

critique

A Ransom Fellowship Publication

2011 Issue 5

Darkened Room: *The Conspirator, True Grit, Friends with Benefits*
Reading the Word: *The Cross and the Wide World*
...and...

God, Jehovah, and Allah

An exercise in discernment

CRITIQUE



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ABOUT CRITIQUE

Critique is part of the work of Ransom Fellowship founded by Denis and Margie Haack in 1982. Together, they have created a ministry that includes lecturing, mentoring, writing, teaching, hospitality, feeding, and encouraging those who want to know more about what it means to be a Christian in the everyday life of the twenty-first century.

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FROM THE EDITOR

A beautiful woman

by Denis Haack



Yesterday afternoon we drove 90 minutes north from Toad Hall to an old theater in the heart of Minneapolis. We parked the car in an underground ramp, and found a little store that had been in business in the sixties when we were undergraduates at the University of Minnesota. The caramel corn they sell still tastes as sweet as the scent that spills out the door onto the sidewalk. A block away was the Orpheum, with its soaring ceilings, oversized chandeliers, and brightly painted friezes, built in 1921 when theaters were expected to be ornate if not gaudy. We had come for a concert, to listen to music with roots deep in bluegrass and gospel, played and sung in the richly joyful, heart-breaking style of Alison Krauss and Union Station.

How is it that songs so profoundly sad can engender such hopefulness and grace in the human heart? Musical skill plays its part, and the musicians last night played with the casual ease that comes only after long years of serious practice. The two-hour set made obvious that the people on the stage were called to this, displaying a giftedness that could not be denied. Deeply rooted music also helps, music shaped not merely by an artist's individual life but a long tradition of reflection on the human condition bounded by the accumulated wisdom of generations of experience, suffering, and scripture.

In "Gravity" on her album *Loneliness Runs Both Ways* (2004), Krauss sings of life as a pilgrimage, a journey not unlike leaving home as a teenager for a life on the road. *And all the answers that I started with / Turned out questions in the end / So years roll on by / And just like the sky / The road never ends.* A slice of life, that of a musician living out of a suitcase, becomes a metaphor for human beings yearning for a home worthy of the name. The same longing was felt by patriarchs so long ago who roamed as nomads over the face of the earth, longing the scriptures tell us for a "better country" than the one they left, a true "homeland" (Hebrews 11:13-16). "Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God," we are told, "for he has prepared for them a city."

"I like to think that I know more now than I did ten years ago," Elif Batuman says in a short essay on the occasion of the tenth anniversary of 9/11 in *The New Yorker* (September 12, 2011). "But one thing I've learned is that the path to understanding isn't a well-lit staircase." Wisdom, like beauty and all else that is most precious in life, is not easily or quickly achieved, and though the journey is not the end in itself, we do not get beyond the journey in this life. Like the ancients, we remain nomads here.

The Hebrews pictured wisdom and folly as women (see, e.g., Proverbs 3-9), a metaphor sometimes assumed to be merely misogynist and so dismissed in an age that knows better. But the image must be sexually charged because whether hooking up with foolishness or faithfully embracing prudence, the transaction penetrates to the deepest recesses of the soul. We become what we love. The only question that remains is whether we will be loved or simply seduced, in the arms of wisdom or folly, demonstrating some small measure of human flourishing or forever distracted from the important by the merely urgent.

As we sat in the second balcony, high above the stage at the Orpheum, the music seemed to nourish my soul, reminding me of how beauty meets truth in grace. Not all of us are musicians of course, but all of us can be rooted in a venerable heritage of wisdom, with patient faithfulness fulfilling our calling with all the creativity we can muster. In the Christian vision of life, work is not just a necessity, but also a gift, our vocation an expression of faith to witness to the reality of the kingdom of God.

Ah, you say, well and good, but few of us ever receive a standing ovation. And wisdom, perhaps with a gentle smile, comments that hearing is hard in a fallen world. There are ovations and ovations, she says, some significant and others not so, some eternal and others passing. Listen for the better.

The final song in the encore last night, "There is a Reason," summed up the sadness, the hopefulness, the beauty, the brokenness and the grace that had animated the entire concert.

*I've seen hard times and I've been told
There isn't any wonder that I fall
Why do we suffer, crossing off the years
There must be a reason for it all*

*I've trusted in You, Jesus, to save me
from my sin
Heaven is the place I call my home
But I keep on getting caught up in this
world I'm living in
And Your voice it sometimes fades
before I know*

*In all the things that cause me pain
You give me eyes to see
I do believe but help mine unbelief
I've seen hard times and I've been told
There is a reason for it all*

Recognize that? It is the voice of a beautiful woman named Wisdom. ■

DIALOGUE: READERS RESPOND



To the editor:

Good morning Denis. I recently finished Alister McGrath's book *The Passionate Intellect* (InterVarsity Press, 2010). In a chapter on "The Tapestry of Faith" he said "A theological understanding of human identity may lead to the uncovering of secret longings and help people to consciously articulate their hopes and fears, or name their heart's desire. Augustine, Blaise Pascal, and C.S. Lewis all believed that the Christian faith itself brought human nature into sharp focus, thus allowing them to identify apologetic approaches tailored to the realities of our situation." At that point he footnoted a book by Corbin Scott Carnell: *Bright Shadow of Reality: Spiritual Longing in C.S. Lewis* (Eerdmans, 1999). I ordered the book and have found it fascinating, in particular because it spoke about something that I have experienced but never really understood: That sense of spiritual longing, *sehnsucht*—the sense of almost melancholy as one feels and experiences hints of transcendence. Lewis himself struggled to define this. Anyway, it seems that it is something you might be interested in, if you have not already read Carnell's book.

Cal Boroughs
St. Elmo, TN

Denis Haack responds:

Cal: I have not read Carnell's book, but your note has placed it on my reading list, or, to be more precise, on my to-be-ordered list. I suspect this is going to be of interest to *Critique's* readers, so I am glad to include your note here.

I've often thought that the deep longing we each feel, the yearning for home, and the vague sense of lostness that seems to be attached to our soul is evidence of God's existence and a hint that human significance cannot be subsumed in the here and now. In our family, having grown up in a house named Toad Hall, *The Wind in the Willows* is a favorite story. There is a wonderful passage near the beginning as winter ends and Mole stirs underground. "Spring was moving in the air above and in the earth below and around him," Kenneth Grahame says, "penetrating even his dark and lowly little house with its spirit of divine discontent and longing." What are we if we lose that sense of divine discontent? Even nature itself, creation with all its broken beauty, whispers the same tune that resonates within our hearts. Some, like Carl Sagan and Richard Dawkins, argue this is merely a feeling

we call awe generated by our smallness in such an overwhelming cosmos. A hard argument to counter, on the one hand, because it is partly true, but on the other hand, as unsatisfying as it is reductionistic. To be able to feel awe, to be able to be overwhelmed before the grandeur and terrifying beauty of all that is, and to know that it is all that is, impersonal, temporary, and illusionary, is a prospect that fills my soul with heartbreak.

Thanks for your reading recommendation—I've learned over the years to take them seriously.

To the editor:

Thank you for speaking, printing, and sharing the truth. Your ministry is a gift, a God given, grace filled gift to me, and to my wife. We have never met you, but we love you both, and all those who are working so hard to make sure *Critique* and *Notes from Toad Hall* get out to a starving culture.

Steve and Carrie Smith
Blairsville, GA

Denis Haack responds:

Steve and Carrie: Thank you so very much for your kind words. The fact you took time to write means a great deal to us. ■

The Conspirator:

Baseball, hotdogs, apple pie, and... the rule of law?

A film review by Greg Grooms



I remember when my e-mail inbox began filling with the messages about “Ground Zero Mosque”: “You can build your mosque at Ground Zero when we can build our synagogue at Mecca,” and “Building a mosque at Ground Zero is like building a memorial to Hitler at Auschwitz.” My first impression was that a mosque was actually being planned for the site of the old World Trade Center towers, but of course, that wasn’t the case. The site for the proposed community center/mosque was about two blocks away. Still it was close enough to strike a nerve in war-weary, post-9/11 America.

At first I was sympathetic. Angry

New Yorkers felt that building a mosque there and now was an insult to the friends and families of those who died in the 9/11 attacks. More than this, they feared the center would become a rallying point for any Muslims who saw the World Trade Center tragedy not as a treacherous, cowardly attack on innocent civilians, but as high-and-mighty America finally getting a taste of what it deserves. I shared these patriotic fears, but there was one problem.

The law was on their side. The property had been purchased, the site plan submitted in accordance with city zoning statutes, and the project approved in a legal and orderly fashion.

Of course millions of Americans simply didn’t care about the legal rights of New York Muslims. What significance could they possibly hold when weighed against the outrage of their fellow citizens?

It’s an old problem.

On April 14, 1865—five days after Lee surrendered to Grant—John Wilkes Booth assassinated President Abraham Lincoln at Ford’s Theater in Washington, D.C. It was arguably the worst possible epitaph to the Civil War, dooming the south to reconstruction and angering millions of war-weary northerners. In the hysteria following the assassination, many suspects were arrested and interrogated, and just 17 days after the assassination, eight people were brought to trial: seven men and one woman, Mary Surratt.

Director Robert Redford’s film *The Conspirator* examines Mary Surratt’s trial. In so doing, he hopes to stir our emotions regarding the abuse of what was once considered a sacred principle, but of late has fallen on hard times: the rule of law.

Robin Wright’s portrayal of Mary Surratt is, in my opinion, brilliantly acted, but far too severe to make her a sympathetic figure. She is in the film, as she was in life, a southerner, openly sympathetic to the Confederate cause. The issue of her guilt—Did she actually know of and participate in the plot to kill the president?—is never clearly resolved in the film.

What is made clear is that her guilt or innocence was never really the issue at trial. The war and the assassination had overtaken our nation’s ability to endure, so someone had to pay. Mary Surratt was called upon to pay, if not for her own sins, at least for the sins of others. Secretary of War Edwin Stanton, chillingly portrayed by Kevin Kline, is the bad guy in Redford’s tale. He justified it like this to Frederick Aiken (James McAvoy), Surratt’s lawyer: “Mary Surratt was a party to the most grievous crime in our history. Necessity demands that she be given a swift, sure, and harsh sentence.”

In pursuit of this noble goal, the deck was stacked against Surratt from the beginning. Rather than the trial before a jury of her peers guaranteed by the Constitution, she was judged instead by a military tribunal. She



was not even allowed to testify on her own behalf. Others who dared to do so were openly intimidated and subverted by government prosecutors. When the tribunal initially found her guilty, but sentenced her to a life sentence, pressure was successfully brought to bear on them to change the sentence to death by hanging. And a last-minute writ from a civilian judge staying her execution and granting her a constitutional trial by jury was set aside by the president of the United States himself.

Of course, the argument can be made, so what? The nation had endured an outrage. Justice was needed. And given her traitorous sentiments, her close relationship with many who were guilty, and the nagging uncertainty of how much she actually knew, who's to say that justice isn't what she got? If some corners were cut along the way, is that really a big deal?

It depends, obviously, on how important law is.

Once, civil laws were seen as reflections of larger principles. Just as the laws of science were rooted in nature and therefore had to be reckoned with, so, too, moral principles were thought to be part of the fabric of the world God had made and should be revered and taught to following generations. Of course, there were differences of opinion on what those principles were even back in the day.

Now civil laws are most often seen as rules societies pragmatically adopt and replace as a matter of convenience. They're a matter of what works, and when they cease to work or become inconvenient, we're free to discard them or even ignore them. It's a rather cynical view, one that rarely stirs the heart or the conscience on legal matters.

Still I salute Robert Redford and his film for trying to do just that. The

American exceptionalism that was such a big part of my youth—we think we're special and don't make the same mistakes other countries do—has fallen on hard times for good reasons. (May it never make a comeback!) But American cynicism, especially when applied to the rule of law, is an even poorer substitute. The belief that there is one set of rules that apply equally to all our citizens, regardless of race, sex, or social standing, has never been as true in practice as we like to pretend it is. But each time we abandon the pursuit of it, the American Experiment becomes a little less worthwhile.

The Conspirator is the first production of The American Film Company. According to their Web site, the AFC is "founded on the belief that real life is often more compelling than fiction, [and so] produces feature films about incredible, true stories from America's past. Central to the company's filmmaking will be prominent historians, assuring that each production remains true to the history from which it is drawn." Their first effort admirably achieved these lofty goals. May their future work be as thoughtful and even more successful. ■

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Greg Grooms, a contributing editor for *Critique*, lives with his wife Mary Jane in Hill House, a large home across the street from the University of Texas in

Austin, where they regularly welcome students to meals, to warm hospitality, to ask questions, and to seriously wrestle with the proposition that Jesus is actually Lord of all.



The Conspirator credits

Starring:

James McAvoy (Frederick Aiken)
 Robin Wright (Mary Surratt)
 Evan Rachel Wood (Anna Surratt)
 Johnny Simmons (John Surratt)
 Kevin Kline (Edwin Stanton)
 Tom Wilkinson (Reverdy Johnson)
 Justin Long (Nicholas Baker)
 Danny Hutson (Joseph Holt)
 James Badge Dale (William Hamilton)
 Colm Meaney (David Hunter)
 Alexis Bledel (Sarah Weston)
 Toby Kebbell (John Wilkes Booth)

Director: Robert Redford

Writers: James D. Solomon and Gregory Bernstein

Producers: Brian Peter Falk, Bill Holderman, Robert Redford, James Solomon and others

Original Music: Mark Isham

Cinematography: Newton Thomas Sigel

Release: 2011, USA

Rated: PG-13 for some violent content

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION/DISCUSSION

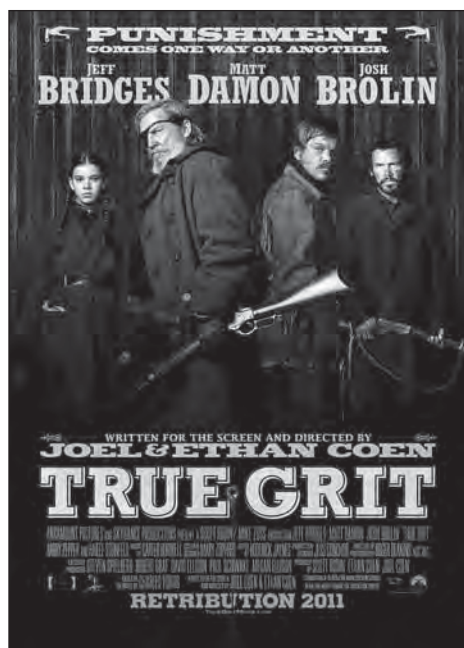
1. Discuss your first impressions of the film. What does watching *The Conspirator* leave you thinking about?
2. The last American president to be shot was Ronald Reagan in 1981. What do you recall of the media coverage surrounding the event? (*Saturday Night Live* famously parodied media coverage of the Reagan shooting in a skit entitled "Buckwheat Shot," starring Eddie Murphy.) How did it compare to the press coverage of the Lincoln assassination as shown in *The Conspirator*? What effect in each instance did media coverage produce in the population at large?
3. Why did the government decide to try Mary Surratt in a military court? In your opinion, was their rationale sound?
4. How did the fact that Surratt was a woman influence public perception of her? The process of the trial? The verdict?
5. Do you think Surratt was a participant in the plot to kill Lincoln? Defend your answer.
6. Frederick Aiken, Surratt's lawyer, undergoes a transformation during the film, from her angry opponent to her passionate supporter. What drives this change in him?
7. In one of the film's most important dialogues, Aiken encourages Surratt to incriminate her son John in order to save herself. She refuses, saying, "Have you ever cared for something greater than yourself?" To which he replies, "I've spent the last four years fighting for something greater than myself." "Then we are the same," she says. Discuss this exchange.
8. Aiken accused Secretary of War Edwin Stanton of seeking vengeance in Surratt's trial, not justice. What's the difference between vengeance and justice?
9. In 1866 the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that constitutional rights may be suspended during times of war, stating "these [the Bill of Rights], in truth, are all peace provisions of the Constitution and, like all other conventional and legislative laws and enactments, are silent amidst arms and when the safety of the people becomes the supreme law." Was this ruling, in your opinion, correct?
10. If you've seen the film *Unthinkable* (2010), compare it to *The Conspirator*. In each film the rights of an American citizen are suspended because of a perceived threat to "the greater good." In Surratt's case, the Union is at stake, at least in the opinion of Secretary Stanton. In *Unthinkable*, the threat is nuclear terrorism. Should the rule of law be upheld in each case, despite the possible consequences? If not, why not?
11. If you were allowed the honor of dining and talking with director Robert Redford after viewing his film, what questions would you like to discuss with him about his film?
12. Critics are divided in their assessments of *The Conspirator*. The *Boston Globe* called it "an important film... that has had the life beaten out of it by Robert Redford, a man who should know better." The *New York Times* accused it of "Dixie sentimentality." According to Rex Reed "No matter where your political leanings lie, the great thing about *The Conspirator* is that Mr. Redford is wise enough to let the audience decide what the parallels are. See it, enjoy a ripping good yarn, and learn something." What did you think of it? Is it well done? Is it entertaining?
13. Why, in your opinion, was this film made now?

Note: Allow me to recommend a study guide The American Film Company has made available online for The Conspirator (www.crimemuseum.org/documents/ConspiratorCurriculum.pdf).

DARKENED ROOM

True Grit

A film review by Drew Trotter



Leaning on the Everlasting Arms

What a fellowship, what a joy divine,
Leaning on the everlasting arms;
What a blessedness, what a peace is mine,
Leaning on the everlasting arms.

Leaning, leaning, safe and secure from
all alarms;
Leaning, leaning, leaning on the
everlasting arms.

Oh, how sweet to walk in this
pilgrim way,
Leaning on the everlasting arms;
Oh, how bright the path grows from
day to day,
Leaning on the everlasting arms.

What have I to dread, what have I to fear,
Leaning on the everlasting arms?
I have blessed peace with my Lord so near,
Leaning on the everlasting arms.

—Elisha A. Hoffman, pub.1887

Ethan and Joel Coen cannot seem to do any wrong nowadays. In 2008 they won the Academy Award for Best Picture with their astounding adaptation of Cormac McCarthy's *No Country for Old Men*. In 2009 they finally issued a life-long dream project, the semi-autobiographical *A Serious Man*. While no box office hit, *Man* was a critical darling with its hilarious and poignant absurdist take on Jewish angst and growing up in the sixties. This past year was supposed to be a sort of "year off." They made a movie they had wanted to make for some time, but did not expect it to raise much interest or even be that successful at the box office. Even though *True Grit* had star power in the likes of Academy Award winners Jeff Bridges and Matt Damon, the film was a western and was to be carried largely by a fourteen year old girl, Hailee Steinfeld, who was unknown.

The Coen brothers are great filmmakers, but lousy prophets. *True Grit* took the box office by storm, making \$247M worldwide on a budget of \$38M, and was nominated for 10 Academy Awards, surprising almost everyone including the brothers themselves. No western has made significant inroads on the American movie scene since 1992's *Unforgiven* and, at the time, *Unforgiven* was the first western to make critical and popular noise since the sixties. *Grit* garnered an unheard-of 96% rating among critics and 86% audience popularity rating, as measured by rottentomatoes.com. What is going on? How does a movie that even its makers were not certain of become such an amazing success at all levels?

Answers to that question lie in many places, but one is that the movie, like many of the nominees for



Best Picture this year, rode a simple, but thoughtful, story to its success. Packed with ideas about justice, revenge, and honor, *Grit* chronicles the maturing of Mattie Ross, a frontier girl determined—and I do mean determined—to see her father's death avenged. She hires Rooster Cogburn, a U.S. Marshall moonlighting as a bounty hunter, to help her track down Tom Chaney, her father's killer, in the Indian territory of Oklahoma. She arranges her father's funeral, negotiates the sale of a drove of ponies her father had bought, argues the complicated point of where Chaney should be arrested with LaBoeuf, a Texas Ranger who joins on with Mattie and Rooster, and, finally, confronts Chaney himself in a classic western stand-off at the end of the film.

Another of the film's attractions revolves around the stellar performances. Steinfeld perfectly portrays the precocious Mattie, a character who ranges widely between innocent adolescence and stark adulthood. She effortlessly acts the little girl who likens following the trail of a dangerous killer in the wilds of Indian territory to camping out on a coon hunt with her father, and just as easily the adult horse trader, able to handle the seasoned Col. Stonehill, who ends up paying more than he would ever have paid to a less persistent customer to take back the horses he originally sold Mattie's father. Bridges plays Cogburn with a *joie de vivre* that makes him seem exactly what he is supposed to be: a man with true grit whose heart is won in the end by the endearing Mattie. Damon represents the dandy, stuck-on-himself LaBoeuf with a sympathetic humanity, letting his offensive side only show when it does not matter. The supporting cast, anchored by Josh Brolin as Chaney and Barry Pepper as Lucky Ned



Pepper, are without exception superb, giving the audience just that blend of strange quirkiness and realistic toughness that characterizes the myth of the old West in the mind of the American moviegoer. It would be hard to name a film that has more consistent greatness of acting in every performance.

But story and acting admitted, the true success of the movie lies in its depth of moral character, demonstrated in all aspects of the film, from the *dramatis personae*, to the story line, to the noble, almost Shakespearean dialogue, to the lilting, hymn-based music. Everywhere; the movie rests clearly on, and never departs from, its plain, noble center. In this, *Grit* resembles the remarkable novel by Charles Portis on which the film is based, and departs widely from the well-known earlier movie of the same name, the John Wayne starrer of 1969, which flies in the face of the novel and is far sunnier, and far weaker, than both the book and the Coen brothers' picture.

What is that central truth? It is best summarized by a comment in the introductory voice-over by Mattie, but it is important to recognize that the stage is set for a deeper moral examination from the very beginning of the film. Eschewing credits almost entirely, the film begins with a simple card on a black background, presenting the first half of Proverbs 28:1 from the King James Version: "The wicked flee when none pursueth." Very quietly, a simple piano plays a few notes of the hymn "Leaning on the Everlasting Arms," as an ethereal light grows into the scene of a porch with its stairs leading down to the body of a man, apparently lying dead in the street with snow gently

covering him. Suddenly a man rides by on horseback, and the adult Mattie tells the viewer what has happened to precipitate the events we will watch unfold:

People do not give it credence that a young girl could leave home and go off in the wintertime to avenge her father's blood, but it did happen. I was just fourteen years of age when a coward by the name of Tom Chaney shot my father down and robbed him of his life, and his horse, and two California gold pieces that he carried in his trouser band....

Chaney fled. He could have walked his horse, for not a soul in that city could be bothered to give chase. No doubt Chaney fancied himself scot-free. But he was wrong. You must pay for everything in this world one way and another. There is nothing free except the grace of God.

Justice and grace are the foundation upon which the Coen brothers have built their film, and they have done so in a way rarely seen in Hollywood.

Not only does *True Grit* begin with a quotation from Proverbs, but the film refers to scripture and homespun, frontier Christianity throughout. Mattie refers, for example, to sleeping in the same room with the three corpses at the undertaker's as causing her to feel like Ezekiel in the valley of the dry bones. Perhaps the starkest reminder of this flavor of the film comes from the musical theme, based on the frontier hymn, "Leaning on the Everlasting Arms." The film ends with a full-throated rendition of the hymn sung by the alternative country singer Iris Dement, and, as we have mentioned above, the same hymn is playing in the background when Mattie delivers the central statement

of the movie, which makes the film's Christian roots quite clear: "You must pay for everything in this world, one way and another. There is nothing free except the grace of God."

he specifically Christian themes are so many and so sympathetically introduced that one marvels at "Christian" movie-making being done once again by non-Christians (cf. the great *Chariots of Fire*). Nothing demonstrates this so much as the dialogue itself. Supporting characters regularly use biblical language. Yarnell, Mattie's servant, breathes a "Praise the Lord" after declaring that Mattie's father has "gone home," and even one of the criminals hanged at the beginning of the film encourages the audience with his last words to "train up your children in the way that they should go." More significantly, Matt Damon's LaBoeuf prays before he shoots Ned Pepper; just a brief invocation—"Oh, Lord" as he takes aim, knowing he has one shot at 400 yards or Rooster Cogburn is dead—but a reverent, humble prayer nonetheless. And it is answered positively; Ned Pepper falls before he can kill Rooster.

Christian themes are supported in other, more subtle ways. Once, when Rooster has two criminals holed up in a cabin, he calls out to them, asking who they are. They reply "a Methodist and a son of a bitch," but later as Moon, the young Methodist, lies dying, he asks to be remembered to his brother, a Methodist "circuit rider." Rooster is gentle with Moon, asking him if he wants Rooster to tell Moon's brother that he died a criminal. Moon tells him it doesn't matter, confidently declaring, "I will meet him later walking the streets of glory."

The scene has a poignancy that

appears heart-felt. This is especially noteworthy, given the Coen brothers' penchant throughout their careers for sarcasm regarding religion. Rooster does sardonically end the scene by telling Moon when he gets to heaven not to be looking for Quincy (the other criminal who has murdered Moon for talking), but even this line is delivered with gentle violins in the background and without malice. The scene is a perfect example of the clear moral tone that undergirds virtually every scene in the film.

The lynchpin for the Christian framework of the film, however, resides in the complicated but wonderful depiction of the film's central character, Mattie Ross. Peter Travers of *Rolling Stone* calls it "Presbyterian steel," but Mattie's demeanor is more subtle than that. Her perseverance on the one hand colors her character with an honor and self-sacrifice that awes the two older men, as it does the audience. She is the one with "true grit" in the end, able to fire at Tom Chaney point blank, and more than once. But Mattie can be read just as easily as a childish legalist-with-a-heart, and at points in the film it is hard to know what the Coen brothers intend in her character: a sympathetic portrait of a fundamentalist or a sarcastic portrayal of a naive idealist. After all, she does grow up into an old maid who seems to have lived a cantankerous, lonely life, carrying with her the scar of her adventure in her stump of a left arm, but so certain of herself that she is not even likeable.

This uncertainty demonstrates how great Mattie's character really is in this version of the story because believability and veneration are exactly the two qualities needed for a true movie hero, and both reside in Mattie. Mattie is the center of the movie, really, not Cogburn, unlike the 1969 version in which John Wayne took center stage. Her dogged pursuit of the criminal Tom Chaney, who shot her father, and the humor she brings in shaming men old enough to be her father, make the picture alive.

But what are we to think of Mattie's quest: is she pursuing justice or only seeking revenge? The answer lies in reference to a theme that is scattered liberally through many films in 2010:

family. Mattie's desire to honor her father makes her continue on, no matter what the cost, and it is her perseverance that causes that pursuit to triumph. She loved her father and insists that Tom Chaney be punished at Fort Smith rather than in Texas (where LaBoeuf prefers him to be tried because LaBoeuf gets the reward if he takes Chaney to Texas, and doesn't if Chaney is hanged in Arkansas). Mattie of course doesn't care about the money. But she reiterates time and again: "I do not want him to die in Texas for shooting the dog of a Senator. He must die in Arkansas because he shot my father."

It is the honoring of her father that makes Mattie's character a truly Christian one. She is not just a remarkably stubborn child, who will pursue a goal simply because she has chosen a path and is determined to walk it to the end. Although there are never any signs of doubt in her vision, that vision is one of love for her father and retribution for his death, which drives her noble actions, and the Christian understanding of grace and justice shines through them.

True Grit is a classic western with all the elements of the journey story. Both Rooster and Mattie (and LaBoeuf to some degree) develop in the movie, not just in our eyes as revealing character they already contained, but as changing, learning to trust others, learning humility, learning friendship. Even as they persevere in the face of repeated challenges, they begin to trust each other, realizing they cannot do alone everything worth doing in life. The film contains tender moments and rousing moments, grisly moments and beautiful moments, and the Coens master each wonderfully.

Most notable, though, is how Christian the film feels in every frame. The Coen brothers, Jewish by upbringing but admittedly irreligious in practice, have demonstrated that grace themselves, which Christians call "common grace," in making this film so thoroughly enjoyable. As Armond White put it in his review in *First Things*: "Who knew America's coolest filmmakers would turn out to be its most openly spiritual?" ■

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Drew Trotter, a contributing editor for *Critique*, is the executive director of the Consortium of Christian Study Centers (<http://studycentersonline.org>) and

has taught at the seminary level for more than thirty years. However, there is no evidence that his teaching has ever done anything for anyone but provide a lasting, non-invasive cure for insomnia, so he wonders whether or not he actually should include this impressive statistic in a blurb that is being distributed to the general public.

True Grit credits

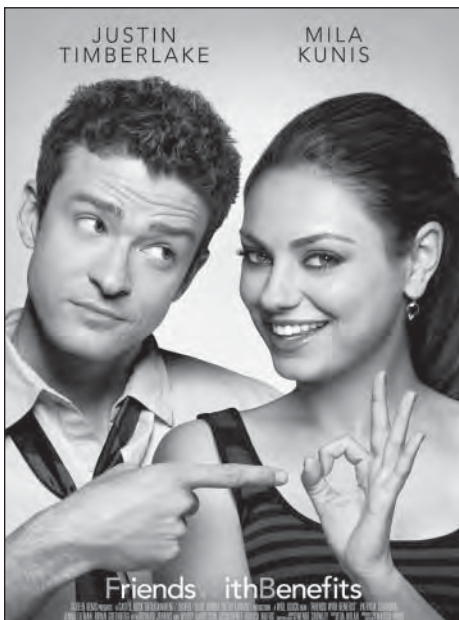
Starring: Jeff Bridges (Rooster Cogburn)
 Matt Damon (LaBoeuf)
 Hailee Steinfeld (Mattie Ross)
 Roy Lee Jones (Yarnell)
 Josh Brolin (Tom Chaney)
 Barry Pepper (Lucky Ned Pepper)
 Rae (Emmet Quincy)
 Ed Corbin (Bear Man)
 Leon Russom (Sheriff)
 Bruce Green (Harold Parmalee)
 Directors: Joel and Ethan Coen
 Writers: Joel and Ethan Coen (screenplay), Charles Portis (novel)
 Producers: Joel and Ethan Coen and others
 Original Music: Carter Burwell
 Runtime: 110 min
 Release: USA, 2010
 Rated: PG-13 for some intense sequences of western violence including disturbing images

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION/DISCUSSION

1. What does it take to make a "Christian film"? Is there any such thing?
2. In what ways do you think *True Grit* does not really exemplify Christian values?
3. Each of the characters in *True Grit* is a rugged individualist in the classic western vein. Is there any sense of community in the film at all? If so, where and how is it portrayed?
4. What is the film's sense of evil? Does this accord with your understanding? Why or why not?
5. Do you find the character of Mattie Ross appealing? Would you like to have her for your friend? Why or why not? Discuss both the girl and the adult versions of the character.

Sex Points the Way: *Friends With Benefits* and the nature of reality

A film review by John Seel



"A girl can tuck a Trojan in her purse on Saturday night, but there is no such device to protect her heart."

—Laura Sessions Stepp

"Having friends with benefits is a lot like communism. It works well in theory, but not so well in execution."

—Mila Kunis discussing her film, *Friends With Benefits*

If you are lost on a mountain, one thing is obvious. One way is up; the other is down. Follow gravity and you will get to the valley. It may be a circuitous route, but you will eventually get there. The same is true of sex. It has its own logic.

If social mores are learned in film, then this summer has brought the hook-up culture out of the college dorm room and onto the big screen. The level of confusion about relationships today is staggering. The church has done little to help—vacillating from studied silence to moralistic finger wagging. Neither addresses the complex relational choices young couples inevitably face. Novelist Tom Wolfe describes contemporary patterns in his 2000 essay, "Hooking Up."

Back in the twentieth century, American girls had used baseball terminology. "First base" referred to embracing and kissing; "second base" referred to groping and fondling and deep, or "French" kissing, commonly known as "heavy petting"; "third base" referred to fellatio, usually known in polite conversation by the ambiguous term "oral sex"; and "home plate" meant conception-mode

intercourse, known familiarly as "going all the way." In the year 2000, in the era of hooking up, "first base" meant deep kissing ("tonsil hockey"), groping and fondling; "second base" meant oral sex; "third base" meant going all the way; and "home plate" meant learning each other's names.

Dating is *passé*. Hooking up is *de rigueur*. "Hooking up" is an intentionally ambiguous term for a casual sexual encounter—ranging from kissing to intercourse—that has no expectation of future emotional commitment. This summer the hooking-up culture went mainstream. It was explored in Natalie Portman and Ashton Kutcher's *No Strings Attached* (2011) as well as in Mila Kunis and Justin Timberlake's *Friends With Benefits* (2011). It even spilled over into marriage relations in the Farrelly brothers' film *Hall Pass* (2011). Of course this doesn't include the coverage hooking up gets on TV with shows such as *Sex in the City*, *The Bachelor*, *The Bachelorette*, *Bachelor Pad*, *Jersey Shore*, *Sweet Home Alabama*, and perhaps the most explicit hook up reality TV show this year, NBC's *Love in the Wild*. Hooking up dominates the culture's relational imagination.

If film is the main avenue whereby American adolescents and young adults explore, discuss, and imagine social mores, then these films and TV shows deserve close attention. Sex, it would appear, has lost its moorings to a serious relationship, but more importantly it has lost its hold on reality. The practice of hooking up does not work in reality. It worked no better



in the seventies when open marriage and key parties were the rage. See the 1997 film, *The Ice Storm*, which is set in 1973. For in spite of social mores, there is no prophylactic for the heart. Heartache ensues, even by the admission of the actors portrayed in these films. Moreover, the hook-up practice has its dark side, as one in five women in college report being the victim of sexual assault—casual sex easily morphs into coercive rape.

Mila Kunis and Justin Timberlake, the two stars of *Friends With Benefits*, are popular and compelling role models of a generation. It was striking that, at the first showing of *Friends With Benefits* in Boston on a Friday afternoon, over 80% of the audience was women. Learning to negotiate this ambiguous and complex social pattern is a matter of acute personal interest to modern women. Market research revealed that 60% of the first weekend attendees to *Friends With Benefits* were women over the age of 25. Women and men go to these movies to figure out what's allowed and what's not. They look to the social experiments on screen to define the sexual boundaries in their own lives...but often miss the larger metaphysical truths embedded in their sexuality.

Friends With Benefits is a well-scripted, fast-paced, thoughtful film—far better than the earlier release, *No Strings Attached*, which has a similar plot and theme. Though there is a great deal of sexual content in the film, it is tastefully portrayed and appropriate to the story. The actors actually spent two-months rewriting the script from its original PG-13 rating to an R rating, because they believed a more explicit portrayal would resonate more authentically with their target 20-something audience. The comic banter of Kunis and Timberlake is reminiscent of Katherine Hepburn and Spencer Tracy at their best in

films such as *Adam's Rib* (1949).

Both Kunis's and Timberlake's characters appeal to the loss of a parent as the source of their emotional brokenness. Kunis's character Jamie does not know whom her father is and has been mostly abandoned by her overgrown hippy mother played by Patricia Clarkson. Likewise, Timberlake's character Dylan explains that his mother abandoned him, and we witness his struggle to maintain a caring relationship with his Alzheimer-stricken father played convincingly by Richard Jenkins.

Dylan's love for his father shows both him and the audience what true love demands—self-giving for the good of another without thought for oneself. To identify unashamedly with his father's Alzheimers, Dylan joins him by taking off his trousers in a public restaurant. It's a comic gesture; here it's pure love. It's the opposite of lust, self-grasping for the sake of oneself without thought of the other. We know love when we see it and, though we long for it in all relationships, some kinds of relationships such as friends with benefits make lust normative and love nearly impossible.

The main problem this film explores has little to do with sex and everything to do with friendship. Does having sex with a friend necessarily mess up the friendship? To the modern filmgoer, the expectation of sex is a given, the potential loss of a friend worrisome. The stigma of having friends with benefits is not the sex, but the cheapening of friendship. For most moderns, sex is not relational, but recreational. Friendship, however, remains undeniably relational. This is where problems arise. Because sex is actually more than recreational, it screws up the relationship. When sex is disconnected from reality, reality bites. Reality always asserts its truth in the end.

Nonetheless, one can argue that friends with benefits is an improvement over casual hooking up. A special conversation is required to establish mutual expectations—one in which boundaries are clarified. In this film, Kunis and Timberlake swear on a Bible app on an iPad to remain emotionally disconnected—like George Clooney in the film *Up in the Air* (2009). "I have a Bible app because I'm a good girl," Kunis remarks. The Bible is a symbol of relational seriousness lacking moral content.

However odd making a commitment to be emotionally unsupportive appears, it is actually more meaningful when compared to the casual nature of hooking up itself. These modern-day secularists even find it appropriate to get God involved in their decision. At the very least, expectations are verbalized. Friends with benefits is a commitment that is supposed to mean something for the sake of the relationship. "We will remain friends no matter what." This kind of arrangement follows directly from the hook-up culture. If you hang out with friends, it is presumed that sex will happen. The key is to avoid emotional attachment in order to preserve the friendship. But as both films reveal, *No Strings Attached* and *Friends With Benefits*, sex doesn't allow it.

The traditional romantic comedy is deconstructed—"Katherine Heigl is a liar," Kunis exclaims making reference to Heigl's film *The Ugly Truth* (2009). Here the nature of the relationship—friend with benefits—plays the role of protagonist. Willing cynicism, feigning cosmopolitan sophistication, lamenting one's emotional brokenness...none of this changes the embodied fact that sex is always more than sex. Sex creates an emotional bond.

There are scientific studies that appeal to neurological releases of



dopamine, oxytocin, and vasopressin as the source of the bonding sexual intimacy creates between couples. But such chemical reductionism misses the larger cosmic point. Reality has a given pattern, and sex, like gravity, cannot be rearranged to suit our own predilections without real consequences. Sexuality is not a consumer choice or a lifestyle alternative, but a metaphysical reality. To deny its design is to miss its point—a banquet of self-giving love.

The givenness of our bodily design is not a social creation. Sexuality is an embodied reality. To treat sex like junk food (as does much of Hollywood) or a starvation diet (as does much of the church) is to miss the point of its intended banquet. Sex is meant to point us to the deepest aspects of all reality—the mutual giving of our embodied selves in love for another. Casual sexual relations—hooking up—will inevitably undermine friendship because genuine friendship demands love and sacrifice. This is just as true on the battlefield as it is in the bedroom: “Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friend” (John 15:13). Learning how to become a gift to the other is what fosters true friendship. Sex and love are designed to go hand in hand. Only when one removes love from friendship can the notion of friends with benefits work—but that leaves one with a relationship defined by manipulation, grasping, and self-centeredness. Friendship works no better on these terms than does sex. Relationships demand love or they die. So does sex. Like gravity, that’s the way it is. Few happily deny gravity for long. True freedom comes by living within our created design.

Reality provides each of us a series of personal choices, choices we reaffirm each day and thereby determine what kind of person we become:

life or death, love or indifference, community or isolation, flourishing or floundering, giving or grasping, heaven or hell. Every decision serves one or the other end and bears its inevitable fruit.

There is a great deal of confusion about sex because, for too long, the church has preached only the starvation diet. Instinctively and rightly, Hollywood knows to honor sex as something more than a thing to be avoided. But not knowing what it is for, Hollywood and many modern couples risk losing more than friendship; they risk losing sight of who they are, who God is, the meaning of love, the ordering of society, and the meaning of the cosmos. We were made for much, much more. Sex irrefutably points the way. ■

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John Seel, PhD, is a contributing editor to *Critique*. He is the president of *Transcend Entertainment*, a film and special effects company based in Los Angeles and Vancouver, BC. He and his wife, Kathryn, live in Cohasset, Massachusetts.

***Friends With Benefits* credits**

Starring:

Justin Timberlake (Dylan)
Mila Kunis (Jamie)
Patricia Clarkson (Lorna)
Jenna Elfman (Annie)
Bryan Greenberg (Parker)
Richard Jenkins (Mr. Harper)
Woody Harrelson (Tommy)
Nolan Gould (Sam)
Andy Samberg (Quincy)
Shaun White (himself)

Director: Will Gluck

Writers: Keith Merryman, David A. Newman, and Will Gluck

Producers: Glenn Gainor and others

Cinematography: Michael Grady

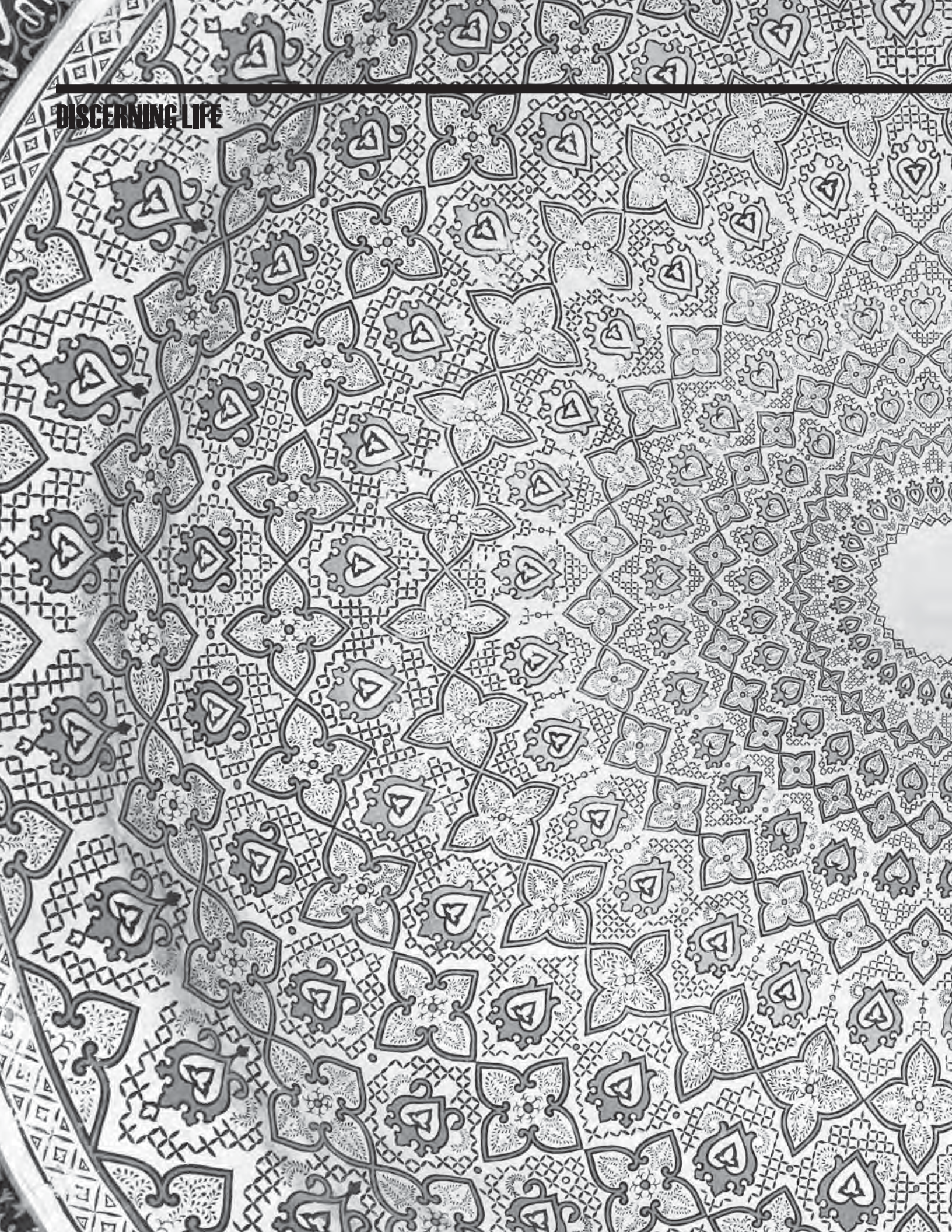
USA; 109 min; 2011

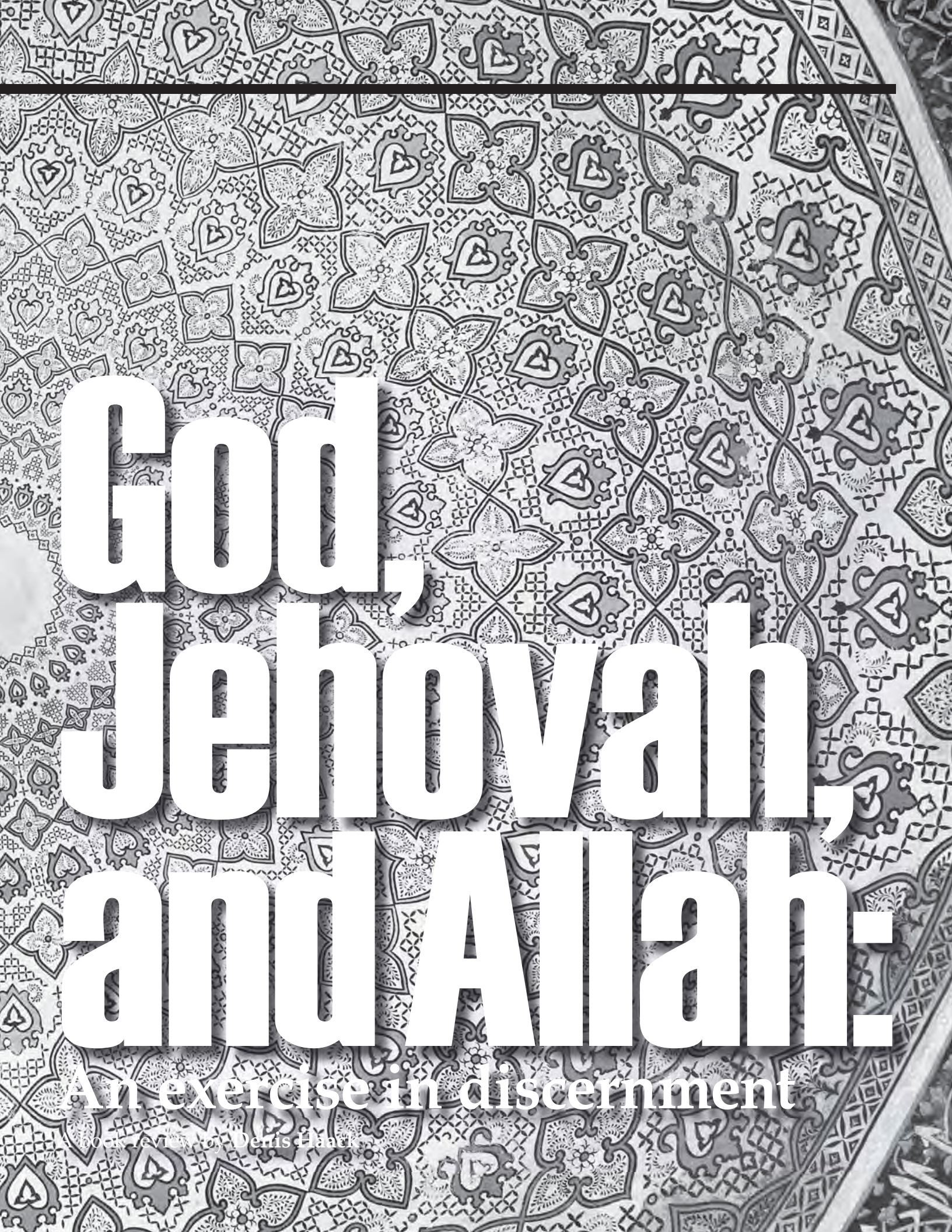
Rated: R (for sexual content and language)

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION/DISCUSSION

1. What difference does it make if sex has an intrinsic design and is not merely a social construct? What would “sexual freedom” be then?
2. Today 20 percent of all marriages begin from an online dating sight—and the number is growing. Coupled with the popularity of social networking sites such as Facebook, how do these patterns and practices support or hinder hooking up? Are they related in some way?
3. How is the plausibility of hooking up reinforced by movies and television programs? Where do most people learn how to negotiate interpersonal relationships? Why are colleges now offering courses on the subject?
4. How is hooking up biased against the best interests of women?
5. In your experience or that of your friends, does hooking up foster healthy friendships or relationships?
6. Tina Turner asks, “What’s love got to do with it?” What is lost when sex and love are separated and sex is seen as a form of exercise? What does love demand that hooking up omits?
7. Jewish television matchmaker Patti Stanger has a rule in her club, no sex without monogamy. Why does Stanger push back against the hook up culture on her Bravo TV show *Millionaire Matchmaker*?
8. Seel suggests that agreeing to be friends with benefits is an improvement over hooking up. Why is this the case? In the film *Friends With Benefits*, did Jamie’s return to hooking up after her break with Dylan seem more or less attractive?
9. How can the church better assist young adults with these complex patterns of social relationships? What works? What does not work?
10. Why is it important to imagine sexuality as a banquet rather than fast food or a starvation diet? Is this how your church has described it, if at all?

DISCERNING LIFE





God, Jehovah, and Allah:

An exercise in discernment

by David J. Den Hartog



There are some things we don't have to plan for while living in a pluralistic world, though it would be wise to do so. If we can reasonably anticipate needing to make some choice, there is no reason to be caught flat-footed when the situation arises.

One such situation involves a very simple question. The question is this: Is the God of Abraham (the Jewish Jehovah) and the Christian God (the Father of Jesus Christ) and the God of Muhammad (the Muslim Allah) the same God? Then, depending on what answer we give, what are the practical implications of our position, and can we explain our reasons thoughtfully and persuasively to both Christians and non-Christians alike?

It's important to remember that merely reacting to such things is insufficient. As Christians we believe we are fallen creatures, so there is no reason to believe that our momentary reaction is necessarily godly or reasonable. And the question we are raising is an important one. In the Bible, the name and identity of God is revealed as holy, and not to be taken lightly. As we review the Scriptures, the fact that the Old Testament law was given to a theocracy helps us realize the significance of this issue since the penalties listed are severe. Similar penalties should not be encouraged in a pluralistic democracy, but they help the Christian recognize that we must speak of God with care and respect and in a spirit of submission. He is Creator while we are his creatures, he is Almighty while we are finite, he is Redeemer and we are slaves to sin, he is our God and we are his people.

Which brings me to *Praying with the Earth: A Prayerbook for Peace* by John Philip Newell, a poet and Church of Scotland minister. The book is a series of simple liturgies that consist of prayers and short readings, one for each day of the week, morning and evening.

There are some wonderful things about *Praying with the Earth*. It is brief, making it accessible to busy people, and of a size perfect for slipping into a laptop case or backpack. It is a beautiful volume filled with artwork, all nonrepresentational from the traditions of religious art inspired by Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. (A

**IT IS ESPECIALLY A TIME TO
PRAY FOR PEACE WITHIN THE
HOUSEHOLD OF ABRAHAM
AND SARAH AND HAGAR.**

two-page appendix helps us understand the illustrations.) Newell has inserted regular pauses between the readings—marked by “Pause” so we’ll actually do so—to provide time for meditation and reflection. I like this a great deal because I know how easy it is to simply keep reading during my times of prayer and devotion, and the reminder to slow down, to think, is

good. Within each day's liturgy there are also sections marked “Silence,” and “Be still and aware.” One might think that these are merely other terms for “Pause,” but I don't think so. To pause between readings is an invitation to reflect on what was just read, while to be silent and still is an invitation to worship. It's hard to be silent at the best of times, unless we happen to have a vocation that provides it, and even then technology can always provide the means to fill our world with music or talk. Silence has long been known to be a spiritual discipline, a skill to be learned, and one that is difficult to learn and practice. “Be still, and know that I am God,” the Scriptures say (Psalms 46:10). Which raises the question if we are never still, can we still know God, or will our walk with him always remain just a bit stilted? Newell's inclusion of these elements reveals his sensitivity to the needs of the soul.

Praying with the Earth also raises some issues that discerning Christians will want to consider with care. “This is a time to pray for peace,” Newell writes in his preface.

And it is especially a time to pray for peace within the household of Abraham and Sarah and Hagar. As Jews, Christians and Muslims we are painfully divided, even though we share a spiritual descent. And our divisions are at the centre [sic] of much of the world's most serious places of conflict and war today. Praying with the Earth: A Prayerbook for Peace is an attempt to utter the longings for peace that are closer to the heart of the household, and closer to the heart of all earth's spiritual traditions, than our divisions.... This is the twofold aim of Praying with the Earth, to learn from the wisdom of other parts of the family, and to recover, or perhaps to hear for the first time, some of the lost wisdom in our own branch of the family. And in all of this to be called back to the deep yearnings for peace that are at the heart of our shared inheritance and at the heart of the human soul [p. xi-xii].

Some will object to the notion that Christians, Jews, and Muslims are members of the same household or family, while others will be comfortable with this language,

insisting that semantics should not stand in the way of learning from one another. *Praying with the Earth* is written so as to be acceptable to Jewish, Christian, and Muslim believers. Thus none of the prayers are in Jesus's name, scripture quotations include texts from Old and New Testaments as well as the Qur'an, and some of the wording of some of the prayers may seem unfamiliar to evangelical Christians (depending on your theological tradition). The discernment issues raised here help us consider afresh what we believe and why, how we live in light of those convictions, and whether we honor God's name as a result.

Even if you never use *Praying with the Earth* as a guide for prayer and meditation, the issues involved are something we should expect to face in a pluralistic world. And all this calls not

for reaction but discernment, and the questions included here are designed to help us in that process. ■

IF WE ARE NEVER STILL, CAN WE STILL KNOW GOD?

Sources:

Praying with the Earth: A Prayerbook for Peace by John Philip Newell (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2011) 58 p.

"Is the God of Muhammad the Father of Jesus?" by Timothy George (Christianity Today, February 4, 2002) is available online (www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2002/february4/1.28.html).

RESOURCE

Hearts and Minds bookstore is a well-stocked haven for serious, reflective readers. When ordering resources, mention Ransom Fellowship and they will contribute 10 per cent of the total back to us. ■

Resource: Hearts and Minds bookstore, www.heartsandmindsbooks.com



QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION/DISCUSSION

1. Do a study in Scripture concerning the name of God. Your study should not be limited to, but can include: Exodus 3:13-16; 20:7; 23:13; Leviticus 22:32-33; 24:10-16; Psalm 8:1; 72:19; 138:2; Isaiah 48:9; Amos 2:6-8; Matthew 1:21; 6:9; 7:22; 12:21; John 1:12-13; 14:14; 15:16; Acts 21:13; Colossians 3:17; Revelation 3:8.
2. Read and discuss "Is the God of Muhammad the Father of Jesus?" by Timothy George (originally published in *Christianity Today* and available online).
3. Evangelical theologian Timothy George answers the question in the title of his article this way:

Is the Father of Jesus the God of Muhammad? The answer is surely Yes and No. Yes, in the sense that the Father of Jesus is the only God there is. He is the Creator and Sovereign Lord of Muhammad, Buddha, Confucius, of every person who has ever lived. He is the one before whom all shall one day bow (Phil. 2:5-11). Christians and Muslims can together affirm many important truths about this great God—his oneness, eternity, power, majesty. As the Qur'an puts it, he is "the Living, the Everlasting, the All-High, the All-Glorious" (2:256).

But the answer is also No, for Muslim theology rejects the divinity of Christ and the personhood of the Holy Spirit—both essential components of the Christian understanding of God. No devout Muslim can call the God of Muhammad "Father," for this, to their mind, would compromise divine transcendence. But no faithful Christian can refuse to confess, with joy and confidence, "I believe in God the Father. ... Almighty!" Apart from the Incarnation and the Trinity, it is possible to know that God is, but not who God is.

What are the implications of this for how you interact with Muslim neighbors and colleagues? With Jewish neighbors and colleagues? Would you be comfortable praying publically at some event at which a Muslim also would pray? Why or why not?

4. In *Praying with the Earth*, texts from the Qur'an appear along with texts from the Old and New Testaments. Do you object? Why or why not? Since many devotional books include extra-biblical poetry or quotations, why would someone object to texts from the Qur'an? Shouldn't we be more concerned

about the truthfulness of a statement than its source?

5. In the Scriptures, Jesus instructs his disciples to make their requests to God in his name. (See, for example, John 15:16; 16:23-28). Are you comfortable using the prayers in *Praying with the Earth* since none are in Jesus's name? Why or why not? Are you convinced that praying "in the name of Jesus" requires those words (or an equivalent) to be verbalized for a prayer to be fully acceptable to God? Why or why not?
6. To what extent are Jews and Muslims part of the community in which you live and work? How comfortable are you interacting with them about the things that matter most? What plans should you make?
7. Review Acts 17:16-34 where Paul is in Athens speaking with non-Christians who hold to very different worldviews and gods. Does his identification of the Athenian god (16:23) and Zeus (16:28) with the God of Scripture lend any guidance in this discussion?

The Cross and the Wide World

A meditation by **Preston Jones**

Christians relate to the Lord differently. The variety of Protestant denominations and the numerous subgroups within Roman Catholicism point to different theological accents and emphases. But they also point to differences of personality, style, and life experience.

For the past several years I've related to the Lord primarily through reflection on the cross. Christ's crucifixion is a historical event, long past, and beyond definite archival reach. But I've also come to see the crucifixion as an ongoing, eternal event—present from the beginning of time (Revelation 13:8) and repeated every day (Hebrews 6:4). In a sense, it's something I can participate in (Philippians 3:10). This focus has been accompanied by a deepening in commitment to practicality and to a personal emphasis on works done in Jesus's name. One bears a cross to relieve another's.

The scriptures are clear that we are reconciled with God by faith through grace. They are equally clear that Christian commitment absent works that make practical differences in people's lives isn't Christian commitment. I don't see how anyone could walk away from the parable of the sheep and the goats, or read the book of James or the writings of second-generation Christian leaders, and have a different impression. "If we prove ourselves good citizens of his here [on earth]," Polycarp wrote to the Philippians in the second century, "we shall reign with him hereafter, if we have faith." Faith and works together.

My thinking about the omnipres-

ence of the cross began several years ago as I considered the meaning of the long and fascinating, but also agonizing, process of evolution. I began to conceive of Jesus's death on the cross as related to the pain of the whole groaning world (Romans 8:22), for suffering is as central a theme in nature as it is in scripture, though obviously it's not the only theme. This thinking carried into my reading of more than 100 war memoirs and diaries, where references to the cross abound. It was further deepened in Guatemala, where one sees inexplicable suffering foisted on children, among others. One sight—large crosses with vultures perched on them, standing watch over hundreds of people scrounging a living from a trash dump in the valley below—was as apt as it was horrible.

My considerations of the cross's ever-presence were sustained by things seen and experienced in Joplin, Missouri, which was ravaged by a tornado in late May of 2011. On three of my four trips to that city, I made little crosses from debris, partly because I wanted mementos, but mostly because I felt that doing so put me in touch with some meaning that, though out of reach, was still discernible in the spirit.

I've seen glimmers of the cross all around, for everywhere there's beauty alongside ugliness, and wisdom alongside foolishness, light, and obscurity. I see it in the wonderful human impulse to shape nature, and also in the unwise insistence on lush green yards in times of severe drought. I see it in the ugly vultures that soar over a flea-infested slum at the edge

of the dump in Guatemala City, and also in the perseverance of the faithful Christians who live there. I see it in the efforts of my colleagues who are always thinking of ways to reach their students, but also in the endless stream of energy-sapping initiatives cooked up to feed the insatiable Moloch of the education industry. I see it in the random violence of the Joplin tornado, and also in the way the nearly destroyed trees, refusing to give in, have sprouted new leaves.

When I was young, my mom warned me away from crucifixes because "Jesus isn't on the cross anymore." That's true, and I think that in some way everything good and beautiful proclaims this truth. But in the offices nearby there's frustration. In the grass I walk on there's insect warfare. A wave of personal unraveling is sweeping across my community. A Guatemalan friend of mine spent three days standing on a beach waiting for the body of her friend's son to wash ashore. It never did. Somehow, from those depths, she still lifted her voice to the Lord.

The glory is always glorious, and the nails are always driving. Both. It's unending, until the end.

We learn **en route** if we pay attention. ■

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Preston Jones, a contributing editor for *Critique*, teaches at John Brown University.



BACK PAGE (DARKENED ROOM, CONTINUED)

The Conspirator



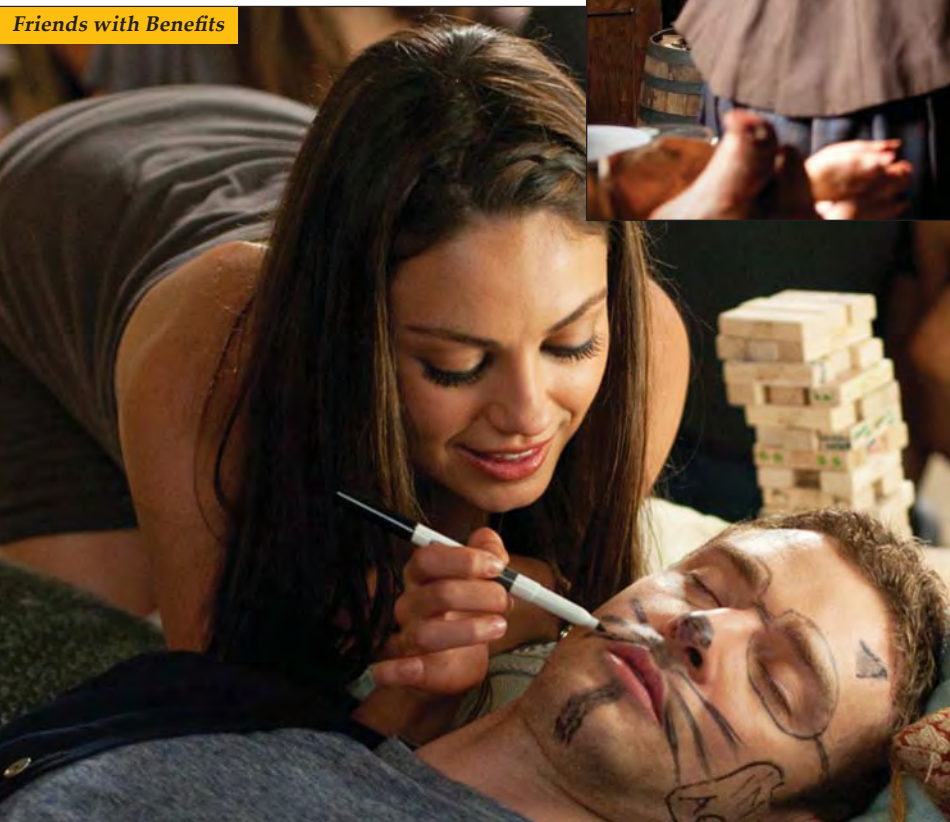
The Conspirator



True Grit



Friends with Benefits



Friends with Benefits

