Gospel by dispensing with God-language is ill-conceived and unsuccessful. As they see it, van Buren’s elimination of God-language leaves dimensions of human experience inadequately accounted for. The perceived meaninglessness of statements containing the word *God* is due, not to something inherently nonsensical about the notion of God, but to an inadequate concept of cognitive meaning, and behind that to an inadequate understanding of human experience. So, the basic problem with so-called secular versions of the Gospel, or attempts to interpret Christian faith without any reference to God, is not that they rely on empirical criteria of meaning. It is that the concept of experience operative in such attempts is far too limited.

In what may be the most important of his numerous books, Langdon Gilkey subjected radical theology to a thorough critique, and developed an extended case for the possibility of religious discourse in a secular age.³³ As Gilkey

Though analytic philosophy was particularly interested in the mistakes of traditional philosophy, its criticisms had profound implications for theology as well.

**The choice
facing modern
Christians
is not whether
or not to
be secular.
It is whether
or not they
can find a
meaningful
understanding
of their faith
within.**

analyzes it, “the central theological problem of radical theology” is the inconsistency of affirming two contradictory lordships: secularity and Jesus.³⁴ Although van Buren accepts the empirical attitudes of modern secularity, the great importance he attaches to the historical Jesus raises some serious questions. To begin with, there is an incompatibility between the Lordship of Jesus and radical human autonomy. If we are truly autonomous, and therefore without God, why and in what sense are we dependent on the strange figure of Jesus?³⁵ Indeed, if we are truly autonomous, why should we need a lord at all? Why not dispense with Jesus as well as with God? If Jesus is essential for our authenticity, then we are not truly autonomous. If Jesus is not really essential, then he is not truly Lord, but merely one of numerous available historical examples of human potentiality.³⁶ So, either Jesus is Lord and we are not autonomous, or we are autonomous and we don’t need Jesus. We can have it one way or the other, but not both.

Gilkey also finds problems with van Buren’s notion of contagious freedom. For one thing, van Buren fails to show just how “freedom” avoids his objections to the word “God” and meets the criteria which “God” fails to meet. He simply dismisses “God” as incompatible with empirical attitudes, and counter-asserts the category of “freedom.” Similar questions arise with regard to his use of the word “contagious.” How does it satisfy the criterion of empirical verifiability?³⁷ What is it that guarantees the contagion of Jesus’ freedom? What makes the influence of this historical figure unique, apart from all others? If there is no guarantee, then it is difficult to see why Jesus should be called Lord, rather than any historical figure bearing admirable characteristics.

Then, too, the freedom which characterized Jesus may just as well represent an unattainable norm as a genuine possibility, for how can the mere knowledge that one man was remarkably free have the effect of setting another free? Unless there is some factor to account for its transmission, the remarkable freedom of Jesus, instead of

liberating others, only serves to condemn those unable to achieve it in their own lives. In that case, Jesus becomes a Lord of Law, rather than the Lord of grace who sets other people free.³⁸ On the other hand, if there is something which guarantees that Jesus’ freedom sets other men free, what exactly is it? How can it be conceived except in categories at odds with the empirical assumptions van Buren commits himself to?

Van Buren’s affirmation of Jesus’ Lordship encounters further difficulties in connection with what can be known of him historically. The picture of Jesus that historical scholarship suggests refuses to fit the requirements of a godless, religionless Christianity. How can someone who proclaimed the soon coming of God’s kingdom in thoroughgoing eschatological concepts provide a model for activity in a world which has lost all sense of the transcendent? Moreover, the whole notion that Jesus’s life is one to be imitated is problematic. The central purpose of his life was to make his listeners aware of the reality and activity of God in the world. Even if Jesus is regarded as a historical paradigm for the activity of contemporary secular men and women, the value system of the present world is at odds with the love, service, and self-giving which the Lordship of Jesus implies. So, a theology built around the ethical requirements of Jesus is every bit as unsecular as any based on the transcendence of God.³⁹ “If intelligible Christian language is to be used at all,” Gilkey concludes, “God-language is necessary,”⁴⁰ and it is important that theology demonstrate why this is so.

There are two general ways of pursuing this objective, both of which move toward the same conclusion. One begins by analyzing certain constitutively human experiences, demonstrating that they presuppose, as a condition of the possibility of their being what they are, a certain background of ultimacy or transcendence. Then, on further analysis, it shows that this background exhibits characteristics of such a nature as to justify its identification with what theists mean by the word “God.” Another way is to first clarify the concept of God on a formal, logical basis,

and then demonstrate that the content of certain experiences is such that they cannot be adequately understood except as referring to what analysis reveals the concept of God to entail. Perhaps we could designate the first the phenomenological, and the second the metaphysical, resolution of the problem of the meaning of *God*. In both cases, the conclusion is the same: human experience includes a dimension in which the referent of the word “God” appears, and from this it follows that the word “God” is meaningful and that theological discourse is possible.

In *Naming the Whirlwind*, Gilkey takes the first approach, describing his study as “a phenomenology of religious apprehension within secular life,”⁴¹ which provides an “ontic” analysis of lived experience.⁴² His analysis of secular experience carefully examines disclosive experience, such as birth, and uncovers certain “ontological” structures which are constitutive of human existence.⁴³ They are contingency, relativity, temporality, and freedom. Further inspection reveals that these structures point beyond themselves to another dimension or context of experience—a region identifiable as “ultimacy” or “unconditionedness.” This dimension of experience is always present in human life as its source, ground, horizon, and limit; it is the presupposition of all we are and do.⁴⁴ Because it deals precisely with this range of ultimacy, which all human experience presupposes, religious language is meaningful after all.⁴⁵ Because it dismisses transcendent references as meaningless, a secular self-understanding is incoherent. It is contradicted by the true character of secular experience, which inherently presupposes this background of ultimacy.⁴⁶

Gilkey maintains that his proposal takes things only so far. If successful, it demonstrates that various constitutively human experiences presuppose, and thus serve as indicators of, a background of ultimacy or transcendence. However, to identify this background specifically with God lies beyond the point where he has advanced the discussion. For this reason, he describes his endeavor as “an ontic prole-

gomenon to theological discourse.” Its purpose is to prepare for theological discourse by delineating an area of experience within which religious discourse makes sense and communicates. But this is quite different from a full-fledged theology or metaphysics that speak explicitly of God.⁴⁷

Schubert Ogden on Radical Theology

In contrast to Gilkey’s carefully circumscribed “prolegomenon to theological discourse,” Schubert Ogden (*below*) responds to the challenge of



Schubert Ogden

radical theology by arguing that only explicitly theistic language does justice to the essential concern of Christianity.⁴⁸

Ogden credits van Buren with providing a clear statement of the empiricist challenge to religious discourse. As we have seen, van Buren advocates an interpretation of Christianity according to which “the statements of the Christian gospel are in no sense to be taken cognitively as assertions about a divine reality, but should be interpreted instead as expressions of a certain human stance or attitude.”⁴⁹ Since our secular consciousness is shaped by the language of modern science, which defines the scope of all meaningful cognitive discourse, “the outlook typical of men today makes any meaningful assertions about God impossible.”⁵⁰

Like Gilkey, Ogden rejects van Buren’s version of Christianity as inadequate to the language of the Gospel. He argues that “theology neither can nor must be non-objectifying, if that means wholly non-cognitive, and so lacking in all direct objective references to God and his gracious action.”⁵¹ Going beyond Gilkey, however, Ogden responds that theistic language is not merely a plausible option for those who seek a contemporary interpretation of Christian faith, it is an absolute necessity. “However absurd talking about God might be,” he exclaims, “it could never be so obvious-

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However, if direct experience comprises more than sense-perception, then language that does not meet the criterion of empirical verification is not necessarily devoid of cognitive meaning.

ly absurd as talking of Christian faith without God.”⁵² For the Gospel to have any meaning at all, therefore, secular or otherwise, a case must be made for the reality of God.

Ogden develops his argument for the reality of God in two stages. First, he seeks to show that the idea of God is the most adequate reflective account we can give of certain experiences human beings inescapably share. Then he proposes a concept of God that is consonant with these experiences. Both moments display a sensitivity to empirical concerns, the recognition that language makes sense only in relation to human experience. “The only way any conception of God can be made more than a mere idea having nothing to do with reality,” Ogden asserts, “is to exhibit it as the most adequate reflective account we can give of certain experiences in which we all inescapably share.” Indeed, “no assertions can be judged true, unless, in addition to being logically consistent, they are somehow warranted by our common experience, broadly and fairly understood.”⁵³

The crucial question, then, is what human experience, or what dimension of human experience, requires the idea of God in order to be understood? In a word, the answer is *faith*. The thesis of Ogden’s alternative to the non-cognitivist interpretation of religion is this: “For the secular man of today, as surely as for any other man, faith in God cannot but be real because it is in the final analysis unavoidable.”⁵⁴ We all live by faith, because this is the only way human beings can live, and when adequately understood, God is the only conceivable object of this faith.

According to Ogden, human beings live by faith in the sense that everything we do expresses an original and underlying confidence in the meaning and worth of our existence. In other words, we all exhibit a “basic existential faith.” Every human enterprise, particularly moral thought and action, rests on an original and inescapable trust in the nature of reality. Even self-destructive actions, one could argue,

reflect a confidence that these actions “make a difference,” that reality is patient of our efforts. Such existential faith is the necessary precondition of human selfhood.

The next step in Ogden’s response to the secularist challenge is to argue that the word “God” refers primarily to whatever it is about the whole, of which we experience ourselves as parts, that calls forth and justifies this original and inescapable trust.⁵⁵ What concept of God could adequately account for this basic existential faith? What qualities must God have to serve as the ever present object of our trust in the final worth of our existence?

An examination of this confidence reveals two essential characteristics by which God’s nature must be defined. As the ground of our secular faith in the ultimate worth of our lives, God must be relative to our life in the world; indeed, God must be the supremely relative reality and therefore capable of real internal relations to all our actions. At the same time, God’s relatedness to our lives must itself be absolute, for unless the ground of life’s significance exists absolutely that significance itself could not be ultimate or permanent. Consequently, the only view of God which explicates both elements in a secular faith in the ultimate worth of our life, is dipolar. It conceives of God as both supremely relative and supremely absolute.⁵⁶

Ogden finds the necessary conceptual resources to formulate a Christian theism precisely along these lines in the work of Alfred North Whitehead and Charles Hartshorne. Their view of God as both absolute and relative, both changing and changeless, provides a way of conceiving God’s reality that does justice to modern secularity. It provides a ground for our confidence in the ultimate significance of our lives, an object of our basic existential faith. Unlike van Buren’s secular interpretation of the Gospel, Ogden maintains, his own secular interpretation, resting as it does on a broadly empirical basis, is at once appropriate to the essential claims of the Bible and understandable in the present situation.⁵⁷

Broad versus Narrow Empiricism

In constructing alternatives to radical theology, Gilkey and Ogden offer empirical responses to empiricist challenges to Christian faith; in particular, to the meaning of theistic discourse. Their approaches are not empirical in the narrow sense which van Buren and his radical colleagues employ—one that depends on sensory or scientific data—but in the sense of finding confirmation in more generous conceptions of human experience. They find experiential evidence for the conclusion that religious language generally, and in Ogden's case, straightforwardly theistic language, is meaningful. It gives coherent expression to profound dimensions of human experience.

The contrast between these two perspectives directs our attention to the crucial issue that lies behind Death of God theology. What, exactly, is the scope of our experience? What does human experience include?

In restricting the scope of meaningful assertions to those capable of empirical verification, Death of God theologians like van Buren assume that the only areas of experience capable of meaningful assertive representation are those accessible to sense-experience, or to the extension of sense-experience through scientific instruments. But there are other, much more expansive, views of human experience. A. N. Whitehead, for example, regards "perception in the mode of presentational immediacy" (which is roughly, though not strictly, synonymous with sense-perception), as only one mode of perception.⁵⁸ Although this mode of perception is most easily recognized, since "we habitually observe by the method of difference,"⁵⁹ we also enjoy another mode of direct experience, namely, the mode of "causal efficacy."⁶⁰ For example, we are intuitively aware that the present conforms to the immediate past—an awareness we share with all organisms, and one that is particularly evident in lower grade ones.⁶¹ Because epistemologies such as that of Hume, who regarded relations

between presentationally immediate entities as the only type of perceptive experience,⁶² are unable to account for this phenomenon, their portrayal of human experience is inadequate.

However, if direct experience comprises more than sense-perception,⁶³ then language that does not meet the criterion of empirical verification is not necessarily devoid of cognitive meaning. So, even if van Buren and his radical colleagues are correct in concluding that theological utterances are not empirically verifiable, this does not mean that they are meaningless. (With rare exceptions, no one maintains that God is a directly observable entity alongside others in the sensorily perceptible world.)⁶⁴ The criterion of experiential verifiability is more generous than that of empirical verification. So, if human beings experience the referent of the word "God" in some mode other than presentational immediacy, God-language has cognitive meaning, whether or not it meets empiricist criteria. This is what Ogden in effect argues for. Because we experience God as the object of our basic existential faith, as a permanent element in our experience as human beings, God-language is meaningful, even though God's presence is not empirically verifiable.

Radical Theology in Retrospect

Granted, neither Gilkey nor Ogden presents himself as an analytic philosopher, so neither clearly exemplifies the linguistic turn in theology, but their efforts show how influential analytic philosophy and logical positivism were in twentieth century religious thought. When philosophy killed God in the mid-sixties, they were among those who responded to the challenge by seeking to bring God-language back to life.

There were, of course, numerous discussions of religious language following Death of God theology and its precedents in the theology and falsification debate. As Terrence Tilley's overview from the late seventies indicates, most of them took a tack similar to Flew's original respondents—R. M. Hare and Basil Mitchell—who maintained that we might be able to salvage God-language to some degree if we construed it

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as expressing certain human perspectives or emotions, but conceded that it lacked any discernible cognitive or assertive power.⁶⁵ Few of the considerations of theistic language offered arguments as robust as Ogden's. (Even Gilkey—despite his rigorous critique of van Buren—demurred from the claim that his prolegomenon does more than map out a place in human experience where God-language might find a home.) But once in a while the potential metaphysical import of theistic discourse got some recognition from analytic philosophers. In a widely read discussion of religious language that appeared in the early sixties, Frederick Ferre brings the final chapter, "The Manifold Logic of Theism," to a close by tentatively suggesting that theistic language may—just may—have cognitive significance.

"If language literally based on certain models of great responsive depth found within human experience is capable not only of synthesizing our concepts in a coherent manner but also of illuminating our experience," wonders Ferre, "we may ask *why* this happens to be the case." "And if some models," he continues, "are capable of providing greater coherence and adequacy than others, we may begin to suspect that this tells us something not only about the models but also about what reality is like..." And then, finally, this statement: "Theism is founded on the belief that reality is such that the metaphysical models of personal activity will best survive any tests which may be demanded."⁶⁶ More of a concession than a ringing affirmation, it is at least a recognition that God-language could make sense of our experience.

In pursuing a metaphysical route to the affirmation of God-language, have we abandoned the linguistic turn? I think not. Instead, I believe, we have discovered that the linguistic turn can lead to a road much broader than we may have realized.

Lessons from the Sixties

What, then, do the sixties have to tell us? At least two things.

For one, they show that we cannot avoid the thought-world in which we live. Both proponents and opponents of the Death of God recog-

nized the inherent secularity of the modern mindset. Like it or not, our view of the world is largely framed by science. As John Herman Randall notes, science was more important than any other factor in shaping the modern mind.⁶⁷ The reason science is so influential is the fact that it is so effective. Let's face it—science is the most reliable and generally accepted means we have of acquiring knowledge, and in one way or another we all enjoy its benefits. As Ian Barbour states at the beginning of his Gifford Lectures, "The first major challenge to religion in an age of science is the success of the methods of science."⁶⁸ This challenge may not be obvious to everyone. Indeed, it may not be obvious to anyone...for a while, that is. But sooner or later the underlying perspective of an age—and its philosophical expression—comes to shape the general outlook of all who inhabit it.

Linguistic analysis in the form of logical empiricism expresses a deep seated and widespread conviction that the scientific method provides a reliable, indeed privileged, access to truth. So effective is science in accounting for the world around us that it seems natural to conclude that the world accessible to science—the world accessible through the senses, or the instrumental extension of the senses—is the only world there is. It is not a major step for those steeped in science to reach the conclusion that the only sort of utterances that make cognitive sense—that actually communicate reliably about the world—are those that are accessible to empirical verification.

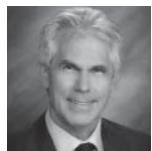
The sixties also tell us that theology cannot ignore philosophy. Whether or not we accept philosophy as the final arbiter of truth, we must take seriously philosophy's attempt to represent the best of human reflection and formulate standards of responsible belief. When philosophy challenges religious belief, we must rely on philosophy to solve the problems that philosophy creates. Analytic philosophy in its various forms focused attention on the function of all language, religious language included, and an effective expression of religious faith, in the intellectual

environment where analytic philosophy prevails, must take the nature, scope, potential vulnerability, and inherent resources that religious language provides.

The response of the theologians whose work we have noted to Death of God theology was not to deny the validity of scientific method, nor the secular perspective to which it naturally leads. It was to show that scientific language is not the only language that makes sense. There are facets of human experience and corresponding dimensions of reality which are not accessible to scientific inquiry, that is, to empirical investigation, and whose claims are not appropriately adjudicated by scientific examination. Nevertheless, by a broadly construed understanding of “empirical,” one based on a wider range of experience than scientific inquiry involves, they offer impressive arguments for the conclusion that religious language, in particular the locution “God,” indeed satisfies experiential criteria of meaning and truth.

For some in the sixties, it looked like philosophy had killed God, but for others, God is very much alive, and someone we can still talk about. More important, perhaps, God is someone we can still talk to. ■

Richard Rice presented this paper as the keynote address



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Suffering and the Search for Meaning.

References

1. They included Thomas J. J. Altizer, William Hamilton, Gabriel Vahanian, and Paul M. van Buren.
2. According to Karl Popper, it is “not the verifiability but the falsifiability of a system [that] is to be taken as a criterion of demarcation.” “It must be possible for an empirical scientific system to be refuted by experience” (*The Logic of Scientific Discovery* [Harper Torchbooks, 1959, 1968], 40, 41; italics original).
3. For a helpful review of various expressions of and

approaches to the empirical challenge to God-language, see the anthology, *The Logic of God: Theology and Verification*, eds. Malcolm L. Diamond and Thomas V. Litzenburg, Jr. (Bobbs-Merrill, 1975).

4. Alfred Jules Ayer, *Language, Truth and Logic* (2nd ed.; Dover, 1946, 1952), 41.

5. *The Journal of Religion*, vol. 46, no. 3 (July 1967).

6. “To know the meaning of the negation of an assertion, is...to know the meaning of that assertion. And if there is nothing which a putative assertion denies then there is nothing which it asserts either: and so it is not really an assertion.” (*New Essays in Philosophical Theology*, eds. Anthony Flew and Alisdair MacIntyre [New York, 1955], 98).

7. Flew and MacIntyre, 96–98.

8. Paul M. van Buren, *The Secular Meaning of the Gospel Based on an Analysis of Its Language* (London, 1963), 4.

9. Van Buren, 2, 4.

10. *Ibid.*, 20, 79, 84.

11. *Ibid.*, 156. Van Buren describes this aspect of his concern as coincident with that of the theological left, whose objective is to think through Christian faith in light of the critique of modern thought (170).

12. *Ibid.*, 84.

13. *Ibid.*, 103.

14. *Ibid.*, 156.

15. *Ibid.*, 8, 156. Van Buren regards this aspect of his concern as coincident with that of the theological right (169).

16. *Ibid.*, 79, 158–59.

17. *Ibid.*, 14.

18. *Ibid.*, 15.

19. In formulating his method, van Buren incorporates the conclusions of four students of religious language: R. M. Hare’s interpretation of theological utterances as non-cognitive expressions of a “blik,” a fundamental attitude achieved independent of empirical inquiry, rather than as assertions (85); I. T. Ramsey’s elaboration of Hare’s blik concept in terms of discernment and commitment (91); T. R. Miles’ description of the way of silence qualified by parallels (91); and R. B. Braithwaite’s thesis that religious assertions declare an intention to act in a certain way, accompanied by the entertainment of stories associated with this intention (96).

20. *Ibid.*, 19.

21. *Ibid.*, 100–101.

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22. Ibid., 121–24.
23. Ibid., 126.
24. Ibid., 197.
25. Ibid., 127–128.
26. Ibid., 132.
27. Ibid., 158. This view of the language of faith bears a close resemblance to Hare's interpretation of theological utterances as the expression of a blik. Because of its non-cognitive character (97), the language of a blik does not consist of statements of fact or explanations of states of affairs (143). Although the blik conception of the language of faith is fundamental to his proposal, van Buren modifies it somewhat by insisting that the Christian's blik is related decisively to a specific segment of secular history (143).
28. Ibid., 154.
29. Ibid., 199.
30. Ibid., 193.
31. Within a few years, another cover appeared on *Time Magazine* bearing the question "Is God Coming Back to Life?" (December 26, 1969).
32. See Gary Dorrien, "Theology and Modern Doubt: Langdon Gilkey, Schubert M. Ogden, James M. Gustafson, Gordon D. Kaufman," Ch. 5 in *The Making of American Liberal Theology: Crisis, Irony, and Postmodernity 1950–2005* (Westminster John Knox Press, 2005).
33. Langdon Gilkey, *Naming the Whirlwind: The Renewal of God-Language* (New York, 1969). Note the titles of the major sections: "Part 1: The Challenge to God-Language," and "Part 2: The Renewal of God-Language."
34. Ibid., 148.
35. Ibid., 150.
36. Ibid., 157.
37. Ibid., 126.
38. Ibid., 160–62.
39. Ibid., 152, 153, 155.
40. Ibid., 166.
41. Ibid., 413.
42. Ibid., 275.
43. Ibid., 317–319.
44. Ibid., 296–97.
45. Ibid., 365.
46. Ibid., 363.
47. Ibid., 413, 416. The way Gilkey carefully limits his objectives in *Naming the Whirlwind* stands in rather striking contrast to the concluding chapter of his book *Shantung Compound* (New York, 1966), published just three years

- earlier. There he argues explicitly that it is only in God that we find the fulfillment of two fundamental human needs, viz., our need for an object of loyalty that transcends all finite interests, and thus makes genuine morality possible, and our need for a source of meaning in a time of social chaos.
48. Schubert Ogden, "The Reality of God" in *The Reality of God and Other Essays* (New York, 1966).
49. Ibid., 85.
50. Ibid., 14.
51. Ibid., 90.
52. Ibid., 14.
53. Ibid., 20.
54. Ibid., 21.
55. Ibid., 34, 36–37.
56. Ibid., 47–48.
57. See Ibid., 66–67.
58. Alfred North Whitehead, *Symbolism* (New York, 1959), 21.
59. Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality* (New York, 1969), 7.
60. Whitehead, *Symbolism*, 17.
61. Ibid., 41.
62. Ibid., 34.
63. In an article on Whitehead's generalizing power, Charles Hartshorne identifies both memory and sense perception as experiences of the past—in the case of sense perception the immediate past—and argues that memory is the more inclusive of the two ("Whitehead's Generalizing Power," in Whitehead's *Philosophy: Selected Essays 1935–1970* [Lincoln, Nebraska], 129–39).
64. Cf. Gilkey, 266.
65. Terrence W. Tilley, *Talking of God: An Introduction to Philosophical Analysis of Religious Language* (Paulist Press, 1978).
66. Frederick Ferre, *Language, Logic and God* (Harper Torchbooks, 1961), 164–65.
67. John Herman Randall, Jr., *The Making of the Modern Mind: A Survey of the Intellectual Background of the Present Age* (New York, 1977), 164.
68. Ian Barbour, *Religion in an Age of Science: The Gifford Lectures*, 2 vols. (San Francisco, 1990, 1993), 1:3.

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Why I Try to Believe: Nathan Brown Confronting Atheism | BY CHARLES SCRIVEN

Nathan Brown (*right*) and Ryan Bell are good friends. Brown is book editor at Signs Publishing Company in Australia and Bell, the former pastor of the Hollywood Seventh-day Adventist Church, has come off a year-long experiment with atheism.



Nathan Brown

Bell (*below*) now says that he doesn't think God "exists." The world, he explains, "makes more sense to me as it is, without postulating a divine being who is somehow in charge of things." Brown has published a book that is, in substantial part, a response to his friend's experience. It's called *Why I Try to Believe: An Experiment in Faith, Life and Stubborn Hope*, and his friend is author of the foreword. Ryan Bell says Brown's book is "likely among the most honest efforts to grapple with faith in the midst of doubt that you will find."



Ryan Bell

His book is a memoir as well as a theological reflection, a record of why he persists in Christian conviction "despite challenges and disappointments" such as come, he suggests, to any thoughtful person of faith. The word "trying" in the book's title expresses "healthy honesty," what he also calls "humility." It's an acknowledgement, too, that many of his questions remain "unanswered."

Titles for the book's ten chapters aptly summarize the author's themes. After "Trying to Believe" comes "Hoping to Believe," where Brown quotes Jim Wallis's remark that two groups may be the best at viewing the world "realistically." They are "the cynics and the saints," and they differ in this crucial regard: the saints, but not the cynics, enjoy "the presence, power and possibility of hope."

Hoping that life is "more than molecules and mathematics" changes us for the good, he says, and "reconnects us to the present."

Brown has published a novel, and so it should be no surprise that one chapter is called "Believing the Stories." He describes a visit with his wife to the Holy Land, where the commercial uses of the scriptural record seem off-putting, but helped him realize that seeing "holy places" is not so much the point as is rediscovering "holy stories." The following chapter, "Clinging to Belief," recounts stories about C. S. Lewis and the biblical character of Job as a means of dealing with inexplicable sorrows and griefs. "Believing Jesus" suggests that theories about "how salvation works" may distract from the deeper point of the story. Quoting from one of Ryan Bell's sermons, he emphasizes that Jesus "knows something more about life than we do," and then shares his favorite "picture" of Jesus, one that is often "skipped over." Found in Matthew 12, it shows Jesus defining his mission in terms of Isaiah 42; he proclaims "justice to the nations," and refuses all the while to "crush the weakest reed or put out a flickering candle."

The book is thus not only a defense of faith but also a critique of faith gone wrong. True faith is not escape from responsibility but alignment with the divine initiative for justice on earth. To be, with Abraham as well as with Jesus, a "blessing to others" means taking up a kind of holy "activism." You "try to believe"—Chapter 7 is calling "Wanting to Believe"—in order to be "good for our world."

Not that Christ's victory over death is shunted aside. From the perspective of faith, the grave cannot, Brown thinks, be the end, but he does resist unbiblical borrowings from Platonic philosophy that devalue the physical life God has given us. "If belief makes us less engaged with the life and world we are given, we have something askew," he declares.

The theme of humility returns in Chapter 9, where he addresses his own struggle with hypocrisy. He goes on to suggest that critics of religion may be less offended by “inconsistency of living” than by “pretending” to have somehow risen above it. He offers a possible summary of Jesus’ message, “Let’s go for a walk together,” and then says, “No matter how hypocritical and faltering I might be, grace invites me still.”

The book is short—about 120 pages in all—and ends with another reference to Ryan Bell. Precisely in the context of his friend’s “experiment with atheism,” Brown says, “I have chosen again to try to believe.”

In the context of Adventist life today, the book is encouraging not just for its evocation of faith in the midst of secularity but also, and perhaps especially, for its candor and humility. This helps to make it a good read, at once deeply relevant and fully comprehensible. The Gospel of Matthew can speak of “doubt,” even among the disciples (Matthew 28:16–20), and then proceed immediately, without handwringing or raising of eyebrows, to its final call to participation in the mission. The book is thus an expression, despite potential huffing and puffing from naysayers, of, precisely, the Matthean vision.

Here now is further perspective from the author:

Question: *You’re a book man—a reader, writer and editor of books, a self-described “word nerd.” And you invest so much of yourself in Adventist publishing, in other people’s words. Why do you think all this makes a difference? Why, to the church, should words matter so much?*

Answer: Despite all the other forms of communication and media, books remain important cultural artifacts. They still matter to both readers and writers because they offer the most considered and developed setting for ideas, stories, conversations and arguments. A book is a serious undertaking for a writer, a publisher and a reader, so should demand the best from all three. Compared to a comment on a blog or social media post, we expect that a book is

more than mere reaction, has been through a significant process of mediation and refinement, and has a life expectancy beyond tomorrow afternoon. In the church, some argue that our message and our beliefs are so important that we should use any and every means available. By contrast, I would argue that our message and our beliefs are so important that we should use the best means available, in both format and creative development.

Question: *In Why I Try to Believe you acknowledge, even apologize for, the evils done in the name of religion. Still, you take faith and hope to be good for the world, and one reason you try to believe is so that you can be good for the world. Your reason seems to be related to the theme of “Do Justice,” but can you say more?*

Answer: We can’t talk about faith in the world today without this kind of acknowledgment. I read some years ago the suggestion that apologetics today needs a lot more plain apology. But where we go after that is an important question. It seems to me that the better response to bad religion is not no religion, but better religion. In much of my writing and editing work—of which both these books are good examples (I hope)—I try to share my hopes for what faith can be, even what it ought to be. And as I read the Bible, its description of faith includes a real, active and practical passion for justice—and that must be good for the world. Among other motivations, we believe and act for the benefit of those outside the narrower definitions of our faith.

Question: *Your book is a wrestling with doubt, and with questions life throws us “in the form of our sorrows and joys, grief and triumphs, disappointments and hopes.” But two other themes, honesty on the one hand and humility on the other, are also prominent. So if doubt is a problem, might it also be, in some sense, a virtue?*

Answer: In doubt are the seeds of both change and growth. Questions are often more useful than rote answers. But we need to find healthy ways to be honest about our doubts, at the

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same time as keeping these doubts in perspective and recognizing that living in tension does not mean we are unable to believe. Let's be honest about our doubts and humble with our questions, which means we are also prepared to doubt our doubts and question our questions.

Question: *Ellen White said famously that God has never removed the possibility of doubt. She said we have "evidence enough," but added that our beliefs about God "must ever remain clothed in mystery..."*

Answer: Faith is a complicated question, particularly when we recognize we are dealing in what we cannot prove. After all, the incomprehensibility of God is among the attributes that make God worthy of being called God. But mystery does not mean we can't know—although perhaps only "through a glass darkly"—or choose to trust.

Question: *You quote Jim Wallis to the effect that only "cynics and saints" see the world realistically. What do you mean by that?*

Answer: The quote talks about the choices we make when we look at our lives and the world around us. The first choice is whether we ignore the reality of our various situations, then we choose how we respond to those realities. Wallis' suggestion is that we choose either despair or cynicism—as a kind of coping mechanism—or hope. Ultimately, I believe we can choose to hope in ways that are both realistic and transformative.

Question: *On a trip to the Holy Land with your wife, you realized that the point was not so much to visit "holy places" as to rediscover "holy stories." Say more. Why do stories figure so importantly in your understanding of faith?*

Answer: Probably because that is my way of understanding life. With degrees in English, writing and literature, I am well trained in thinking about—and thinking in—story. Stories are significant in what it means to be human,

giving shape and meaning to our experiences and ideas. Unsurprisingly, this is also the way that the Bible presents faith to us. At its core is the story of Jesus—and the stories He told. But I also wonder if the books that are "opened" in the Bible's judgment scenes (see, for example, Revelation 20:12) might not be, as I seem to have assumed growing up, some kind of accountant's ledger tallying all the rights and wrongs, but instead might be the recorded stories of each of our lives, reminding us that our lives do matter, and allowing for much greater nuance than the bare statistics of our lives. Sorry, distracted there with an idea I have been thinking on recently—but, yes, stories matter.

Question: *Alluding to Moses' great sermon in Deuteronomy, you suggest at the end of the book that choosing to believe is the "key to your life." Your whole book is about why this is so, but I still wonder what single thing you might say in defense of the claim if your friend Ryan Bell were listening in just now?*

Answer: From the conversations I have had with Ryan around this book, we have found common ground in the idea of choice as a key part of the questions of belief, not blind choice but nonetheless a choice or choices we each make. When he and I make different choices in relation to faith, that questions each other's choice, which can strain friendship, but should not be the end of the conversation. So I would say to Ryan, "Thank you for listening to and contributing to my attempt to explain why I choose to believe. And, as mentioned in the book, I pray for you still—in what I hope is a friendly, non-combative, non-condescending way." ■

Charles Scriven chairs Adventist Forum. This interview appeared on the *Spectrum* web site April 23, 2015.



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Telling a Better Story: Reasoning about God in A Secular Age

| BY ZANE G. YI

Is it possible to reason about belief in God in a secular age? We live in a time when belief in God is no longer, in many places, a cultural given. Secondly, and perhaps relatedly, we are increasingly aware of and sensitive to reason's limitations in the face of religious, cultural, and ethical plurality. In such times, it's tempting to react to these shifts by either *aggrandizing* or *abandoning* reason. One might pine for days when people were more reasonable, and rehash familiar arguments for or against God's existence. Or, alternatively, one could celebrate the demise of reason's hegemony, reveling in reality's unknowability. A philosopher who opts out of both extremes is Charles Taylor who, in his magnum opus, *A Secular Age*, attempts to reason about belief in God by reasoning differently—by telling a better story.¹ In what follows, I want to examine his argument, clarifying both it and its significance.

The Inevitability of Master Narratives

One of Taylor's obvious goals is to offer a new master narrative of Western modernity; immediately, this gives rise to some legitimate reservations. Master narratives are comprehensive explanations of who we are, how we got here, and where we are going. One influential description of the times in which we live is as one characterized by a general "incredulity" toward master narratives.² This suspicion is based on a two-fold concern. One stems from how such narratives have been used to legitimate oppressive agendas that marginalize and brutalize others.

Beyond this, historians note that master narratives provide sweeping, generalized interpretations that seem much more interested in a *telos*, i.e. interpreting how events are leading to a certain goal, instead of providing an account of actual historical causality. This leads to overlooking important details, or forcing details to fit a pre-conceived narrative arch. So, instead of sweeping accounts of history

on a macro-scale, academic historians today focus on studying specific people, events, or time periods.

Despite their misuses, abuses, and short-comings, it turns out that master narratives are unavoidable: "We all yield them, including those who claim to repudiate them," notes Taylor.³ One reason for this persistence is psychological. As humans, we continue to draw on them because they shape our individual and communal sense of identity; where we've come from and where we are going. The stories we tell of our own lives are embedded in a sense, although not always explicit, of some grander arch (or, perhaps, collapsing of one).

Responding to the claim that the age of grand narratives is over, Taylor argues: "[T]he post-modern writers themselves are making use of the same trope in declaring the reign of narrative ended: ONCE we were into grand stories, but NOW we have realized their emptiness and we proceed to the next stage."⁴ In other words, making such a claim involves a performative contradiction.

It turns out that opting out of the conversation leaves a vacuum eagerly filled by others unaware (or perhaps, sinisterly, fully aware) of the dangers of master narratives. As Thomas McCarthy points out, "it has proven dangerous to leave this field to those who misuse it."⁵ Moral and intellectual responsibility, then, calls for telling *better* master narratives, rather than denying or ignoring them.

The Epistemic Significance of Master Narratives

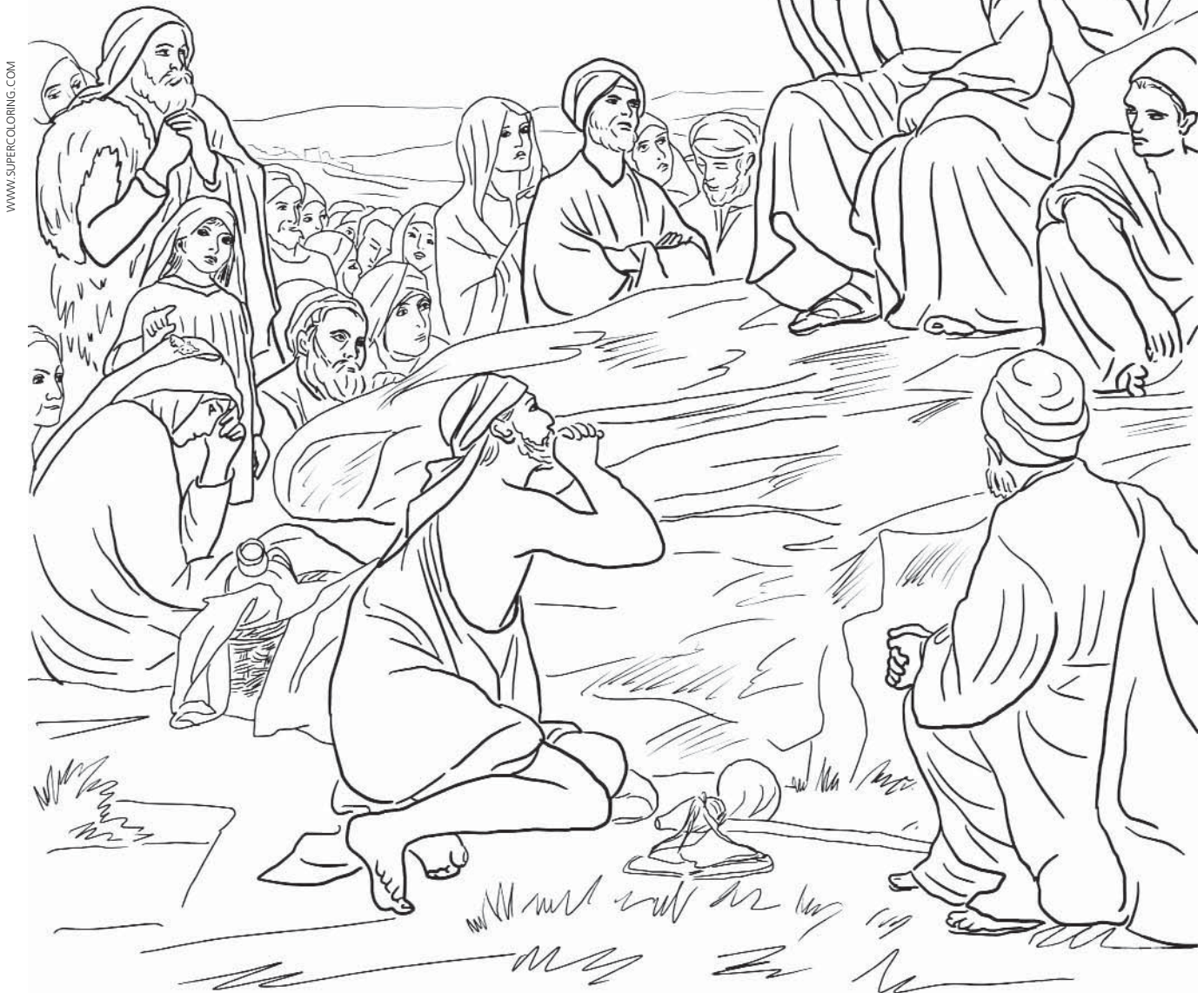
Beyond these psychological and ethical considerations, however, master-narratives are also epistemically significant, and thus of special interest to philosophers like Taylor. Narratives shape our attitudes toward our beliefs. They can make beliefs seem more or less plausible in at least a couple of ways. First, certain beliefs can be viewed as a threat, or as aligning with one's personal identity and

values. Second, certain beliefs can be viewed as an epistemic regression or gain in relation to this master narrative. Narratives can also lend a sense of legitimacy for certain beliefs, making them seem obviously true or as an advance over previously held, but erroneous beliefs.

Narratives are epistemically significant at a more fundamental level. Narratives affect the experience of reality itself (rather than just beliefs about reality). This has been pointed out by philosophers working in the phenomenological tradition, who attempt to carefully describe and analyze human experience. Such analysis has shown that all experience has a temporal structure to it. According to Edmund Husserl, the founder of phenomenology, consciousness

of an object at a given point also involves the consciousness of the experience that preceded it. This form of memory, called “retention,” is distinct from explicit recollection. Take, for example, the experience of listening to a musical melody. Hearing a particular note involves an awareness of the note that preceded it, although, perhaps this may not be a focused awareness.

Furthermore, according to Husserl, perceptual



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experience also involves an expectation of what will happen next. He calls this "protention." To continue the analysis of listening to music, hearing the note of a melody involves the anticipation of the note that will follow it. Once again, as in the case of retention, this may not be explicit. The important point is that both retention and protention are constitutive of experience in the present. In other words, there is a temporal structure to experience. The idea of a 'pure' sequence of isolated events, as David Carr puts it, may be "thinkable or conceivable, but it is not experienceable."⁶ Perception, at a fundamental level, has a "protentive-retentive" structure to it.

Our experience of each moment is shaped by our sense of what has come before it and what will come after. One might argue that this awareness stretches both ways into the more distant past and future. This is why master narratives are so significant. They explain the past and forecast the future. Think about this on a personal level. One's confidence, or lack thereof, of their ability to tackle a challenge they are facing is shaped by the sense he or she has of the trajectory of their life. If it is one that is riddled with past failure and expected to end in similar fashion, one experiences the present circumstances as insurmountable or oneself as incapable. "I can't do it," one might conclude.

Both our experience of reality and beliefs about it are shaped by the narratives we tell or implicitly affirm. This includes experience or non-experience of the divine and belief or disbelief in God. According to Taylor, the general sense of history provided by "the subtraction story" often functions as an "unchallenged axiom"⁷ that makes the claims of religion seem pre-reflectively implausible. He points out:

The narrative dimension is extremely important, because the [attitude many people have toward religion] comes less from the supposed detailed argument (that science refutes religion, or that Christianity is incompatible with human rights), and much more from the general form of the narratives, to the effect that there was once a time when religion could flourish, but that this time is past.⁸

Subtraction stories of modernity refers generally to a variety of master narratives that share a similar structure, explaining religion to be part of a problematic past and modernity as being the result of a sustained process of progress over irrationality.⁹ This can make belief in God seem antiquated and antithetical to intellectual and social progress. Such narratives also predict the decline and inevitable demise of religion. Obviously, if affirmed as true, such tales can shape one attitudes towards religion, generally, the beliefs associated with it, and even experience of reality itself; God really seems dead before I even begin thinking about it.

The Reform Master Narrative

So it seems that reasoning about belief in God today involves re-examining, contesting, and retelling the stories of how we got where we are. How did we become a society where belief in God is no longer a given? Although the length, scope, and details of Taylor's response to this question are daunting,¹⁰ the basic thesis he advances is fairly simple: a significant, but unacknowledged, historical force driving Western secularization are the reform movements that originated in the late medieval ages. On this account, religion was a driving force behind secularism, rather than its opponent or victim.¹¹

Taylor argues that secularism required a transformation in the way humans collectively thought of themselves; a new anthropology. Instead of viewing themselves as passive, "porous" subjects, embedded in a social or cosmic fabric, humans had to grow more confident in their abilities to create a flourishing social order, eventually coming to understand themselves as active, "buffered" agents.¹²

While Taylor acknowledges other important factors, i.e. Stoicism, Renaissance humanism, the scientific revolution, etc., he claims that Christian reform movements "which aimed to remake European society to meet the demands of the Gospel, and later of 'civilization'," played an essential role in making this new self-conception widely plausible.¹³ Originally these reform

movements started out as attempts to improve monastic and clerical practice, but grew to include the laity as well. For example, in 1215, the Lateran Council demanded “a regime of moral and educational standards of the clergy; this was the first of numerous attempts to raise once-yearly confession, absolution and communion on all lay people.”¹⁴ Taylor’s Foucauldian thesis is that these attempts gained momentum, resulting in more ambitious reform movements that attempted “to change the habits and life-practices, not only religious but civil, of whole populations; to instill orderly, sober, disciplines, productive ways of living in everyone.”¹⁵

Over time, the relative success of these early reform movements picked up steam and became more ambitious. Attempts to reform movements started with the elites of society, but were eventually imposed on others. New initiatives of educating and “civilizing” the public were complemented by new laws. All this resulted in many individuals developing “disciplined, sober, and industrious” lives as a second-nature and an increased confidence in the human ability for self-transformation, as well as the transformation of society.¹⁶

This new found confidence culminates in a new understanding of human nature, one understood to be motivated by benevolence on a universal scale:

*It [i.e. exclusive humanism] was accompanied by an increased sense of human power, that of the disengaged, impartial, ordering agent, or of the self-giver of law, or of an agent who could tap immense inner resources of benevolence and sympathy, empowering him/her to act for universal human good on an unprecedented scale.*¹⁷

Taylor claims that the creation/discovery of such moral sources is “one of the great realizations in the history of human development.”¹⁸

All this eventually leads to the emergence and widespread acceptance of an ethical stance Taylor terms “exclusive humanism”; this is “a humanism accepting no final goals beyond

human flourishing, nor any allegiance to anything beyond this flourishing.”¹⁹ Ultimately, the result of these reform movements, originally motivated, ironically, by religious ideals, is that they created the conditions of possibility for a purely immanent understanding of reality. A secularized anthropology, it turns out, is the pre-cursor to a secularized view of reality, rather than vice versa.²⁰

So one of Taylor’s goals in offering this narrative is to correct what he takes to be significant oversight when it comes to the past. If Taylor’s story is correct, Western secularism is the byproduct of a deeply religious past. It was Christian ideals, efforts, and impulses that originally motivated the drive to transform society and resulted in making it seem not only possible, but for many, the ultimate ethical *telos*.

But beyond correcting erroneous sweeps of history, Taylor is out to further complicate matters. Taylor’s narrative continues to include an analysis of exclusive humanism’s spread, as well as fracture, to generate new varieties of belief and unbelief, i.e. movements like Romanticism, existentialism, and Nietzschean anti-humanisms. These inevitably influence Christianity, which also morphs and melds into a plethora of new forms. As José Casanova points out, the reform master narrative avoids simple, cost-free claims of supersession. Taylor “pays equal attention to the grievous losses, the Christian self-mutilation, and the homogenizing conformity that accompanies the triumph of secularity...”²¹ Christianity, because of its shared past with exclusive humanism, is fraught with gains, achievements, losses, costs, and tensions.

Evaluating Master Narratives

This is one of the reasons Casanova claims that Taylor’s account is “the best analytic, phenomenological, and genealogical account” of modernity he is aware of.²² The analysis informing Casanova’s accolade, helps us understand ways one might go about evaluating master narratives (which, as has been pointed out, are not forms of historical scholarship). One can access them

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come after.**

by comparing them with one another.

There are four basic types of master narratives of modernity:²³

1. the triumphant secularist progressive stories of enlightenment and emancipation from religious institutions and norms;
2. inverse negative philosophies of history, counter-Enlightenment narratives, traditionalist defenses of a lost normative age;
3. the positive identifications of secular modernity as a process of internal secularization and progressive institutionalization of Christian principles and norms; and
4. Nietzschean-derived critical genealogies of modernity, which question the legitimacy of the modern secular age because of its bastard Christian lineage.

Subtraction stories, which Taylor is trying to challenge and displace, belong to the first group of narratives. Taylor's reform narrative, however, cannot be classified as belonging clearly to the latter three categories. His account is distinct from the second type of narrative offered, for example, by Alasdair MacIntyre²⁴ or John Milbank,²⁵ who both put forth largely negative assessments of modernity. Although, like Nietzsche, Taylor's account acknowledges that the ethical ideals of modernity are derived from religious/Christian roots, he does not see this as being problematic.²⁶ Taylor's narrative comes closest, perhaps, to the third type of narrative, yet is distinct because of the way it incorporates the valid insights of each of the other three accounts, and avoids their one-sided over-simplifications.

In addition to comparison, another way to one might evaluate a master narrative is indicated by Robert Bellah, another prominent sociologist of religion, who identifies three major defects that characterize most master narratives.²⁷

1. There is the tendency by those who offer them to draw radical dichotomies—"us" versus "them," civilization versus barbarism, etc.

2. This dichotomy can be drawn temporally between earlier and later points in history, with one's own culture or position representing a higher degree of development or progress than others.
3. Past or present injustices are justified as the necessary preconditions of a better future.

A master narrative might, thus, be evaluated by examining whether it avoids or exemplifies these characteristics. It seems that Taylor makes concerted efforts to avoid these defects with his narrative; the reform master narrative avoids radical dichotomies, progressive views of history, or justifications of past injustices. On the other hand, many subtraction stories exemplify the defects pointed out by Bellah. So, beyond meeting the minimal standard of plausibility, Taylor's reform master narrative avoids the negative characteristics traditionally associated with this genre, and when compared to more simplistic subtraction stories, can be affirmed, for this reason, as being qualitatively superior.

Telling Better Master Narratives

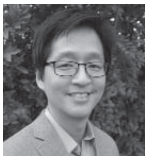
Through this engagement with Taylor, I have tried to clarify a way of reasoning about belief in God in an age where such belief is no longer a given and the powers of reason are contested—by telling better stories. There are numerous reasons to revise or reject a subtraction story of modernity if one affirms a version of it in light of the reform master narrative; regardless of what one views are on this particular matter, Taylor models a way to tell better stories generally. The master narratives we use about other matters are often fraught with some of the defects Bellah identifies and Taylor avoids—we make clean distinctions between "us" and "them", identifying our views as a higher form of development/progress than others, and even justifying our own problematic policies and (non-)actions in light of this narrative. Such narratives close us off from others, and ultimately, reality.

This being the case, in order to make further

progress in our pursuit of truth, rather than just providing direct arguments for or against various viewpoints on a given topic, we have to learn to tell better stories: messier ones—ones that, like the one Taylor offers, may highlight contributions and advances, but avoid simple, cost-free claims of supersession. We can learn, paraphrasing Casanova, to “pay equal attention to the grievous losses, the self-mutilation, and the homogenizing conformity” that accompanies our own histories. Ones fraught with gains, achievements, losses, costs, and tensions.

The details of what such a story might look like will differ amongst individuals and communities, but would, in the end, be ones that would not only be more believable when shared, but most likely closer to the truth. ■

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6. David Carr, *Time, Narrative, and History* (Indianapolis, 1986), 24.
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11. The term “secularism” can be used to refer to the decline of religious beliefs and behaviors or, socio-politically, to refer to the decline of the role and prominence of religious institutions in the public sphere. Taylor uses it in a third, epistemic sense, one where theism is no longer a given. See Taylor, 1–3.

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**This new found
confidence
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Certainty and Heresy | BY HOLLIBERT PHILLIPS

I was motivated to write this piece because of my very deep concern over the public proscribing and targeting of certain ones in the Seventh-day Adventist community by some among us who think they've, so to say, "got it" doctrinally right, whereas the targeted individuals and, *a fortiori*, those among us who see things as they do, have "got it" doctrinally wrong. This is a matter of enormous moment to all thinking and thoughtful members of the faith we not only now hold, but have long held, dear.

To assist in showing what really is at stake, I am approaching this awful situation via a number of crucial distinctions. I begin by framing the central issue in terms of the notion of certainty and some of what that term entails. I justify this approach on the grounds that on a matter of this magnitude, things can't or shouldn't be rushed; a little studied patience and systematic scrutiny are essential.

I, therefore, regretfully issue the following caveat: those who delight in quick and comforting answers, those who are content with unexamined pious platitudes, and convenient, knock-you-flat quotations, need not read any farther.

Certainty can take many forms, and those forms must not be confused. Indeed, we can and do wreak unspeakable havoc if, whether through sheer ignorance or inattention, we fail to observe the distinctions in our everyday lives. In religion, as in politics—arguably more so in religion—this failure can be devastating. As much as possible, therefore, we need to know what undergirds the ideas and claims we regard as worthy of our assent. This is part of what it means to live sensibly and wisely.

Briefly in what follows, I distinguish between three types of certainty: logical certainty, psychological certainty, and epistemic certainty—fairly standard distinctions. As with many other distinctions, some degree of overlap is to be expected.

I begin with logical certainty. That which is logically

certain leaves no room whatever for rational doubt. Because of its nature, that which is logically certain holds universally true. It knows neither national nor ideological boundaries of any sort. That a triangle has three sides leaves no room for rational doubt anywhere in the world; that a proposition and its contradictory cannot be true of anything, at the very same time, and in the very same relation, is another example.

This principle, put another way, says that a logical contradiction affirms or asserts nothing whatsoever. More generally, we may say that that which is logically certain is either *a priori* true—in in which case no state of affairs in the world can count against it, or add to its truth—or intuitively, i.e., self-evidently true, calling only for attentive rational reflection, as we do, for example, in pure mathematics and with numerous everyday truisms. No one goes checking everywhere in the world to be assured that all triangles have three sides, or goes about with clipboard or calculator in hand to check on the marital status of bachelors in their neighborhood. No one needs to be assured, however the world may change, that a blue thing is a blue thing, and so on, *ad nauseam*.

It is this kind of certainty that we scrupulously rely on to do our mathematics. At one time it was the practice in some academic communities to write at the end of a proof in geometry the letters Q.E.D.—*Quod Erat Demonstrandum*—by translation: "which was to be demonstrated." Across all ideological boundaries such proofs held, and still hold, good.

Such is the nature of logical certainty, and with it logical proof and demonstration. Logical certainty is a peculiarity of a logically closed system, unaffected by the way things happen to be in the world. What we have then is a logically privileged world that guarantees all its conclusions. It is a unique world where certainty is privileged. Axioms, postulates, and rules of correspondence guarantee this kind of certainty.

When we move out of this privileged world to take



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account of the other forms of certainty—psychological and epistemic—things can and do get extremely messy. We no longer have the convenience or protection of doing our mental work in anything like the safety of a closed system where axioms, postulates and rules of correspondence strictly apply, and where things are guaranteed to come out right. The real world we must make sense of, one way or other, is nothing like a closed system. We are now in the realm of the *a posteriori*, the realm of

the everyday world we all inhabit, the empirical world, a perplexingly open system, where trial and error, experimentation and conjecture, insight and foresight, inform our claims. Here, we must make even our best judgments with a salutary degree of, so to say, fear and trembling. For the claims we make in this situation, however useful at the time, are in principle defeasible. We must do this because we are limited in our capacities, so that even our best and most cherished judgments are not immune to

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improvement, or correction, or falsification. Since we strive to learn, we embrace our fallibility and acknowledge our claims to know as representing work in progress.

Let us now briefly consider psychological certainty. Psychological certainty, treated as a distinct type, is best considered as that kind of assurance that rests primarily on some feeling or state of mind, where claims are affirmed on the basis that one just has, or is in the grip of, a particular *feeling* in their support. It is the *feeling*, or state of mind, that grounds matters. No evidence need be adduced, for the feeling is, as it were, self-authenticating. Certainty claims of this sort can range from the obviously naïve, on the one hand, to the fairly sophisticated, on the other.

In some delusional cases, the notion of evidentiary warrant carries, or can carry, no weight. We are all familiar with a range of cases of this sort. True, certainty of whatever kind does involve some form of mental assent, some degree of feeling, but that does not suffice to reduce the one form to the other, or to suppose that they are all simply the same. That kind of muddled reduction would be unfortunate; indeed, it serves no useful purpose.

I turn now to epistemic certainty. This is the kind of certainty involved in some of our everyday or technical claims to know, in affirmations such as, “I know for a fact that the world is spherical”; “I know that some diets are better than others”; and so on.

The term epistemic derives from the Greek verb that means *to know*. (Incidentally, and of significance, the term science derives from the Latin verb that means *to know*.) Tersely put, epistemology is the study of a family of related concepts among which knowledge and belief are central. Other logically relevant concepts in this family are truth, evidence, faith, revelation, justification, and certainty itself.

We all strive to know; that’s why we establish and invest in institutions of learning. We strive to keep ignorance at bay, so we develop sophisticated tools and strategies, establish stringent principles and standards of confirma-

tion and disconfirmation, test hypotheses, theories, and conjectures of various sorts, all in an attempt to “get it right.” By and large, we want, progressively, to know better and better and in so doing develop warranted beliefs.

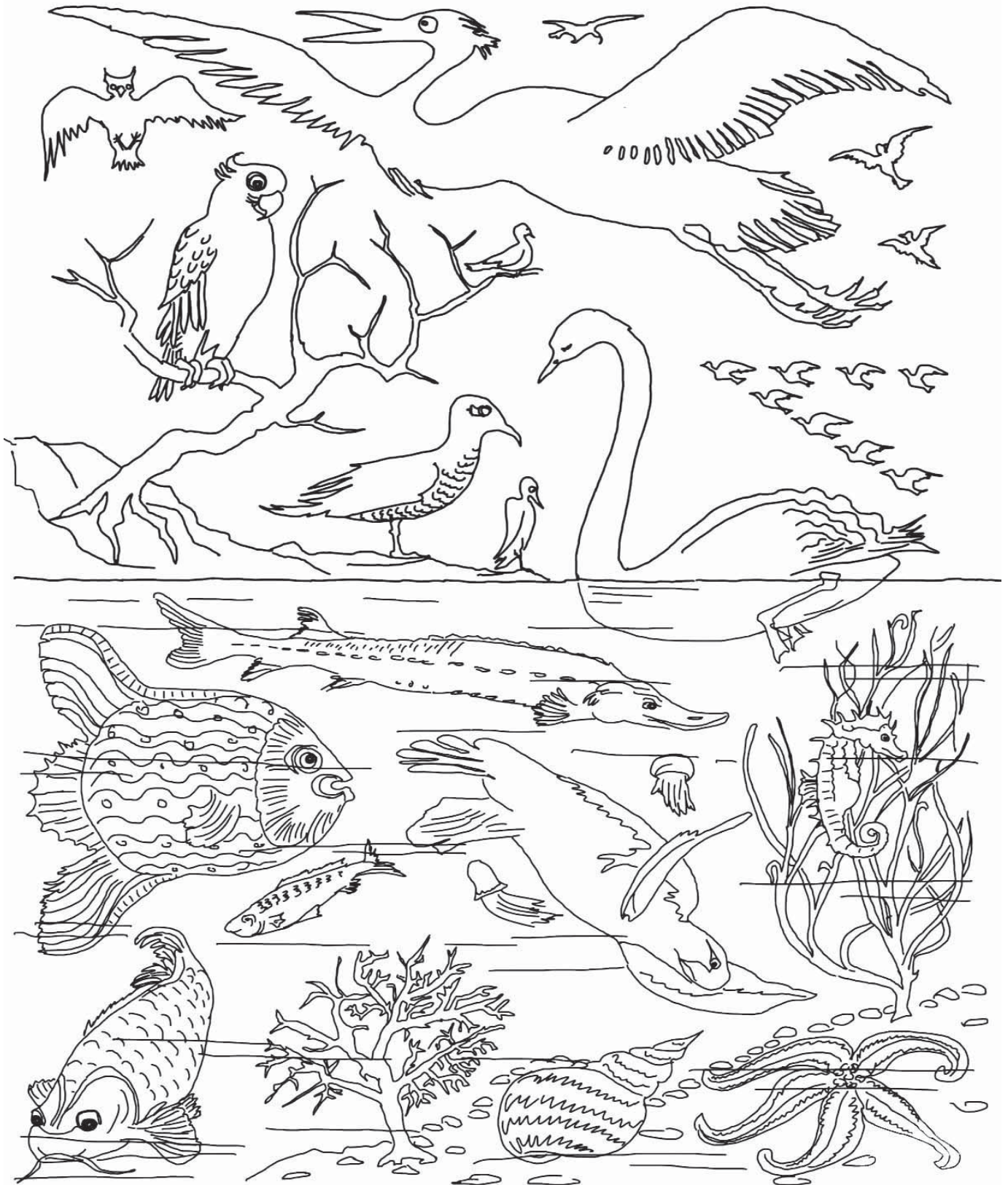
To accomplish this, we have to ask the two-fold question: what is it to know, and what, if possible, is it to know with certainty? (The technical literature that addresses these and related questions is vast, and sometimes daunting, but for the purposes of this short paper, that fact is not of crucial concern here.)

Minimally, for one to know that the earth is spherical, logically requires that three conditions be met. (1) It must be the case—true, that is—that the earth is indeed spherical. If it is not, then one cannot *know* that it is. One cannot *know* that my name is George if my name is not George. So let’s call this first condition the truth condition. (2) One must also *believe* that the earth is spherical. One cannot, without obvious contradiction, claim that one knows that the earth is spherical, but believe no such thing. Call this condition the belief condition. (3) One must have and understand relevant supporting evidence, i.e., warrant for the claim. Call this the justification condition. (This knowledge schema, with some subtle modification, is fairly standard. It rules out lucky guesses, serendipity, and mere parroting.) While one cannot *know* what is false, one can *believe* what is false, for with belief there is no truth condition that must be met. One can believe anything one pleases.

Where does all this take us? On the face of it, the earth illustration above was an easy one. George was easily identifiable. He was the guy sitting in a Swedish chair typing this paper. Very serious problems can arise when that which we want to know is not George-identifiably accessible. It is not easily or neatly identifiable. What then becomes of the truth condition that we noted above as a requisite for knowing in the propositional sense? Integrity demands that we do not rush to judgment. In such cases the only viable option is to qualify our “know-

Certainty and Heresy ➔ continued on page 72...

CREATION AND THE ARTS



To Create

BY J. MAILEN KOOTSEY

“Creative” is an adjective widely applied to capable and admired people. Artists create drawings, paintings, and sculptures. Writers create essays and books. Composers and musicians create music. Poets create poetry. Engineers create bridges, roads, and assembly lines. Architects, working with engineers and builders, create buildings. Comedians create laughter and fun. Dancers create beauty in form and motion. Scientists create understanding of natural phenomena. Philosophers create organized worlds of thought. Mathematicians create worlds of symbols and logic. Computer programmers create code. The list could go on and on.

The June issue of the business magazine *Fast Company* featured their list of the 100 most creative people for 2015. Many made the list because of unusual success in business and technology. For example, Jens Bergensten (*right*) was No. 5 on the list as the lead designer of the online game *Minecraft* that has 100 million players. Number 27 was Jennifer Lewis (*page 53*) who developed a technology that allows 3D printers to print electronic circuits. But not all the list were from the world of business. Number 1 was Charles Arntzen (*page 54*) who developed a treatment for Ebola using the tobacco plant. The comedian Amy Poehler (*far right*) was put at No. 8 for finding multiple new ways to bring comedy to audiences. Position 41 was given to Vian Dakhil, a Member of Parliament in Iraq, for launching a worldwide crusade to save the Yazidi religious minority people who were surrounded and threatened by ISIS. Perhaps the most unusual was No. 65, tattoo artist Vinnie Myers (*page 56*) who helps restore women’s personal image by adding realistic nip-



ples to surgically reconstructed breasts.

There is a common theme in all the preceding examples of creativity. Each human creator works within a discipline where there is a variety of building blocks: materials, objects, processes, symbols, or ideas. The creator attempts to find new ways to combine these building blocks to bring about new beauty, new functionality, new ideas, fun, or just plain satisfaction. Painters have a wide range of hues available, ways to arrange the colors on the canvas, and themes. The creative painter aims for an arrangement of patterns and colors that generates a desired response in viewers. Musicians strive for combinations of melodies, harmonies, rhythms, and tones that resonate with and captivate listeners. Engineers choose a task and work to create something that accomplishes the task quickly and efficiently. Chemists put different combinations of atoms together to create new molecules, looking for desired properties.

As a child I used to wonder if there was a limited number of books that could be written, paintings that could be painted, or musical pieces that could be written. Having learned some mathematics, I know now that there is no need to worry that succeeding generations will be left with nothing to create. Let’s take an example from digital photography or artistry. Anyone who has bought and used a camera in the past two decades knows that the detail in a digital picture is determined by the number of picture elements or pixels that make up the picture. Each pixel can have a unique color determined by the capabilities of the camera sensor and recording electronics and ultimately by the human eye. Even a modest camera today can record five million pixels for one picture. Estimates of the number of distinct colors recognizable by the human eye range from two million to 100 million. So to be

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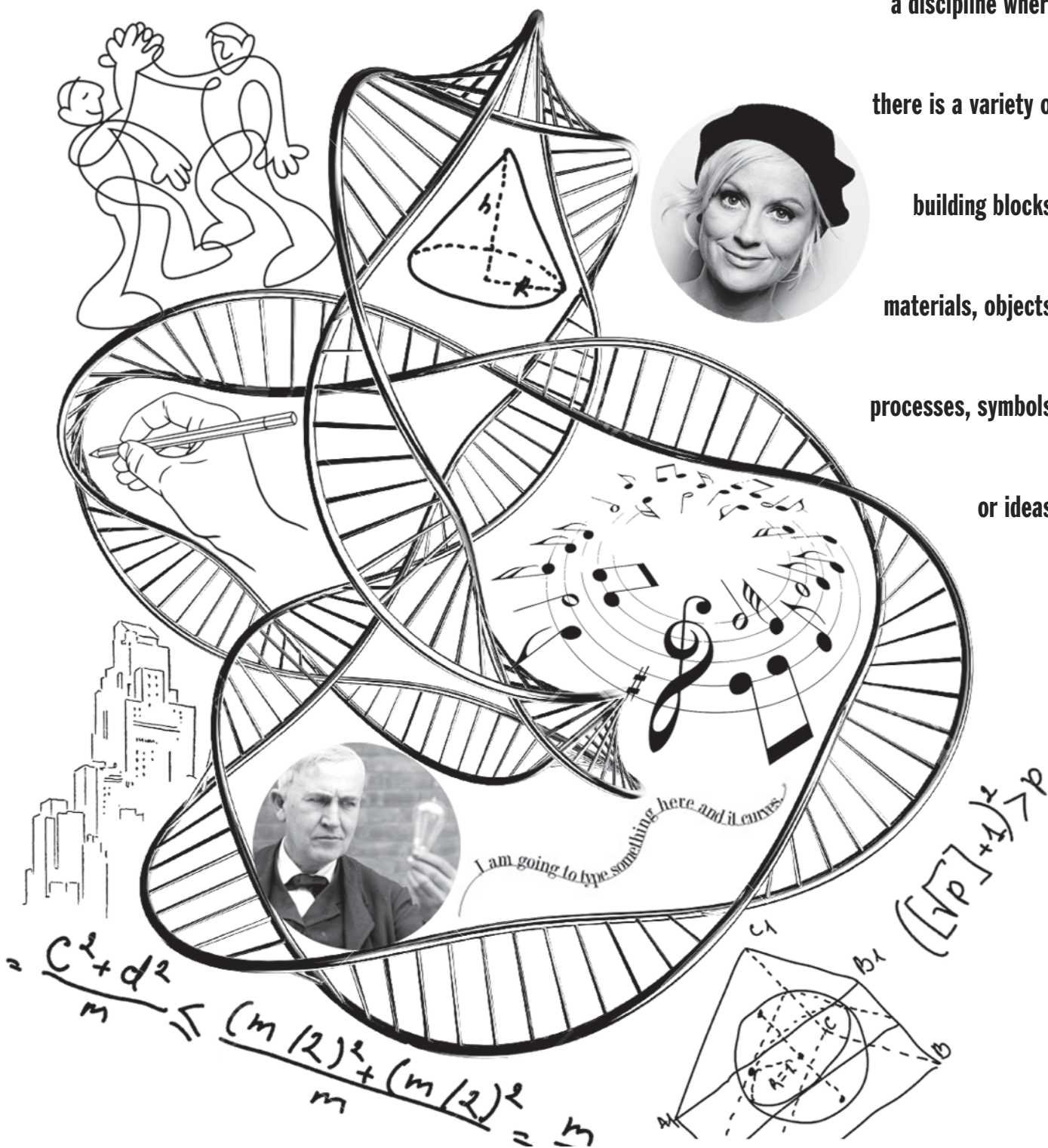
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**Individuals
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conservative, how many different pictures could be generated by five million pixels each capable of two million colors? The number of possible pictures is so large that it strains even the capabilities of scientific notation, itself designed to make large numbers palatable: the number is one followed by 13.4 million zeros!! For comparison, the number of atoms in the known universe has been estimated at “only” one followed by sixty-five zeros. Of course, almost all of the virtually infinite number of pictures possible with our theoretical camera are of no interest and would simply be called visual noise. So, it is the job of the photographer or computer artist to create combinations of pixels and colors that attract and hold our attention. Some of the successful combinations come from recording an image from the real world, some come from modified or imaginary images, and others are abstract images that have no origin in real world observation. A similar argument could be made for any field of even modest complexity—visual arts, music, writing, construction of buildings or physical devices, or even scientific experiments; the number of possibilities is so large that humanity will never run out of new things to create.

Why are some people more creative than others? Psychologists and brain scientists have done many studies in search of clues to increased creativity. The field is still in its infancy, but one theme seems clear from the studies to date: creativity increases with diversity and variety on several levels.¹ Individuals who interact with multiple cultures or environments are more creative than individuals who live entirely within one restricted group. Also, teams are more creative when the team includes members of both sexes and individuals with different fields of training and experience. Even social diversity in a team is associated with increased creativity. Debaters and interviewees who are going to face an opposite with known differences are more creative in their interactions because the

anticipation causes them to prepare better.

Numerous scientific and technical projects and companies have failed because no one was available (or was listened to) to point out a blind spot. Thomas Edison (*previous page*) is famous as the inventor of sound recording; but, twenty years before Edison’s invention, Édouard-Léon Scott de Martinville filed a patent for a machine that recorded sound.² He was a printer by trade, but also studied the anatomy of the human ear and the art of steganography (concealing secret messages within non-secret text or pictures). His device funneled sound waves through a horn structure to vibrate a membrane with an attached stylus that wrote waves on a page darkened by lamp black. De Martinville named his device the “phonograph.” Why do we remember Edison and not the phonograph invented twenty years earlier? Because de Martinville never thought of adding a playback device to his invention. You could only look at the squiggles on the black paper recording, but not listen to them, and the eye is not capable of translating the squiggles back into audible sound. It seems obvious to us now that playback must go with recording, but it was a blind spot for de Martinville and it spoiled his creative act.

The famous physicist Richard Feynman said something that gives us another clue about creating: “What I cannot create, I do not understand.” The creator must understand the materials, words, sounds, or ideas that are at hand to form a new creation. That understanding usually comes from long hours of experience, trial, and error. New musicians or young athletes eyeing careers as a soloist or a world class athlete are told that it takes ten thousand hours of practice to achieve their desired goals.

There is a second type of human creator whose methods and appeal are completely different. The magician creates illusions, especially of situations that everyone knows are completely contrary to experience. The

woman lays down in the box and gets sawed in half, only to appear intact later on stage. The fluttering white doves keep coming, one after another, seemingly from no place at all. One moment the cloth covers up a glass of water and a moment later, the cloth is whisked away and the glass and water have vanished. The magician succeeds when she pulls off something appearing obviously unnatural. The audience leaves after being wowed and entertained, but no one has altered their inherent belief that it is dangerous to be sawed in half.



As stunning as are the human creations in the arts, sciences, businesses, sports, and other areas, thoughts of the ultimate achievements of creativity naturally lead to thoughts about God as Creator. Much energy, writing, and debate has gone into attempts to prove or disprove the existence of God from observations of the world and the universe. Let's lay that particular issue aside for the moment, assume for purposes of argument that there is a Creator God, and ask what we could learn about how that Creator works from observations of human creativity and from the rest of the created world and universe.

Is it appropriate to extend some of the traits and qualities of creative people to describe a Creator God? Humans of all ages do learn something new most readily by analogy and extension of the known, so I am going to use that learning aid here, recognizing its limitations. Let's begin with the creative human who combines materials, objects, processes, symbols, or ideas to produce a new and interesting product. To understand how this analogy can be extended, we have to begin with an idea postulated many centuries

ago by Greek philosophers.

Early philosophers, beginning with the Greek Plotinus (third century) and running into the late eighteenth century, saw the universe as a hierarchy they called the "Great Chain of Being."³ God was at the top of the Chain, followed in descending order by levels of angels, humans, animals, lower creatures, and plants, with inanimate rocks at the bottom—all together covering everything in the universe. This Chain was not based on anything like scientific evidence as presently understood, but was a purely philosophical and logical construction based on ideas from Plato and Aristotle. Plato began by affirming the Idea of the *Good*: "the reign of a rational divine power in all that exists and all that comes to pass in the world." *Good* for Plato meant perfection and self-sufficiency, needing nothing else for its own existence or happiness. Yet, he went on to argue that Self-Sufficing Perfection also included the concept of Self-Transcending Fecundity, so that this divine power must also be the source of a material and variegated universe. Because it was created by a perfect divine being, the creation itself was also assumed to be perfect, although dependent on its Creator and therefore not self-sufficient. The dependent creation idea developed into a classification scheme based on the amount of "soul" in the entity. God was placed at the top, being the ultimate "soul," and the amount of "soul" was seen as decreasing with each lower level until "soul" disappeared entirely in the inanimate rocks. An assumed principle of *continuity* meant that the differences between levels was expected to be very small. It was also assumed that this Chain of Being must be populated with everything that could exist at each level. If anything that was possible was missing, that would be a defect marring the perfection of the Creation. This logical argument was called the principle of *plenitude*. The philosophers thus concluded that because of the principle of plenitude, no new species of ani-

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mals or plants could ever appear because any new species would imply a previous lack and imperfection.

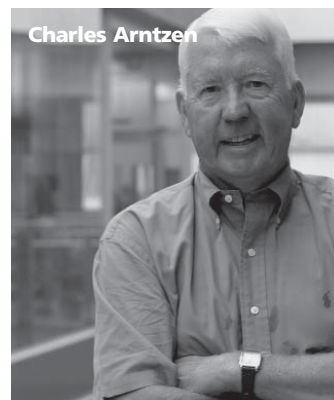
Here is a description of the Great Chain of Being, written in a letter by the seventeenth century philosopher Leibnitz:

All the different classes of beings which taken together make up the universe are, in the ideas of God who knows distinctly their essential gradations, only so many ordinates of a single curve so closely united that it would be impossible to place others between any two of them, since that would imply disorder and imperfection. Thus men are linked with the animals, these with the plants and these with the fossils, which in turn merge with those bodies which our senses and our imagination represent to us as absolutely inanimate. And, since the law of continuity requires that when the essential attributes of one being approximate those of another all the properties of the one must likewise gradually approximate those of the other, it is necessary that all the orders of natural beings form but a single chain, in which the various classes, like so many rings, are so closely linked one to another that it is impossible for the senses or the imagination to determine precisely the point at which one ends and the next begins—all the species, which, so to say, lie near to or upon the borderlands being equivocal, and endowed with characters which might equally well be assigned to either of the neighboring species.⁴

As the scientific revolution got under way, the Great Chain of Being was replaced by classification schemes based on observations and data gathering rather than assumptions and logic alone. The current scientific understanding of the universe can also be described as a multi-level hierarchy; not a single chain or “curve,” as Leibnitz described it, but a structure with many branches. The contemporary hierarchy is one of size and complexity, extending from invisible particles to the cosmos, and including everything in between. At the bottom level (in present understanding) is the Standard Model of sub-nuclear physics including quarks, leptons (including the elec-

tron), and bosons. Level by level, the rest of the universe is seen as built up by synthesis from these elementary particles. Combinations of the sub-nuclear particles make up the more familiar proton and neutron of the nuclear level. Protons combined with neutrons and electrons make atoms. Linking atoms together makes molecules. Different kinds of molecules together form cell organelles, which in turn combine to make up cells. In the biology branch of the hierarchy, cells give rise to organs, then organ systems, and humans and animals. Still higher are families and various cultural groupings on the human side, along with ecologies of animals and plants. Another branch of the hierarchy, starting with atoms, includes all the non-living forms of matter, geology, the earth, the solar system, and the entire cosmos. As the entities from one level are combined to create the next higher level, variations in the number participating and the natures of the relationships that link them determine the qualities that appear in the higher level produced. God is not at the top of the scientific hierarchy, as with the Great Chain of Being. Believers generally place God outside of the universe represented by the scientific hierarchy while non-believers don't even have God in their thinking.

Scientists looking at fossils and counting the observed species on earth long ago rejected the early philosophers' principle of plenitude, that the existing universe must already contain everything possible. The number of living species on earth is estimated to be around ten million (about 1.2 million have been directly observed), but this number is also estimated to be less than one percent of



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the total number of species that have lived on earth. In other words, more than 99 percent of the species that have lived on earth are extinct. Species continue to disappear and new species appear⁵, so the number is not constant, but varies over time.

For another example, the carbon atom is now recognized as the basis of all life on earth, animal and plant, in combination with other atom types, of course. How many different molecules could be constructed out of carbon? It has been calculated that twenty carbon atoms could be put together in 100 million different molecular structures; but, twenty carbon atoms is very small compared with many biological molecules. One strand of human DNA contains approximately thirty billion carbon atoms; the number of possible molecules that could be made with thirty billion carbon atoms is beyond astronomical! Since the possible number of DNA-sized carbon-based molecules is far, far greater than the number of atoms in the (known) universe, it clearly cannot be true that all possible molecules that could be made out of carbon exist in the universe.

This explosion of possibilities at each new level of complexity is now recognized to exist at every level of the hierarchy of complexity. Like the unimaginable numbers of possible “pictures” that could come from the digital camera sensor, and of molecules created by linking carbon atoms, we find the same essentially limitless possibilities when linking cells to create organs, organs to create organ systems, and so on up the hierarchy. In fact, above the atoms-to-molecules step, we don’t even know how to estimate the number of possibilities. For example, no one has even attempted to estimate the number of biological species that are possible.

Now we are finally ready to consider some analogies between human and divine creators. Describing the human creative person as selecting elements (paints, materials, sounds, words, ideas, etc.) and combining them to

make something interesting and desirable, we are describing that person as working in a two-level hierarchy—putting components together in specified relationships to create a new more complex whole. This is exactly what occurs at every level of the cosmic hierarchy of size and complexity! If God is characterized as Creator, God is then a creator of a multi-level hierarchy with many levels rather than just two. It would be like our human artist going through all the steps to create paints from sub-nuclear particles (levels below the picture) and in addition (at levels above the picture), designing museums of art, organizing worldwide museums, etc. Just as the human artist creates paintings by selectively choosing colors and patterns that appeal and communicate, so the Divine Creator apparently makes only selective entities at each level from the innumerable possibilities (i.e. no support for the principle of plenitude). Evolutionists say that the results at each level are governed by random events and natural selection, but now there is increasing evidence that there are laws at each level that also influence the combinations that are sustained. There is much yet to be learned about these laws of synthesis⁶. Regardless of the mechanisms involved, though, the overall process is “natural” and characteristic of the universe.

There is another comparison, or rather a contrast, that can be made between human creating and creation in the natural world. Human creating of any object, whether of artistic or engineering type, has always been done in three steps: design, preparation of the components, and finally assembly or linking of the components. The last step could be by hand, by a mechanical process, or more recently by a computer-controlled robot. Creation in the natural world occurs by a very different and much more sophisticated method: self-assembly. A tree, for example, is not constructed by turning the trunk on a giant lathe, drilling holes and inserting the separately-prepared branches, etc., like an

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automobile is assembled. Instead, given the right environment, a tiny seed, step by step, “grows” the necessary cells and processes that, over a period of years, produce the tree. Everything we see in the natural universe—from tiny single-cell creatures to galaxy clusters—is produced by a self-assembling, self-organizing process. Creative humans have only recently begun to even think about producing anything by self-organization, with the examples to date consisting of simple changes in shape triggered by changes in temperature or chemical composition. Designing a productive self-organizing process based on the molecular level would require powerful thinking and calculations much greater than today’s theories, and the largest supercomputers, can provide.

Early on it was argued that animals grow from single cells because there is a miniature of the adult hidden in the cell. Now we know that the large DNA molecule contains the information necessary to build the adult structure. The “plan” in the DNA is vastly different from architectural plans or diagrams for human buildings or circuits. The latter are essentially “models” of the final product done in a separate medium. Instead, DNA contains instructions for processes that occur when certain external and internal conditions are met—more like a flow chart than a set of final specifications.

Finally, a discussion of creation in the universe would not be complete without a reminder that, in the words of theologian Abraham Joshua Heschel, “Creation is not an act that happened once upon a time, once and for ever. The act of bringing the world into existence is a continuous process.... Time is



perpetual innovation, a synonym for perpetual creation.”⁷ Life on earth ebbs and flows on a human time-scale and, on a longer time-scale, the earth, the solar system, and the whole cosmos also are all constantly changing and new.

Summarizing, we can now say that the universe and everything in it is built from elementary particles by synthesis, complexity increasing level by level and the results determined by relationships in the synthesis. At each new level, only a minute fraction of the possible combinations actually exist, the selection made by laws we do not presently understand. The synthesized units come into existence by self-organizing processes. Finally, creation is not a single event, but rather includes continuous and ongoing processes spanning many scales of time and space.

The Great Chain of Being, originating many centuries ago, assumed the existence of a perfect and all-powerful God and attempted to infer by logic what kind of universe such a God would create. When scientific observation became more common and more sophisticated, many of the assumptions on which the Great Chain was based were shown to be false. In this paper, I have reversed the process, reasoning from a scientific Great Ladder of Complexity to some tentative conclusions about God as Creator.

For many religious believers, God’s creative acts are imagined as instantaneous, supernatural (meaning not by any natural law), fiat events. It might seem to these believers that offering explanations for how creation occurred takes away the power and mystery they attribute to God from creation. I suggest that the exact opposite is true: The more that is learned about the complexity and sophistication of the universe, the more admiration and respect for God can grow. I was born with a curiosity about how things work and it led me to become a scientist, but it is not necessary to be a professional to have that curiosity. Today’s media are full of how-to-do-it and how-to-fix-it and watch-them-do-it shows.

On television or in a video you can learn to cook, build a fine wood cabinet, or renovate a house. You can watch park rangers, fisherman, recycling crews, and scientific explorers at work. For me, watching any of these activities increases my respect for the individuals involved and for their skills and imagination.

This concept of a fiat Creator God is not unlike the magician variety of creative act described earlier and might well be described by an adaptation of the title of a book by J.B. Phillips: *Your [Creator] God is Too Small*.⁸ Supernatural fiat creation resembles the ancient pagan idea of creation by the gods in that it pictures God as acting without law or principle (i.e. on a “whim”), but expecting the creation to obey strict laws. I have tried to suggest by analogy with observations on the natural universe, including human creativity, that God’s creation is not lawless or magic, but rather lawful, extremely sophisticated, and made up of real, natural processes that are “supernatural” only in the sense that they are complex, far beyond today’s advanced human scientific understanding and engineering capabilities. This interpretation of creation cannot logically be attributed to the Divine by methods of science, but it makes possible a view of a Creator God that is in harmony with the best science, a view that calls for admiration from both the scientifically naïve and the most sophisticated thinkers. ■

J. Mailen Kootsey has had a 41 year career in higher education as teacher, researcher, and administrator at Duke, Loma Linda, and Andrews Universities. He has a doctorate in physics, but also worked in other disciplines including physiology and computer science. He is now a consultant developing computer models and a partner in an international business. He enjoys playing the piano and tennis.



Note: I would like to thank Dr. Lee F. Greer III for providing references regarding ongoing speciation.

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**One strand of
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the number
of possible
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that could be
made with
thirty billion
carbon atoms
is beyond
astronomical!**

Finding Hope | BY ALEXANDER CARPENTER

In September, 2015 *Spectrum* held its first Ultraviolet Arts Festival at the Glendale City Church, Glendale, California. Musicians, dancers, rappers, painters, and filmmakers talked about making art. The following three articles are presentations from the Festival.

**I believe that
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an illusion, like
a horizon.
A line. An end
that does
not exist.**

The central question we asked presenters at the *Spectrum* Ultraviolet Arts Festival to address was: Where do you find hope? I'll answer that right now: Process and Tension. I like to look at the process marks in a Van Gogh or Pollock painting, or think through the process of editing film into something meaningful. The process of art-making gives me hope through a sense of altered consciousness with beauty and aleatory connection, not literal truth or studied logos driving the ultimate outcome. Process. The *means* to the end. Process art proceeds to process theology. I believe that the divine changes. I don't believe in absolutes including morality and truth. And that strangely perhaps, gives me hope.

My wife Doris and I went to check out the opening of an installation in the late afternoon. Big rectangular box. Hot. Weak music. People trying to be into it, but mostly just self-conscious and awkward. We walked around but decided it was lame and left. We went out with a friend and had a great evening. About midnight we almost stumbled across the same installation. It was quiet; except the artist was present doing some final tweaks to his "portal" and a small crowd had gathered. Some homeless guy asked the artist if he needed help and, to the artist's credit, he said yes. Then he invited a bunch of other

people and soon we were ripping masking tape off and revealing the actual work. Apparently the artist had procrastinated and it hadn't been done in time for the earlier opening at the hyped event. And now, close to midnight, in the dark, observed only by the homeless, the artist's friends, probably some drunks and random merriment makers, the actual work was revealed.

Perhaps you've had an experience like that? Unplanned and interesting—even beautiful, and still in process.

There is tension there, and that is the second part of what gives me hope. I don't believe in balance. Whenever someone says sweetly to just live a balanced life I want to tell them: that's illogical. Perhaps it's me that's unbalanced; but I believe that balance is an illusion, like a horizon. A line. An end that does not exist.

The statement, "Just because you evolve doesn't mean that you have to rewrite your history," means a lot to me because I've chosen to identify as Adventist despite its shortcomings.

Those realities don't obviate the good—families and friends, life experiences and spiritual connections—that Adventism defined in me. I won't let others' lack of moral conscience make me give up my history.

My sense of the religious, the moral and the aesthetic (and the reading of Kiekegaard) has evolved in ways that just don't conform to Adventist dogma. But Adventism is larger than seventy-five percent of the countries in the world. There are more Adventists in the world than people in the Netherlands. Our educational

and health care institutions do make the world better, and actually need unafraid, even creative, contributions from some of you.

The process and tension in art gives me hope beyond the phobias and terrors of this moment and place in infinite time and space. I think the poet Mary Oliver gets to this simple but profound reality of how tension and process create community.

Song of the Builders

On a summer morning
I sat down
on a hillside
to think about God -
a worthy pastime.
Near me, I saw
a single cricket;
it was moving the grains of the hillside
this way and that way.
How great was its energy,
how humble its effort.

Let us hope
it will always be like this,
each of us going on
in our inexplicable ways
building the universe.

Oliver expresses where I find hope. Going on in process and tension—we build this universe. Not only to bring a vision of justice and peace into reality, but also to create something beautiful that transcends. Yes, there's tension in making something for the here and the hereafter; but the way forward is also only clear to me when I'm in process. ■

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Creating Music | BY AARON BEAUMONT

I am a musician and I work with a lot of musicians, but I've also spent a lot of time working with self-described "non-musicians" or "non-creators" and it's really exciting to see the amateur or the hobbyist engage with and awaken to new forms of expression. What is especially fascinating to me is that at the very beginning of the process—and I'm taking this anecdotally from dozens of former piano students of all ages—when I innocently float the idea of playing something other than what's written on the page, something of their own invention, there's this reflexive dissonance for them, and usually a little terror. The verbatim response, ten times out of ten, not kidding, is, "Oh, I don't write music, I'm not a writer, I'm not the kind of person who writes songs." I usually respond with agreement—Yes, you're exactly right, you're not a writer, but that's simply because, literally, you don't write.

What I noticed in this weird urge to resist defining or identifying themselves as creators or the "creative type" was a tendency to think and speak of creativity in binary terms—on or off, black or white, very objective, like you would talk about any other physical or demographic feature you'd put on a driver's license: male, brown hair, Caucasian, six-feet, American, creator.

There's a mythology built up around the cult of "creators"—this idea that creativity is an inexorable, irrepressible, uneditable or irresistible, almost inhuman urge, possessed by the few "true" creators. David Byrne of Talking Heads paints a nice image of this in his fantastic book, *How Music Works*:

The accepted narrative suggests that a classical composer gets a strange look in his or her eye and begins furiously scribbling a fully realized composition that couldn't exist in any other form. Or that the rock-and-roll singer is driven by desire and demons, and out bursts this amazing, perfectly shaped song that had to be three



Jennifer Knapp performs
at the 2015 *Spectrum*
Ultraviolet Arts Festival.



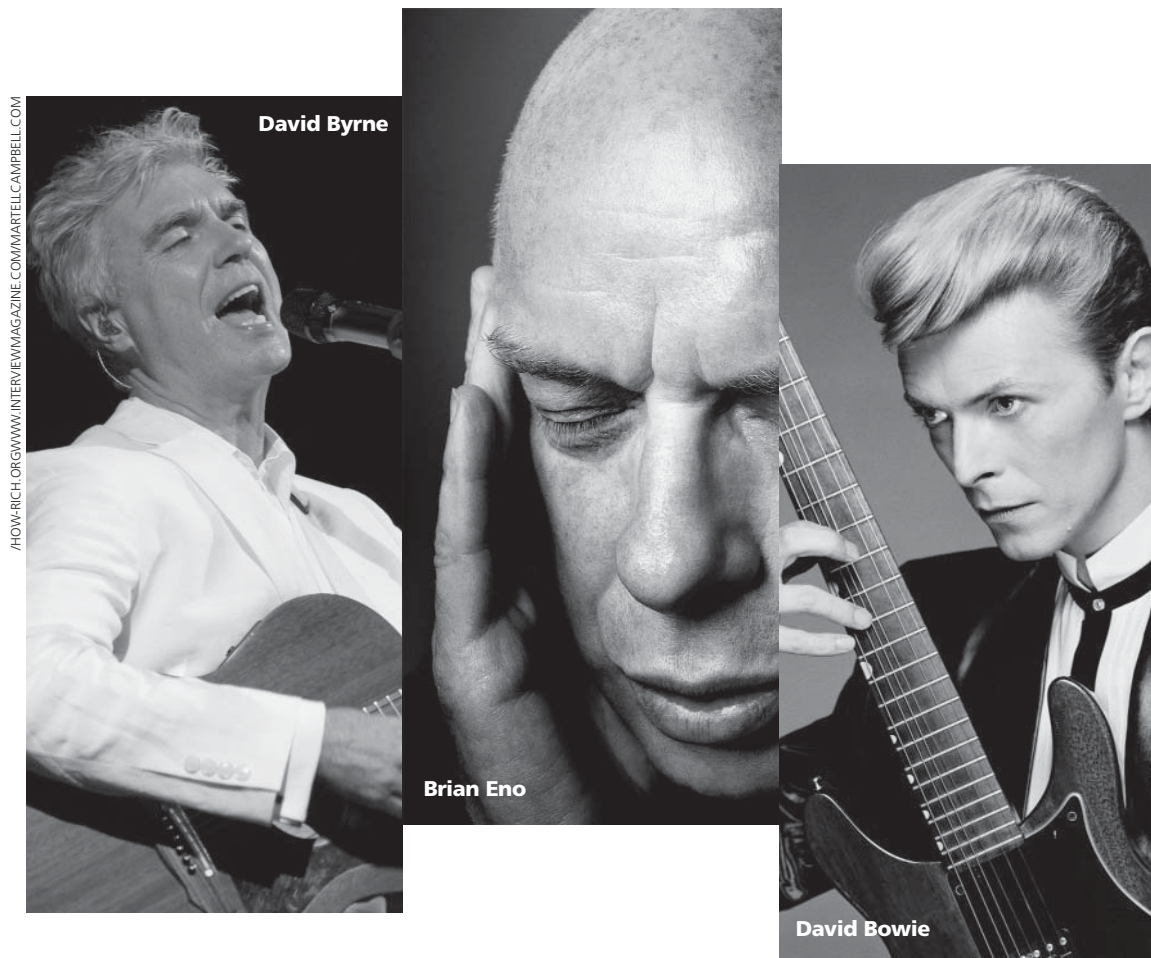
PHOTO BY JARED WRIGHT

minutes and twelve seconds—nothing more, nothing less. This is the romantic notion of how creative work comes to be, but I think the path of creation is almost 180° from this model.

That's a bold assertion from a creator with very few peers, and we're going to dig into what David Byrne might mean by this other vision of the creative process. We'll look at why this mythology of the wild-eyed creator exists,

on the control, laying creative waste, like napalm, on all in his path? To answer this, let's get back to those piano students for a minute. What's interesting to me is that I can't imagine getting the same knee-jerk reaction, ten times out of ten, the first time someone floated the idea of, say, playing baseball—this reaction that they're somehow automatically not qualified. Once they've actually given baseball a shot, of course, the totally reasonable response will be—

I would contend that the creative process in all its mysterious “trappings,” not only does not resist organization—it actually thrives on it and requires it.



and explore the relationship between seemingly opposing forces in the creative process—the tension between raw origination and refined organization. We're also going to explore what exactly we mean by organization, and look at some specific examples of this within the music-making context.

So where does this meme of the wild-eyed creator come from, heavy on the chaos, light

rock hard projectiles flying directly at my face terrify me to no end, please make it stop, for the love of God, no, no it hurts. I suspect that at least initially, a higher percentage of these students could at least conceive of existing in the same plane with baseball. This difference makes some sense—the abilities required by baseball are more apparent, mechanical, and maybe approachable on some level; the “stuff” of art—its mate-

rials and its inputs—seems very different, which helps account for the often mythical, cultic terms we ascribe to its creation.

So what is the “stuff” of art and the creative process? Neurobiologists and psychologists have been studying this question for decades. One popular conception splits creativity into two processes, seemingly diametrically opposed. First, we have the one that perpetuates the aforementioned myth—the restless, explosive, manic phase, generating huge amounts of content, purging the unrefined raw materials of art, grabbing onto disparate ideas and forging original connections between them. Second, we have the less flashy, less sexy responsible older cousin, who’s in charge of organizing, refining, tidying up after, creating order and coherence. Interestingly, we actually get an example of these two forces in the Biblical account of creation: “In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was formless and empty, and darkness covered the deep waters.” Then the organizing force gets busy—God goes about separating the light from the darkness, the earth from heaven, day from night, the water from land, sifting and sorting, and so on and so forth.

So we have two forces in the creative process, and one of them tends to get a lot of attention—indeed, it seems to have completely dominated the conversation and fueled the cult of mystery around the creator, brought to the fore the otherworldly aspect of creativity.

Now don’t get me wrong—the mysteries of creativity, inspiration, and origination should be acknowledged and celebrated, and regarded with some reverence. You might say it is mystery itself after all—the very act of questioning—that produces art in the first place.

However, as we venerate the numinous, unexplainable aspects of creativity, the rest of the equation—the organization of it, the machinery of creativity, the accountant toiling away in a dim cubicle in the basement trying to make sense of the raw data—that stuff often gets short shrift. It doesn’t fit with our narrative of the Great Man. Of course Hemingway and Ravel wrote what they wrote—they were simply monumental geniuses touched by the gods, full stop. The fact that they *also* woke up at five a.m. every day and got to work writing is less convenient to us. I would propose, however, that *this* aspect of Hemingway’s life—the rules, structures, and limitations—actually precedes and lays the groundwork for cre-

ative discovery and origination. Hemingway, despite a sometimes unhinged personal life, was extremely serious and ruthless about his practice of creativity. I would contend that the creative process in all its mysterious “trappings,” not only does *not* resist organization—it actually thrives on it and requires it. The decisions, and the decision-making apparatus we use allow us to both produce and navigate with intention an otherwise overwhelming, limitless array of creative outcomes and possibilities.

Most importantly, and central to all this, is this idea—which is my answer to the theme of the day here, what gives me hope—that creativity itself is a skill anyone can practice and get better at. What’s more, when developed and maintained, sustainable creative practices will themselves become the seeds of creation and discovery.

I would suggest that the “mechanics” of creativity are no less identifiable and approachable than the mechanics of baseball, and in my opinion, they are also far, *far* more pleasant. Sorry baseball fans, I love you too. I just love vintage keyboards more.

I’ll clarify that I’m not trying to demystify art or the creative process or reduce it into something merely formulaic.

It’s also useful to clarify that by becoming a better “creator” I’m not referring to becoming a better “technician”—learning more scales on the piano is not the same as practicing my technique. Rather, it is learning to use technical skill creatively—as a source of inspiration and creative output.

So let’s look more closely at the “organizing” force in creativity—in the most general terms, we’re referring to a concept, rule, tool, method, or especially, a limiting factor by which the raw creative material is refined and can cohere.

One way of thinking about this is to liken it to the field of sound production. We have this raw material—a sound wave—but what gives it its artistic properties (its “value” in a sense), is the limitations around it, its physical environment, its collisions with the reflective surfaces, the box in which the raw material is contained and amplified.

It’s only through the process of this wild, untamable thing completely filling whatever vessel it’s in, checking all the exits, trying to escape—that the raw materials take on the qualities by which we come to identify it. In other words, it’s the things around it—the limiting features—that turn it into something interesting and beautiful. In the same way, creativity is at its best when the

It turns out that one of the best ways to harness the mysteries of creation is simply to organize them in time and space—have your daily routine, and ear-mark time for creation every day.

inscrutable, wild-eyed, untamable impulse is encouraged to interact with the impulse for order, organization, and coherence. I believe they not only play for the same team, but that the controls or limitations themselves can create, can issue forth the stuff of creativity—the materials themselves.

To dig into this idea lets turn to another favorite creator, Brian Eno, and his gardening-versus-architecture paradigm of creativity. In a

system to take you in the direction you want to go.' And this became my sort of motto for how I wanted composition to be.... To be able to surrender is to be able to know when to stop trying to control. And to know when to go with things, to be taken along by them." Eno advocates giving yourself regular opportunities to surrender to new creative mechanisms, to discover through them, to let them lead you.

In this view, our job as artists is almost more



brilliant lecture “Composers as Gardeners,” he talks about the extent to which a creator can presume to control his art, and advocates a bottom-up form of creative organization, rather than top-down—more like a gardener, cultivating hopeful creative seeds, less like the all-seeing architect, looking down with the master plan. He explains, “you organize it only somewhat and you then rely on the dynamics of the

curatorial—to build or select a creative mechanism to whose outcome we surrender, to cultivate the soil for discovery, for fruitfulness, for abundant supplies of ideas to which we can then apply our craftsmanship, and perspiration, and analytical lens. The tools, or limitations, themselves become the wellspring of creative output and inspiration.

These tools can take the form of anything we

surrender creative control to, anything that plays a decisive role in the creative output. One simple example: a piano is a tool and a limitation—it is not a flute; it is not a Moog synthesizer—I have two hands and ten fingers to play it, and I can stretch the definition of what playing a piano means; but in the end, I remain limited by its piano-ness. In this way, it is a simple creative organizing concept, and the conscious decision to use a piano will birth a specific and, by nature, uniquely organized creative output. To say it another way, if I sat down at a piano, I would write a very different song than if I picked up a guitar.

David Bowie mentions a more extreme breed of limiting mechanism he used to write lyrics:

You write down a paragraph or two describing several different subjects creating a kind of story ingredients-list, I suppose, and then cut the sentences into four or five-word sections; mix 'em up and reconnect them. You can get some pretty interesting idea combinations like this. You can use them as is or, if you have a craven need to not lose control, bounce off these ideas and write whole new sections."

Kurt Cobain, Thom Yorke, and many others have used this same "cut-up technique." Bowie actually also created a machine called a "verbicizer" to do the work for him automatically.

One of the most basic limitations that can be exceedingly fruitful to the creator is the very first one we mentioned today: time. In the book *Daily Rituals*, Mason Curry's fascinating catalogue of the habits of creative giants, the first, most obvious pattern I saw was that they all seemed to have a self-imposed schedule! It turns out that one of the best ways to harness the mysteries of creation is simply to organize them in time and space—have your daily routine, and ear-mark time for creation every day. Your ritual lets your brain know, "Ok, now it's time to create, even if I'm not sure what the result will be."

Along the same lines, Nick Cave states, "inspiration is a word used by people who aren't really doing anything. I go into my office every day

that I'm in Brighton and work. Whether I feel like it or not is irrelevant." Instead of inspiration, Burt Bacharach and Leonard Cohen also talk about setting aside time for exploration and discovery.

Pharrell and Mark Ronson provide further recent examples of the dogged craftsman-like approach—both "Happy" and "Uptown Funk" came about only after months and months of rejected experiments and attempts. Pharrell wrote and recorded nine completely different versions of what became "Happy." *The Guardian* writes that "Ronson laboured over ["Uptown Funk"] for six agonising months. He claims that he worked so hard on it that his hair started to fall out; at one point, the stress of trying to come up with a suitable guitar part caused him to vomit and faint." This is once again to illustrate that great ideas don't always arrive in a wild-eyed flash—they often appear only after crossing a long bridge made of bad ideas. To paraphrase Stephen Sondheim, "Great art hides its sweat."

Here are a few more quick examples specific to music-making:

Merrill Garbus of Tune-Yards: one of her mechanisms, along with locking herself in a small, sweltering shipping container where she writes and records—is layering—superimposing simple percussive rhythms on top of each other to discover new more complex ones.

Chaz Bundick, AKA Toro y Moi uses the following "rule" for writing lyrics: "What do I do? How does that make me feel?"

Ruban Nilsson, AKA Unknown Mortal Orchestra, to help write lyrics, loops the music for hours and walks around singing gibberish, from which gradually emerges actual words, one cycle at a time.

Bob Dylan pulled back the veil on one of his organizing tools in a recent speech. I love this quote:

These songs didn't come out of thin air. I didn't just make them up out of whole cloth. Contrary to what Lou Levy said, there was a precedent. It all came out of traditional music: traditional folk music, tradition-

**"If you sang
'John Henry' as
many times
as me...you'd
have written
'How many
roads must a
man walk
down?' too."**

—Bob Dylan

al rock & roll and traditional big-band swing orchestra music.

I learned lyrics and how to write them from listening to folk songs. And I played them, and I met other people that played them, back when nobody was doing it. Sang nothing but these folk songs, and they gave me the code for everything that's fair game, that everything belongs to everyone. For three or four years, all I listened to were folk standards. I went to sleep singing folk songs. I sang them everywhere, clubs, parties, bars, coffeehouses, fields, festivals. And I met other singers along the way who did the same thing and we just learned songs from each other.

If you sang 'John Henry' as many times as me—'John Henry was a steel-driving man / Died with a hammer in his hand / John Henry said a man ain't nothin' but a man / Before I let that steam drill drive me down / I'll die with that hammer in my hand.' If you had sung that song as many times as I did, you'd have written 'How many roads must a man walk down?' too.

He goes on connecting his material to other specific sources he used to define the creative world he would operate within.

David Bowie released twelve seminal albums in a single decade in part by simply changing inputs: changing the limitations, the materials, the stuff, in the sense that he used different personnel for each new incarnation, and that happenstance—loosely curated chemistry between the elements—helped craft something new and brilliant. Mick Ronson's "Panic in Detroit" became Carlos Alomar's "Sound and Vision."

A final, super-important, natural limitation is your actual knowledge or facility with a specific tool, such as piano, guitar. There's a time and a place to be a masterful technician, but history shows that being an amateur or a hobbyist or a neophyte is just as fruitful if not more so. I'm comfortable at the piano; so one thing that's interesting is picking up a guitar when I write, or making something electronic on the computer—and the beautiful thing about this rule or limitation is that there's an infinite number of things I don't know how to do, so I'll never run out of things to do badly in an interesting, potentially constructive way!

Here again, Brian Eno weighs in: "What's interesting about non-musicians is that they don't know what shouldn't be done," he says. "I find I get a lot of ideas from seeing the things tools can do that they weren't supposed to do."

What all this allows me to do as an artist is invaluable.

I can sit down and write a song using a zither and the cut up technique, with perfect rhyme and five-line verses and eight syllables per line. They're the mechanisms whose creative outcomes and limitations I can surrender to, that by themselves both generate and organize content.

What gives me hope about all this is that I know I don't have to feel like doing what I need to do every day to actually do it effectively. I don't have to feel comfortable, confident, and inspired. I don't even have to feel hopeful.

What gives me hope as an artist is that the discipline and practice of creativity itself gives birth to the inspiration, not vice versa. The perspiration can produce inspiration, or better yet, perspiration leads to discovery. If we consider with intention and design the structures and rules by which we operate as artists, these will become the seeds of inspiration, not the result of it.

Finally, I find hope in the idea that creativity and the practice of creating things can be simultaneously fully mysterious, yet fully accessible—you might even say, fully human, and fully divine. It gives me hope that there's no wrong way to write a song, but there are a million right ways.

The world is full of art-making tools, all at our disposal, and what gives me hope is that the specifics don't really matter, and the limitations can be happenstance or arbitrary. It's the act of sitting down to create with intention—to practice creativity and view the world creatively—that makes all the difference. ■

Aaron Beaumont is a pianist/songwriter bringing new life to music



hall/pop tradition with witty songs. A graduate of Andrews University, he has played for many television shows and music festivals, but composing music is now his main occupation.

Illustrating Sacred Stories: *An Argument for Artistic Interpretation* | BY MINDY BIELAS



"Boxed In: The Woman from Timnah." 20" x 20"; 2013.

It was my first Old Testament class, of my first semester at a new graduate school. The energetic blond woman who was my professor talked us through the syllabus, emphasizing creativity and textual accuracy when it came to our class presentations. We were studying the women in the Book of Judges, such as Deborah and Delilah. I was equal parts excited and terrified. Fast-forward to the week of my presentation. I had shown my paintings to only my roommates, but my professor, Dr. Tammi J. Schneider, encouraged me to apply my creative outlet to class.¹ The academic sources for my assigned

woman, Samson's first wife from Judges 14 and 15, were scarce and biased toward Samson, but I had studied the text and painted during every free moment. Students and teacher returned from our mid-class break and, as butterflies swarmed my stomach, I revealed my painting. We started the conversation with initial reactions, which quickly lead to academic insights and pertinent personal experiences. I was amazed by how one piece of art could shed so much light on both the text discussed, and on the people discussing it.

Sacred stories are powerful, and we can harness and use that power when we better understand these stories and our relationships to them. In the following pages I will first explain how sacred stories inform us, then look at how art can affect the way we understand our sacred stories, show how art is a distinctly unique interpretive tool and, finally,

suggest that we take a new, artistic look at our sacred stories in order to become a more relevant and socially engaged community.

Informative Sacred Stories

Not all stories are told through the same medium. We have traditional books; but then there are also comic books, movies, TV shows, audio books, theater, stories orally handed down through generations, and many more. Stories are everywhere, and each of us has a special relationship with one story or another. Even if a story is

not shared for the purpose of promoting a particular moral, every story communicates an ideology. It is in the reading, viewing, or hearing of a story that the story becomes informative. It is when the story is told that the value system is communicated which influences the subjects in many ways: (1) supporting or deconstructing theories and ideas, (2) questioning or reinforcing preconceived prejudices or biases, (3) affecting our emotional response to a particular issue or phenomenon, and (4) overall, influencing our understandings of ourselves,



“Boxed In: The Levite's Pileges” 24" X 20"; 2014

our relationships, and the world around us. How much more so then would sacred stories—heard and read on a regular basis—inform us?²

There is, however, one complicating factor: we read and understand stories differently. Because each of us has experienced life unique to our social locations—that is our gender, race, sexual orientation, ability, age, and so much more—we interpret stories differently. For example, the majority of the articles written about Samson and his first wife were written by men and influenced by an interpretive history of Samson as hero. One example is, Victor H. Matthews’ “Freedom and Entrapment in the Samson Narrative: A Literary Analysis,” who argues that Samson was seduced by his first wife, away from God’s will.³ However, as a woman, I was interested in reading the story from the perspective of his wife. Many of the article’s arguments followed Matthews’. I, on the other hand, argued that the woman was trying to survive a life or death dilemma and that Samson was straying from God’s will before his first

marriage. A more detailed description of my interpretation can be found on the blog, *Feminism and Religion*.⁴

The differing interpretations have distinctly different implications. For example, the first, more traditional interpretation, suggests that the moral of the story is to stay away from anything that may distract you from God’s will. This is an acceptable moral; but the implication is that beautiful things, especially if they are in the form of a female person, are dangerous. This implication is unhelpful because it prepares the Church to demonize women, especially women who happen to be “beautiful.”⁵ On the other hand, the moral of the second—that is, my interpretation, focusing on the perspective of Samson’s first wife—is that unequal power relationships breed destruction, especially for those with less power in said relationships. Once again, this moral is acceptable, but the implications must be assessed in order to decide if it is one we wish to promote. The implications of this interpretation is that those with power, especially those with a privileged social location, should have their power checked in order to prevent negative consequences, which predominately affect those less privileged. After both have been analyzed, it is clear that the traditional interpretation is less helpful for a community working towards equality.

In order to see how these stories inform and influence us, we must take into consideration new and different interpretations, while also being conscious of the implications of our favored interpretation. With this understanding comes the power to change our interpretations for the benefit of our Church community and our relationships with others.

Art and Sacred Stories

Art is a valuable tool when assessing how sacred stories influence our understanding of ourselves, our relationships, and the world around us in several ways. In the first place, art makes apparent the subjectivity involved in textual interpretation. No matter the artistic medium being used, the artist must decide how she or he will present the content of the text in question. The parts that seem most important to the artist, the textual aspects that will become the focus of the artistic piece, are decided for personal reasons. The artist’s social locations and related experiences will not only influence her interpretation of the text, but will shine through in the artistic expression of the interpretation. This subjectivity is then represented in

the final artistic project. Acknowledging the subjectivity of every interpretation, whether it is expressed artistically or not, is necessary to accepting that there is more than one possible moral in every sacred story.

On the other side of the coin, the sharing of this artistic interpretation, and any resulting conversation, will not only continue to shed light on the artist's unique perspective and interpretation, but also bring attention to the subjectivity of the viewer. Because the viewer of the art piece can perceive the subjective nature of the artist's interpretation, this will do two things.

First, the viewer will feel free to acknowledge the subjective nature of her or his own interpretations. This is significant, especially in fundamentalist communities where the "right" interpretation often trumps any other perspective. If the viewer has been holding onto a traditional interpretation—or another interpretation which is not her own—for the sake of having the "right" interpretation, viewing the art piece may free her to understand the story in a way that better fits her social locations. Alternatively, if the viewer has been promoting her personal interpretation and attempting to prove it is the only right interpretation, the viewer will potentially feel free to acknowledge the subjective nature of her own textual work and the validity of others' work.

Second, the use of art for interpretation opens the conversation to important questions of implications. If conversation partners do not need to defend the correctness of their interpretation, they can instead discuss the implications of different interpretations. However, there is a potential caveat. The aforementioned conversation of implications can only occur if the community has created a space where each voice is equally valued. If the community recognizes one or several persons as more authoritative than the rest, and this authority structure is practiced by said community, then there will continue to be some interpretations promoted as more correct, and the conversation concerning implications will be hindered.

I do not mean to suggest that there cannot be



a leader within a conversation. Instead, the leader or facilitator of a conversation should be someone who is comfortable with giving ideas and concepts, inconsistent with their own, equal weight throughout the conversation. During the presentation of my painting of Samson's first wife in Dr. Schneider's class, I was the expert of the painting and Dr. Schneider was the expert of the text. However, neither of us allowed these positions of authority to hinder the conversation. One student pointed out that the painted woman's arm was twisted in an uncomfortable position, metaphorically associating the visual with the socio-political position of the woman in the text. Another person pointed out that the painted woman could be moving forward or backwards, associating this perceived movement with the struggles of abused women today who wrestle with the "choice" to stay or leave.⁶ Had Dr. Schneider or I pushed our perspective onto our peers as the more correct view, we would have missed out on their insights.⁷

Artistic Influences

One might suggest that such conversations can be had without the use of art. However, I argue that art is a distinctly unique interpretive tool for church communities because it can be holistic, communal, and inclusive, in addition to providing new perspectives important to the continued relevance of the Church as a whole.

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First, artistic expression and its appreciation are holistic in that they incorporate many ways of knowing. Within church communities, many different types of people interact, each prioritizing a particular way of knowing. Those who have been highly educated may expect for there to be logic and facts behind arguments, while many more are sensitive to a more personal knowing, prioritizing feelings when a discussion is at hand. Much of society values intellectual ways of knowing; dismissing emotions, gut feelings, intuition, and experiences. Yet, if the Church is going to be holistic, it needs to create a space where many ways of knowing are valued and accepted. By incorporating other non-traditional ways of understanding, such as through artistic expression, interpretive work will better reflect our persons, experiences, and our communities.

Second, after art is created, it is viewed by a wider community in shared spaces, and it is in the communal response of interpreting and reflecting on art that it can be used as a vital interpretive tool for church communities. According to Roland Barthes's literary theory, "Death of the Author," the author, or in this case the artist, has no more authority in interpretation than others.⁸ Similarly, hierarchies based on educational privi-

lege, in which the clergy or leader has more authority than the laity and followers, can be abandoned for more equal conversations.

Interpretations and reflections are then a communal experience, each person relying on others for insight, sharing the power that comes with interpretive understanding.

Third, because art is holistic and communal, art is also an inclusive interpretive tool for church communities. Anyone can participate because participants do not need to articulate their views in traditionally academic ways, nor do they need specialist insight into the artist's background in order to interpret and reflect on the theology and social theory portrayed. Thus, art can transcend many forms of privilege, especially educational privilege, and include many voices.

These three characteristics—holistic, communal, and inclusive—make art a unique interpretive tool, promoting both a new artistic look at sacred stories, and also the environment necessary for a conversation about the implications of such sacred stories.⁹

The Relevant Church

I have shown how different interpretations of the same sacred story can have radically different implications for the communities who value them. I have also argued that art is a helpful interpretive tool for communities who wish to discuss alternative interpretations and the resulting implications. What I have yet to suggest is that an open conversation about the morals of our sacred stories can have significant impact on the Church's relevance.

There are two aspects to this statement. The first is an open conversation; by this I mean, a conversation where every voice is included. The inclusion of every voice will ensure that the needs of all involved are known and addressable. For example, an over-worked single mother of five may find a particular sacred story is especially important to her social location. Yet, if she never has the chance to contribute to the conversation about this sacred story, then this story may never be shared for the purpose of encouraging other people in similar situations. Additionally, the conversation, initially about the sacred story, would never develop into a conversation about the needs of such a person if her contribution were silenced.

The second aspect of my argument is a conversation about morals or value systems. I have made it clear that every sacred story has many possible implications, some

"Boxed In: Jephthah's Daughter." 22" X 24"; 2014



of which are more detrimental to portions of the community. If conversations about the implications of our sacred stories continue to be hindered by tradition concepts, like “only one correct interpretation,” then we may never know how the stories we share many times over, starting with the youngest of our congregants, are negatively affecting their perspectives of themselves, their relationships with others, and their wider community.

It is in the inclusion of non-traditional perspectives in a conversation of implications that we can assess which interpretations are least detrimental to our community, and therefore making the Church more relevant and socially engaged. Important to note, is that this is a process, one without an end. When the Church stops growing and developing, it will start to die and decay.

One last example of how art can continue to provide helpful and unique perspectives of the sacred stories that inform biblically focused communities, like the Seventh-day Adventist Church, took place last year at a women’s Bible study group. I brought my three-part set of my women of the Book of Judges paintings. Each painting is of a woman, whether Jephthah’s daughter, Samson’s first wife, or the Levite’s concubine, interacting with a multicolored frame. On a previous day we had talked about the women depicted, focusing on the biblical account and purposefully holding off on drawing any morals or applications from the text. But on this day, we focused on the artwork. Each woman took turns explaining what she saw in the paintings, bringing to the conversation her own understanding of the text. Before long, the conversation turned to real life experiences. The artwork had helped build a bridge between the text and the application of the text. What was so important to me was that these women had no problem making these connections between the text and their lives for themselves, working together, and valuing their own perspectives as equal to my more academically informed perspective. Their inter-

pretive process was holistic, communal, and inclusive, providing new perspectives that made their weekly Bible study relevant to their understandings of themselves, their relationships, and the world in which they live. ■

Mindy Bielas is an artist, harpist, and MA student at Claremont focusing on Hebrew Bible and Feminist Theory. See more of her art at her web site: mindypaints.weebly.com.



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5. “Beautiful” is put in quotes here to bring attention to the fact that beauty is a socially constructed concept.

6. I put “choice” in quotes to bring attention to the fact that many women in abusive situations have very few options, many of which seem less desirable than leaving the abusive party because of lack of resources, the additional emotional and psychosocial abuse, or both.

7. The concepts of this section have been informed by personal experiences of showing my artistic interpretations in spaces ranging from conservative Sabbath School groups to more liberal academic classrooms.

8. Roland Barthes, “Death of the Author,” *Image, Music, Text*, Trans. Stephen Heath (New York, 1977).

Note: This section was originally a section of presentations at both Adventist Society of Religious Studies and American Academy of Religion, 2014.

**Even if
a story is not
shared for
the purpose
of promoting
a particular
moral,
every story
communicates
an ideology.**

Since we
strive to learn,
we embrace
our fallibility
and acknowledge
our claims to
know as repre-
senting work in
progress.

Certainty and Heresy → continued from page 48...

edge” claims. We do this in science all the time. We would all be dead by now if medical knowledge, and with it the practice of good medicine, were to wait until the truth condition were assuredly, i.e. incorrigibly, met.

Some crucial implications seem clear. In the absence of George-like confirmation of our knowledge claims, we must learn to express our knowledge claims in the modest terms of levels of confidence. At times humility requires that we say in all truthfulness, we simply do not now know. And in all such circumstances, the door should be genuinely open for open, serious, and charitable conversation. The truth condition, much to the dismay of some, cannot in the real world be met without qualification. That’s the way things are and will be for a long time! Certainty with qualification is an instructive and humbling result. In this regard, no one can with any credibility claim any sort of privileged immunity. We are all in the quest to know with essentially the same epistemic handicaps.

Germane to the project identified in the opening paragraphs of this piece, we are now in a position to recall and confront the following two observations. First, certainty of the logical kind discussed above is not attainable in open systems. In all open systems our claims can be rationally doubted—not so with a closed system such as logic or pure mathematics. Certainty of this kind is unassailable. Second, *all* other candidates for certainty are open in principle to rational doubt. So, without loss of integrity, we can acknowledge the inevitable and adjust the discourse from talk of certainty to talk of degrees of confidence.

With that said, we encounter an extremely serious problem. The notion of certainty is so appealing, so beguiling, so reassuring, that it becomes the ground for many a deadly social conflict. The notion must be retained, unattenuated, at all costs. The result is certainties in conflict and with that state of affairs, attendant violence. Heretics become identified.

Certainty, like truth, is *prima facie* a commend-

ing term. It takes very little reflection to see that that is so. A peculiar feature of commending terms is that they can be abused to do the work that only carefully developed arguments should do. Call an opinion a finding and all is more or less well; call it a guess and a lot of trouble can ensue. A lot of argument space is taken over by conveniently employing commending terms designed to elicit concurring and favorable responses and, *a fortiori*, by crafting terms of disapproval for whatever is in conflict with a given certainty. No painstaking or rigorous justification is invoked. Anyone can wield a club; it takes skill to build strong bench. We are all familiar with this, I think.

Unfortunately, the discreditors I made reference to in my opening paragraph, treat their brand of ideological certainty—akin to logical certainty discussed above—with militant self-assuredness. The Triumvirate of Tape, Talk, and Text, armed with axioms, postulates, and question-begging rules of correspondence or coherence, take over with virtual epistemic certainty. (Begging the question is the logical fallacy committed when one uses as a premise, precisely what is to be established as a conclusion to one’s argument.) QEDs sprout up, it seems, everywhere. Every question gets a definitive answer. Textual cherry-picking guarantees an inerrant ideological hermeneutic. One unsustainable result is a destructive, because divisive, intolerance.

For the good of the faith we all cherish, and our unyielding commitment to *the only sure and certain Word*, who called and dined with sinners, that sorry state of affairs must go. In the serious business of “getting it doctrinally right,” studied charitable caution is essential. Now, we are destined to know in part. Let’s give more than lip service to this truth. ■

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Whitman College, WA, where he taught for 28 years, the first ten overlapping his last ten at Walla Walla College from which he moved as Dean of the Graduate School. He is the author of the textbook *Vicissitudes of the I: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Mind*.

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Glory, Glory Hallelujah: Victory Dance of the Coming Kingdom

Sung to the tune "The Battle Hymn of the Republic"

BY STERLING SPENCE

My eyes have seen the glory of the
coming of the Lord
A dawning day of Mercy
Let the just get their reward
When the violent heads of state are
stripped of gun and stripped of sword
God's Truth goes marching on

I have seen him with the marchers
On a thousand dirty streets
Where her prophets are assaulted
Where the innocent are beat
Still the gospel cry is hopeful
It is brave and it is sweet
Let truth go marching on

Glory, Glory, Hallelujah
Glory, Glory, Hallelujah
Glory, Glory, Hallelujah
Let truth go marching on

I have read a fiery gospel
Of a man without a gun
Who loosed the chains of empire
The system overcome
Let the followers march on
Until victory is won
Let truth go marching on

Glory, Glory, Hallelujah
Glory, Glory, Hallelujah
Glory, Glory, Hallelujah
Let truth go marching on

In the squalor of a stable
Christ was born across the sea
With a glory in his bosom
That transfigures you and me
As he died to make us holy
Let us live to make all free
Let truth go marching on

The Coyote Bandits (left to right): Doug Stowers, Christian Liang, Jaylene Chung, Sterling Spence, Brandon Seinturier, Scott Wilson.



Sterling Spence is lead singer and



writer for the Coyote Bandits who play folk, indie, blues, and bluegrass. He also

works for Canvasback Mission.