

Critique

Helping Christians Develop Skill in Discernment

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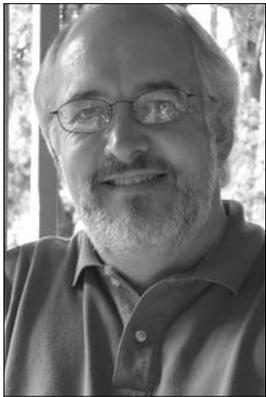
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Editor's Note



Spiritual Reality

Lord," the 12th century Bernard of Clairvaux prayed, "I will never come away from Thee without Thee." In other words, for Bernard, the goal of spending unhurried time alone before God was not merely

an intellectual understanding of God's word and will, but a living enjoyment and assurance of God's presence. The 17th century Puritan preacher, Thomas Watson agreed. "Let this be a Christian's resolution," he said, "not to leave off his meditations of God until he find something of God in him."

The trouble with such sentiments is that they were spoken in a previous era, at a time, we suspect, when the pace of life was more reasonable. In their slower world, periods of solitude for prayer and meditation were more possible because there were fewer demands on their time and energy. We'd like the spiritual reality of which they speak, of course, but feel trapped by the circumstances of a world which relentlessly squeezes such things out of our schedule.

It is true that the pluralism and technology of our postmodern world is something that neither Bernard nor Watson experienced. It is possible, however, that the real impediment is less in our circumstances than in ourselves. Another Puritan, Richard Sibbes, noted that "Spiritual things are against the stream; heaven is up hill." He did not mean that we must work to earn eternal life, but that true spiritual reality now always entails struggling against forces that invariably array themselves against deepening our walk with God.

Most of us think that if only we had more time, our problems would be solved. We could get caught up, get rested and refreshed, and then

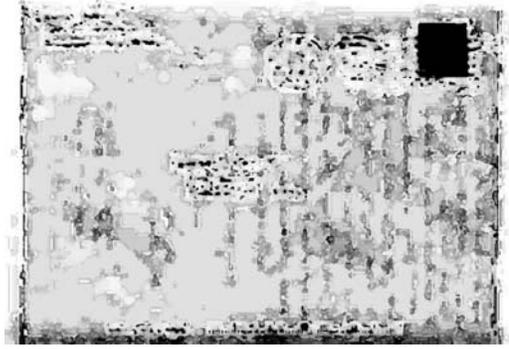
have leisure to explore deepening our relationship with God. But Dallas Willard insists that "it is a fallacy to think that one just needs more time. Unless a deeper solution is found, 'more time' will just fill up in the same way as the time we already have." My experience says that Willard is correct. Instead, he says, "we must learn to choose things that meet with God's actions of grace to break us out of the system. These things are the disciplines of life in the Spirit, well known from Christian history but much avoided and misunderstood." What is called for, in other words, is not more time, but the choice of faithfully including the spiritual disciplines (such as meditation, silence, and solitude) in our life—even if we can only begin with a few minutes each week.

Dick Lucas, the rector of St Helen's Church in London has said that people tend to want to find some infallible, watertight, absolutely compelling argument to persuade others to believe. What God has revealed to us, however, is an infallible, watertight, absolutely compelling Person to believe in, to love, to follow, and most important of all, to be loved by.

The faith we wish to commend is not simply a message, but a living relationship with the personal infinite God who actually exists. Our relationship with him can be nurtured and deepened, but such growth comes at a cost. The question I find myself constantly struggling with is less whether I have the time than whether I am willing to pay the price. ■

~Denis Haack

Dialogue



Re: Business, Meeks, and movies

Send e-mail to:

letters@ransomfellowship.org

You are invited to take part in *Critique's* Dialogue. Address all correspondence to:

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or e-mail:
letters@ransomfellowship.org

Unfortunately, we are unable to respond personally to all correspondence received, but each one is greatly appreciated. We reserve the right to edit letters for length.

I found your internet site yesterday and I am absolutely thrilled. I am a 44 year old wife and mother who works full-time outside of the home. I want to create a home life with my husband and children like you describe. I'm uncertain where to begin—so many distractions, so little time!! I want to study my Bible, make my home beautiful, cook tasty meals, have guests in our home often...whew, I'm tired just thinking about it all. BUT I want what you describe. Where to begin?

Thank you for your lovely, funny, deeply moving writing.

Sonja Bates
Highland, CA

I have a request: The business world is a part of the culture—perhaps the strongest threads in our cultural fabric, in fact. It would be interesting to see some thoughts on business. There are a lot of things to think about in ethics, stakeholder rights, labor, Wall Street ethos and the boundaries of capitalistic thought.

Christian Fong
West Lebanon, NH

The main purpose of the note is to thank you for introducing me to Professor Meeks. I was reading her article and thoroughly enjoying it before I realized that it was a stealth article about epistemology. It certainly whetted my appetite for more, and I have now put *Longing to Know* on my wish list, along with Michael Polanyi. Thanks for presenting those resources!

Andrew & Rebecca Caudal
Southlake, Texas

I wanted to let you know how much I appreciate all the efforts of Ransom Fellowship. I am a college student in Colorado. One of my friends said I had to look at your ministry and website. I fell in love with the idea of doing a film discussion group. However, my idea was to play "Christiany" movies, and use the movie as a bait and switch for the gospel. With the help of your ministry, I saw how truly off I was. My vision lacked love, the desire to know what the world around me was thinking, and what it looks like to engage with the lost. This semester, we have had two movie nights in my dorm hall. As a group of believers and nonbelievers, we watched *Good Will Hunting* (thanks to the Babylonian series) and discussed love, relationships, motives, putting on masks, and so much more. The second time we watched *Shawshank Redemption* and talked about revenge, redemption, freedom, and friendship. There was no agenda other than loving the lost and valuing their opinions. I wanted to take time and thank you for all that you have done. I trust that as our relationships develop there will be plenty of opportunities to talk about the true redemption. The way I look at the arts, culture, and the lost is different because of you and your ministry. I hope this brings encouragement to you; I know it has encouraged me.

Shawn Cramer
Sterling, CO

Spirituality Minus God

If you have a finger on the pulse of our postmodern world you've noticed a yearning for spirituality, even among many who are disillusioned by traditional religion. Thousands of readers are devouring fiction like *Life of Pi* by Yann Martel, and *The Da Vinci Code* by Dan Brown, as well as nonfiction works like *Expecting Adam: A True Story of Birth, Rebirth, and Everyday Magic* by Martha Beck and *The Art of Happiness at Work* by the Dalai Lama. Much popular culture—both film and music—makes spirituality attractive to a generation that, from a Christian perspective is unchurched. An example is *Whale Rider*, with its mystically beautiful depiction of Maori ancestor worship, chanting, and ritual. Many people seem genuinely interested in the topic of spirituality, and are eager to discuss it.

This is a welcome trend, for several reasons. First, as C. S. Lewis rightly noted, the pagan is closer to the biblical world view than is the secularist who insists that reality is bounded by the limits of a material universe. Second,

people are made in God's image and live in God's creation, which means that a yearning for spirituality fits who we are as creatures called into being by the word of God. And third, from a Christian perspective this yearning for spirituality can be seen as an expression of their yearning for God. The fact our conversation can assume spiritual reality instead of debating its plausibility is encouraging. Certainly these facts should inform the way we respond to our non-Christian friends who may be uninterested in our faith but eager for spiritual experience. Rather than be dismissive or negative, we can affirm their desire for spirituality, seek to learn more, and by God's grace be willing to be transparent in our own hunger and thirst after true spirituality.

In the ebb and flow of such an ongoing conversation, we will also want to probe aspects of the postmodern yearning for spirituality. While being willing to entertain honest questions and challenges to our faith, we can raise questions that might help our friends reexamine their

own convictions in the light of what's both true and real.

One issue that is worth probing is the separation that many propose between spirituality and God—the latter being seen as largely unnecessary to spiritual experience. Some of this comes from the growing influence of Buddhism. And many seem convinced that a God that is actually known (in some sense) is not a present concern but the final destination.

Since we—and our spiritual children—need to engage this postmodern yearning for spirituality with the gospel, it is worth considering the issue of spirituality without God as an exercise in discernment.

For more on the subject, see the book reviews in the Resources section of this *Critique* (pp. 9-11). ■

~Denis Haack

Source: "Spirituality without Faith" by Thomas W. Clark in *The Humanist* (January/February 2002; pp. 30-35). A copy can be found online at (<http://www.naturalism.org/spiritua1.htm>).

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. What evidence for the postmodern yearning for spirituality have you noticed? What forms of spirituality interest your non-Christian friends, or are practiced by them?
2. To what extent are your non-Christian friends who are interested in spirituality attracted to Christian faith? To aspects of Christian or Jewish spirituality? What do you conclude from this?
3. How do your non-Christian friends respond when you ask them to tell you about their spiritual pilgrimage? What do you learn as you listen? Can you tell about your spiritual pilgrimage in terms that will be understood and seen as attractive in our pluralistic world?
4. One definition of spirituality (without God) includes three aspects. 1.) A "spiritual response" which "can include feelings of significance, unity, awe, joy, acceptance, and consolation." 2.) A "cognitive context," which refers to "beliefs about oneself and the world that can both inspire the spiritual response and provide an interpretation of it," and 3.) "Spiritual practice," which can include any number of activities which "help to access the spiritual response," including silence, prayer, meditation, chanting, etc. What can the Christian affirm in this definition? What should we probe and challenge? Why?

Questions continued on next page...

Sexy Praise Music

QUESTIONS CONT...

5. The definition of spirituality in #4 was proposed by Thomas Clark, a humanist who argues that naturalists like himself need not believe in God—or even in a spiritual realm distinct from the physical—to enjoy spiritual experience. What questions would you ask him? How would you speak of Christian spirituality in light of his definition?
6. From a Christian perspective, how is a living, personal relationship with God related to spiritual experience and practice? How would you explain this to a non-Christian who claims to have no particular belief in God yet is deeply spiritual?
7. On the whole, do Christians tend to exhibit an attractive, personal, deep spirituality in their walk with God? Why or why not? Is true spirituality actively taught and nurtured in the Christian community, and mentioned as a characteristic of Christians by non-Christians?
8. How would you define true, biblical spirituality? How certain are you of your definition? To what extent do you experience and exhibit true spirituality to a watching world?
9. What spiritual disciplines do you exercise regularly? What hindrances do you struggle with most? What plans should you make?
10. Will our message of a relationship with God be compelling if it is not accompanied by a demonstration of true, biblical spirituality? Why or why not?

An excerpt from S.M. Hutchins.



After the collapse of the Episcopal Church our family returned to the Evangelicals whence we came. During our years away, however, they had been undergoing their own

changes. An electro-theatrical liturgy seems now to be the common and expected manner of worship—spectacular when the budget can manage it, and imitation-spectacular when it cannot.

On a recent visit to a fairly typical Evangelical church, we were treated to one of its regular features. A handsome young woman, attractively dressed, stood before the congregation with an eight-inch microphone, the head of which she held gently to her lips while she writhed and cooed a song in which she, with closed eyes and beckoning gestures, begged Jesus, as she worked her way toward its climax, to come fill her emptiness. The crowd liked it.

Her song had a different effect on me than I suspect she thought it would. It did, perhaps, bring me closer to Jesus, but by bringing me closer to the sinfulness of my own heart, the kind of heart that would be excited to lust by a pretty woman begging to be filled, and that would be instructed by its conscience to avert the eyes until she was done with her performance.

It also made me wonder if her husband, sitting by while she went through her show, was doing his duty by her, since she seemed to have a large surplus of the sort of womanly energy that husbands like to see. (One can only account for these displays by Christian wives and daughters by the unquestioned acceptance in Christian homes of feminist assumptions about obe-

dience not owed to husbands and fathers.) These are not particularly pious thoughts, but I rather doubt that I was alone, and as I write am in no humor to pretend otherwise.

Upon reflection I had to conclude that the song was not un-Evangelical, not foreign to the tradition. It was the “In the Garden” tryst of the old hymnbooks carried into the next phase of intimacy and excitement. ■

~Excerpt, S.M. Hutchins

Excerpted from:

“Please Me, O Lord: On the Roots of Romantic Worship” by S. M. Hutchins in *Touchstone: A Journal of Mere Christianity* (May 2004) pp. 13-14. Dr. Hutchins is a senior editor of *Touchstone* and a librarian in Kenosha, WI. Copyright © 2004 The Fellowship of St. James.

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The Darkened Room

I Will Remember You



A review of *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*

by Drew Trotter

Film Credits

Starring:

Jim Carrey
(Joel Barish)
Kate Winslet
(Clementine
Kruczynski)

Elijah Wood
(Patrick)

Mark Ruffalo
(Stan)

Kirsten Dunst
(Mary)

Tom Wilkinson
(Dr. Howard
Mierzwiak)

Director:

Michel Gondry

Screenwriter:

Charlie Kaufman

Producers:

Anthony Bregman
David L. Bushell
Steve Golin

Original Music:

Jon Brion

Cinematographer:

Ellen Kuras

Costume Designer:

Melissa Toth

Runtime: 108 minutes
Rated R for language, some drug and sexual content.

Movies resist philosophical speculation. Experimental films like Alain Resnais' *Last Year at Marienbad*, an attempt to write existentialism into film in the early sixties, suffer from the absence of the central element that makes movies so attractive: identification of the audience with characters and events that are portrayed on the screen. What we want is a *story* in which we can see ourselves as a participant.

The story of *Marienbad* had plenty of potential; its rough outline epitomizes the dramatic love story genre. A man and a woman in some exotic setting begin, and throughout the movie explore, their relationship, with the dramatic tension arising from the question of whether they will leave their spouses for each other. How many times have we seen variations on this theme? From *Grand Hotel* to *Casablanca* to *Lost in Translation*, the story of men and women comparing duty and desire in relationship is as old as story-telling.

Marienbad failed to attract a large audience, though it is still shown in film classes due to its experimental form. *Marienbad's* sequences jump all over the place in time; its characters are not named; and every "fact" in the film is called into question so that the viewer never knows what is real and what isn't. Finding it too hard to transfer themselves into the situations of either Madame A or Monsieur X, the audiences just said, "I'm outta here."

I can't help thinking about *Marienbad* as I think about *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*, directed by Frenchman

Michael Gondry and written by American screenwriter Charlie Kaufman. The parallels are obvious. In *Sunshine*, Joel Barish (Jim Carrey) and Clementine Kruczynski (Kate Winslet) meet in a vacation spot and explore their relationship. Before long the viewer is treated to a complex structure of sequences that jump in and out of the historical narrative of the two main characters' life together and the memories, and fantasies, of one of the characters. By the opening credits, it's apparent that this movie is investigating something deeper than a simple love story, but the viewer has no clue what, and still isn't sure by the end of the film. The difference between the films is that *Sunshine* has made almost 50% profit on its investment so far, and its run is not over. Though strange and philosophical, it is winning an audience.

The plot of *Sunshine* defies simple explanation. Joel and Clementine meet, fall in love, fall out of love, break up and decide to forget each other, in the end getting back together, wiser and more in love than ever (maybe). The key to the movie's uniqueness, however, is the way they decide to forget each other. Kaufman introduces a bit of science fiction by having Clementine impulsively employ the services of Lacuna, Inc., a company that promises to erase memories of any relationship the client desires to forget. Joel finds out about this and decides to do the same thing to her, regretting the decision in the middle of the night-long process, and the fun begins.

As Joel fights the memory eraser, we move in and out of his sometimes conscious, sometimes unconscious dream-world, experiencing pieces of his life both with and without Clementine. Add in sub-plots concerning the Lacuna, Inc. employees, and the viewer's head is on the verge of wildly spinning out of control.

Yet Kaufman's script never allows this to happen. We are simply too engrossed in what is happening. Unlike the stories of *Being John Malkovich* and *Adaptation*, both of which Kaufman wrote, this story has too powerful a theme and is written too much with the heart to lose the viewer for long: love, even if it ends badly, is worth remembering. When love is gone, our memories of it are all we have. If we get rid of those, we get rid of ourselves.

The genius-level writing in this script is well-supported by Gondry's sure-handed direction. Several reviewers have remarked at the particular excellence of the "procedure sequences," often shot with a handheld camera in spotlight; they do have a remarkable feel of the *real* to them, even as things are happening on screen that are far outside the realm of human experience. Carrey and Winslet are brilliant; one hopes their performances will be remembered when Oscar time rolls around. The superb supporting cast made up of Tom Wilkinson as the con-ning Dr. Mierzwiak and Mark Ruffalo,

Elijah Wood and Kirsten Dunst as his assistants, is good enough to have carried the film themselves; everyone rises to the occasion.

The questions that Christians can ask of this film are endless.

Far from presenting a hopeful, Christian notion of relationships, Joel and Clementine, though together at the end of the film, are not convinced that "this time it will work."

In fact, they explicitly agree that it probably won't, but decide to give it a try anyway. Why? Is it desperation? Is it loneliness? Is it a belief that this is all there is, so we might as well make the best of it?

And what about the importance to the Christian of memory for relationship? God commands Israel regularly in the Old Testament to "remember" his faithful deliverance of them in history, particularly in



Sunshine shouts that the mind is a repository of what the heart has experienced; to erase its memories is to alter fundamentally who a person is and will be forever.

the Exodus, but in many other instances as well. Jesus gave us the last supper as a remembrance of the great lengths to which he went to demonstrate his love for us. Memory plays a great part in keeping love aflame, and so it should. If love is a mixture of duty and desire, then memory is an aid to fanning the flames of desire, when duty is all that's left. In *Sunshine*, duty in love is unimaginable; love is all desire, and the characters seem resigned to this. For them, memory just becomes a way of coping with loss because when desire leaves, love is abandoned.

Lastly, perhaps most importantly, *Sunshine* shouts that the mind is a repository of what the heart has experienced; to erase its memories is to alter fundamentally who a person is and will be forever. God declares that he will remember us forever because he loves us so; can we allow our attempts at love to function any less faithfully? ■

~Drew Trotter

Dr. Andrew H. Trotter, Jr., is the executive director of the Center for Christian Study in Charlottesville, VA, where he teaches and writes on theology and culture, focusing on modern American film. Copyright © 2004 by Andrew H. Trotter, Jr.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. What scene in the film impressed you most? Why? What were the choices the actors, or the director, made in that scene that contributed to the themes illustrated in it?
2. Do you agree that the main theme of the film is that "love, even if it ends badly, is worth remembering"? If so, do you agree with the idea? Why or why not? What other human affections, if any, are worth remembering, even though it is painful to do so?
3. If given the chance to erase memories of your past, which ones would you erase, if any? Why?
4. How does a Christian view of the relationship of a man to a woman differ from the view portrayed in the film? Can you, in a sentence or two, articulate what the film's view of love is?
5. What specific shots or scenes stick out in your mind as you remember the character of Joel in the film? Which ones, when you remember Clementine? Why?
6. What effect do you believe the art production of the film had on its tone and mood? It was very cold and bleak at Montauk when Joel and Clementine met (both times); why do you think the film-makers chose to set the crucial scenes there in winter-time?

True Spirituality

As I trace the trajectory of my spiritual pilgrimage, two periods stand out as intensely dry. God seemed distant, busyness pressed in on all sides, Bible reading and prayer were more a duty than a delight, and it had been many months since I had felt spiritually refreshed and nurtured.

The first period was in the '70s, just prior to my joining InterVarsity Christian Fellowship as a campus staff worker in New Mexico. The sense of being deeply parched was unmistakable, and overwhelming enough that we wondered if it should simply be accepted as normal. We were young parents, people were drawn to our discussions and studies, and opportunities to minister appeared unending. Perhaps we'd just have to learn to live with it.

In those days new staff were brought together for two weeks of training, the final week at a beautiful camp called Cedar Campus, on a secluded peninsula jutting out into Lake Huron. A lot of training occurred, but the sessions were never frantic, each day included time to rest and play, and a thoughtful Bible expositor had been invited to open the Scriptures to us so that we could hear God's word. It was so deeply refreshing to us that we felt almost delirious. Then about half-way through the week, we were sent on a Retreat of Silence—called "ROS" for short. Our instructions were simple: we were to pick up a bag lunch, take nothing more than a Bible, prayer notebook, and hymn book, and spend 4 full hours alone and quiet before the Lord in a secluded spot where we wouldn't be interrupted. We were not to accomplish anything, but to wait on the Lord. We would be tempted to try to do something, like jot notes for a study we planned to lead, but that needed to be resis-

ted. Those for whom this was new, we were warned, might find that it was surprisingly difficult, and that the busyness and noise of our minds and lives would intrude on our quiet solitude. ROS was a discipline to be learned, we were told, and it was hoped it would become a regular part (monthly was recommended) of our schedule.

It was difficult. I didn't realize how much chatter was inside me. Or that I was so addicted to efficient productivity that 4 hours of quiet solitude with God would be like going cold-turkey. It was also as refreshing as a cold drink of water after a long, hot



“Solitude and silence are not self-indulgent exercises for times when an overcrowded soul needs a little time to itself. Rather, they are concrete ways of opening to the presence of God.”

hike. We determined to make ROS a monthly commitment, and then were surprised at how difficult it was to keep that simple commitment. Everything in our lives, culture and church life conspired against it.

The second period of dryness lasted 18 months. We had gone through a very painful time as a family, and the concerns of life seemed heavier than we could bear. Though I tried to remain faithful in Bible reading and prayer, I found them lifeless and empty. I continued to write and lecture, for my convictions had not wavered, but in my soul I felt like I was tracking through a desert. Even books by some of my favorite authors, writers who had often nourished my soul left me unmoved. I did not believe this was normal, but could see no end in view.

Then we did something we had never done before: we took two full weeks of vaca-

tion at once, with the possibility of extending it a bit beyond that if we wished. We had saved some money, and drove up into Canada, where the exchange rate meant our dollars would allow a few nights in B&Bs. Then we stayed, through the generosity of friends, at a cabin they owned on the shore of Lake Superior. I was surprised at how tired I was, and napped for several days in a row. We read, went for long hikes that ended at a coffee shop, and cooked simple meals together. Mainly, though, we were quiet and alone. It was near the end of the second week that the dryness began to break. As I read the

Bible, it was as if God was speaking to me, and as I sat quietly watching the waves pound against the rocks on the shore, I sensed that I was loved of God.

The call to true spirituality

It would be easy to argue that Christians today need to take true spirituality seriously because we live in a world where non-

Christians are yearning for spiritual reality and experience, but I won't argue that. Even if the world couldn't care less, we should be concerned to nurture our walk with God, to take seriously his word to "be still, and know that I am God" (Psalm 46:10). The disciplines of solitude, silence, prayer and quiet meditation need no justification beyond that. It would also be easy to dismiss all I have written here because your busyness won't permit two weeks, or even four hours, to be alone and quiet, but I hope you don't. You can begin with 10 minutes, if need be. It is true there is a cost involved, but that should be no surprise since it was the Lord who warned us that being his disciple would cost (see, for example, Luke 14:25-33). It actually boils down to something quite simple: if we are never still, can we know God in the way he desires us to?

Resources cont.

In *Invitation to Solitude and Silence*, Ruth Barton introduces us to the simple yet radical discipline of waiting, quiet and alone, in God's presence and word. Practical and personal in her writing, Barton uses the story of Elijah in 1 Kings 19 to explain what she is convinced "is the most challenging, the most needed and least experienced spiritual discipline among evangelical Christians today." Each chapter concludes with practical exercises to help apply what she has been teaching, so that readers can slowly grow in the discipline.

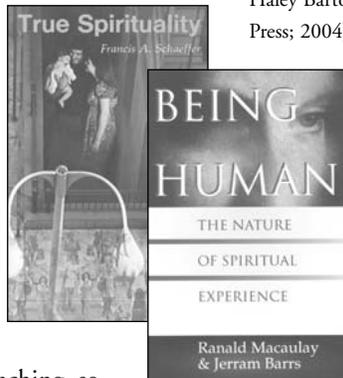
"Solitude and silence," Barton writes, "are not self-indulgent exercises for times when an overcrowded soul needs a little time to itself. Rather, they are concrete ways of opening to the presence of God beyond human effort and beyond the human constructs that cannot fully contain the Divine." Christianity is not merely a system of doctrine, nor can it be reduced to a system of ethics. It is a relationship—a personal, living relationship—with the infinite, personal God, who created us, sustains us, and has redeemed us in Christ, making us his covenant children, forever. Calling him "Father," is not to be a formality, but a reality. And just as all relationships require time alone with the one whom we love, so God invites us to "be still, and know that I am God."

The only question is: will we accept the invitation?

If you would like a simply written, practical guide on how to nurture these

spiritual disciplines in your life, we recommend *Invitation to Solitude and Silence*.

Book reviewed: *Invitation to Solitude and Silence: Experiencing God's Transforming Presence* by Ruth Haley Barton (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press; 2004) 135 pp. + appendix + notes.



For further reading

If Christian spirituality and the classic spiritual disciplines are new to you, it would be wise to consider reading some books that will help you think through the topic. One good place to

If we are never still, can we know God in the way he desires us to?

begin is to note in Scripture the multitude of texts that address spirituality. Some are instructive, many are in the poetic sections, and numerous biblical characters, including Jesus, model it for us.

The basics. There are two foundational books that we would recommend, both essential reading:

True Spirituality by Francis A. Schaeffer (Tyndale House Publishers; 1971). In this classic Schaeffer takes us into Paul's epistle to the Romans to unfold a biblical understanding of what Christian spirituality is, and is not. Though a bit dated in a few details—but not in its care-

ful biblical exposition and instruction—*True Spirituality* remains a wonderful introduction to a topic that is often ignored yet is essential to our faith.

Being Human: The Nature of Spiritual Experience by Randal Macaulay and Jerram Barrs (InterVarsity Press; 1978). Just as *True Spirituality* is a wonderful biblical introduction, *Being Human* helps us think through how the sacred/secular dichotomy is antithetical to Christian faith. The title says it all: Christian spirituality involves all of our humanness, body and soul, and flows out into all of life and culture. If you have never read it, please do so.

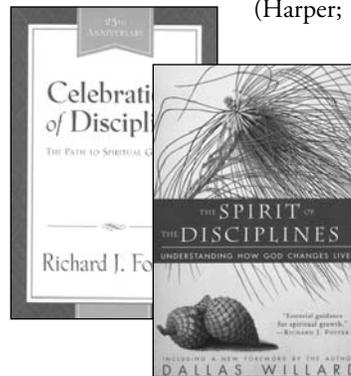
Overviews. There are two accessible introductions to the spiritual disciplines as a whole:

Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth by Richard Foster (Harper; 1978, 1998). Chapter by chapter, Foster identifies and explains the 12 primary spiritual disciplines so we can understand their practice and intent.

The Spirit of the Disciplines: Understanding How God Changes Lives by Dallas Willard (Harper; 1998). The popular author of *The Divine Conspiracy* introduces readers to the

spiritual disciplines within a wider exploration of Christian discipleship.

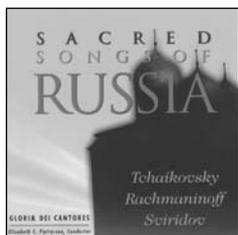
Prayers. We have found that books of prayers bring richness to our prayer life, not substituting for spontaneous, heartfelt prayer, but complementing it with beautifully written prayers that often include topics we would rather avoid. Three we have found helpful include:



Sounds of the Eternal: A Celtic Psalter edited by J Philip Newell (Eerdmans; 2002). A series of brief prayers and meditations, beautifully printed in a book filled with ancient Hebrew illuminated art-work.

The Valley of Vision: a Collection of Puritan Prayers and Devotions edited by Arthur Bennett (Banner of Truth; 1975, 1995). Those who imagine that the Puritans were dry, dull intellectuals need to pray these artfully written, profoundly theological prayers. They inflame heart and mind and imagination together, and exult in worship.

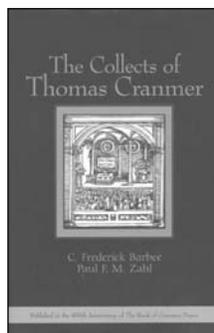
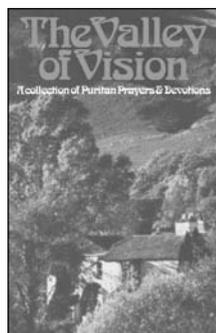
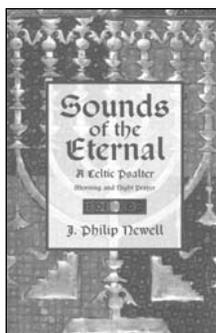
The Collects of Thomas Cranmer by C. Frederick Barbee and Paul F. M. Zahl (Eerdmans; 1999). Archbishop Cranmer is famous for composing the *Book of Common Prayer*, and his *Collects* (brief prayers), along with short meditations on them, are included here. Deeply biblical and written with a



deep love of words and poetry, these prayers are timeless. **Music.** The list here could be endless, since there is much on the market, so I'll limit myself to one. We have found that music that stretches us can often be the most helpful, since we want music that is rooted in Christian faith yet which invites us to medi-

tate outside that which we are so comfortable with that it has become tame.

Sacred Songs of Russia (Gloria Dei Cantores; 1999). Music from the Divine



“This is our calling,” Francis Schaeffer wrote in *True Spirituality*. “This is part of our richness in Christ: the reality of true spirituality...”

Liturgy of the Russian Orthodox tradition, this CD includes pieces by Tchaikovsky and Rachmaninoff. The rich, melodic voices of a Russian choir respond to the chanting of a cantor, resulting in an other-worldly sounding choir of deep beauty. (All the songs are in Russian; the liner notes include an English translation.)

A final word

“This is our calling,” Francis Schaeffer wrote in *True Spirituality*. “This is part of our richness in Christ: the reality of true spirituality, the Christian life... It is not to be practiced in a dull, ugly way; there is to be a thing of beauty, observed by those within [the church], and those outside. This is an important part in preaching the gospel to the humanity still in rebellion against God; but more than this, it is the only thing that is right on the basis of the existence of the personal God and on the basis of what Christ did for us in history, on the cross. And hav-

ing come this far, true spirituality—the Christian life—flows out into the total culture.” ■

~Denis Haack

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New on our website!



Fiction Discussion Guide of *The Brothers K* by David James Duncan

http://www.ransomfellowship.org/B_Duncan.html

Mirror of Our



“Television is the universal curriculum of young and old, the common symbolic environment in which we all live. Its true predecessor is not any other medium but religion—the organic pattern of explanatory symbolism that once animated total communities’ sense of reality and value.” —George Gerbner

Three Lessons of Reality TV

In the past few years television viewing has been transformed by the phenomenal success of Reality TV, a dramatic format that focuses on the lives of ordinary people placed in extraordinary situations. Why is this voyeuristic style of television such a ratings winner? What does the success of Reality TV indicate about the character of contemporary society? And what demands does this place on discerning Christians?

A Mirror into Our Collective Soul

The world of TV is the pop culture village square. And the talk of the town for the past several years has been the ups and downs of various Reality TV “celetoids”—whether *Bachelorette* couple Ryan and Tristan’s wedding, *American Idol* winners, or the latest tirades of *Apprentice*’s Donald Trump. Reality TV, once thought a summer programming gimmick, has morphed into being a defining genre of the culture industry. Car ads as well as presidential candidates have taken up the format. Reality TV is the *zeitgeist* of our media-saturated culture—an undeniable and inescapable force. (One can find more about Reality TV at websites such as www.realityblurred.com or www.orwellproject.com.)

The discerning Christian needs to step back from the phenomena and ask some probing questions. Why this? Why now? What does it mean for society? What does it mean for me? Literary critic Kenneth Burke writes, “We are reminded that every document bequeathed us by history must be treated as a strategy for encompassing a situation. Thus, when considering some document like the

American Constitution, we shall be automatically warned not to consider it in isolation, but as the answer or rejoinder to assertions current in the situation in which it arose.” Reality TV is not an accident. It is the media’s answer to a cultural question. It is a mirror of our culture’s collective externalizations of our heart’s aspirations. It is thus the definition of worldliness in our day.

Worldliness as an Interpretation of Reality

Worldliness has less to do with individual or social sin as “an interpretation of reality that excludes the reality of God from the business of life.” It is a way of seeing the world through the lens of our communal idolatries. Christians face the daily three-fold challenge of temptation from the Devil, the flesh, and the world. However, this last source of sin can often be the most insidious, because the least recognized. The “world” is by definition the largely taken-for-granted way we think about things. We are literally “squeezed into the world’s mold” without being consciously aware of our own complicity. Little red flags may selectively pop up in our consciences when faced with challenges to our personal morals, but too often we do not think deeply about the way our thinking is being shaped by simply living in Babylon. Theologian Craig Gay warns, “For although the temptation to worldliness is obviously not new, the extent to which modern societies provide structural and institutional support for a practically atheistic view of life is quite remarkable. Perhaps at no other time in history has the structural coherence of a social order depended less upon religious and/or theological understanding than it does today in modern societies.”

Culture, like education, is not value neutral. It has a point of view, a given set of priorities, a normative framework, even if it is nothing more than denouncing the possibility for a normative framework. Christians are to guard their taken-for-granted assumptions about the nature of things—to be appropriately discerning. How else are we to understand the biblical injunction, “Do not love the world or anything in the world”? Resistance to a

Collective Soul

problem demands recognition of a problem. A Christian's goal is not isolation from the world, but influence within it for the sake of God's kingdom. But if we are not aware of the contours of the world's constraints, our contact with it may result in casual conformity rather than courteous confrontation. "Television," states philosopher Douglas Groothuis, "is not simply an appliance or a business: it is a way of life and a mentality for approaching reality." Television shapes the spirit of the world. Francis Schaeffer in calling us to resist the spirit of the world reminds us that it takes different shapes. "The Christian must resist the spirit of the world in the form it takes in his own generation. If he does not do this he is not resisting the world spirit at all."

The Reality TV phenomenon has many lessons it can teach us about our culture. Three deserve Christian discernment: a weakened sense of the real, a weakened sense of the sacred, and a weakened sense of self.

Loss of the Real—*Big Brother*

Reality TV serves to weaken our sense of reality. Just as no one thinks that professional wrestling is "real," so too no one really believes that Reality TV is not staged and edited. Most viewers are aware that reality programming, like other TV programming, is commercially packaged stories designed to sell products for advertisers. But when these staged stories about real people in real situations are treated as "real," the power of the story displaces reality. For example, during the last National Republican Convention, WWF superstar The Rock (aka Dwayne Douglas Johnson) introduced the vice presidential candidate Dick Cheney to the audience. The VP candidate was parlaying the image of WWF professional wrestler—fiction merged with reality to become "reality." In effect, a cartoon character was asked to provide gravitas to matters of national significance.

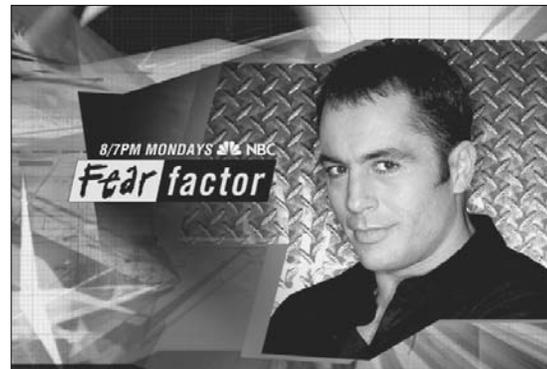
When pseudo-reality takes on the importance of reality, it becomes in effect more "real" than the real. French social theorist Jean Baudrillard traces this accelerating process of abstraction and artifice. First the representation of a thing, the sign, comes to replace the thing being represented, the signifier

(a process that Baudrillard calls "simulation"). Soon the representation of a thing becomes a thing in and of itself without any relationship to that which it once represented (what he calls "simulacra"). The sign has become "hyperreality." In the words of Baudrillard, "Illusion is no longer possible, because the real is no longer possible."

Here is both the power and the problem of Reality TV.

It is a venue that celebrates hyperreality. "The promise of Reality TV is not that of access to unmediated reality so much as it is the promise of access to the reality of mediation," writes Mark Andrejevic in his book, *Reality TV: The Work of Being Watched*. Listen to Australian Survivor contestant Joel Betts discuss the relationship of Reality TV to real life. "In most of our day-to-day behavior we are concerned with managing impressions. Like on *Big Brother* where they don't want to get voted out, we don't want to be voted out by the broader community if we say something that's not appealing. A lot of what we do is strategic because we like to create good impressions, knowing that we can be rejected by our friends, our acquaintances or our co-workers. It's this type of behavior that has people saying that *Big Brother* isn't real, but essentially this is how we behave in real life, too." We live in a world of fictions of every kind—digitally altered photos, surgically reconstructed celebrities, computer simulations, staged pseudo-events, lip-synching pop stars, and synthetic food substitutes. The only question is whether it is a good fiction or a convincing fake. *Reality TV Lesson One: Life's a mediated reality without remainder.*

Why does this matter to a Christian? A Christian believes in objective truth. A Christian also believes in objective reality. Moreover, a Christian believes that truth is a description of what is real: TRUTH = REALITY. We can weaken the connection of truth to reality by attacking either side of the equation. Ideas attack the TRUTH side. Images attack the REALITY side. In neither case does the equation cease to be



by
Dr.
David
John
Seel,
Jr.

true, but the plausibility of true truth and the really real can be seriously undermined by the experience of hyperreality. It becomes easier to live with our own illusions of what is true and what is real. Instead, Christians must be staunch defenders of reality and extremely wary of anything that undermines its constraint on our unbounded egos. The allure of cyberspace and celebration of hyperreality is, in the end, the worship of autonomy. It is, to quote Mark Dery, a “theology of the ejector seat.” Those who worship a God who is both Creator and Incarnate Lord must challenge such technologically re-energized Gnosticism.

Loss of the Sacred— *Temptation Island*

Not only does Reality TV weaken our appreciation of objective reality, but it weakens our sense of the sacred. Everything becomes amenable to the commodity-form. Though Reality TV is an amalgam of earlier forms of programming—such as the game show, soap opera, documentary, and amateur video—it capitalizes on blurring the boundaries between what is public and private, forcibly exteriorizing the interior and making it something to be sold at a price. It is one thing to sell one’s body for sex, quite another to pimp one’s emotions. The allure of Reality TV shows is to capture its contestants in an authentic emotion produced by an artificial situation. It traffics in fear, shame, humiliation, loss, and betrayal. The audience traffics in tears and pain for their own shameless and unfeeling amusement.

The premise of *Temptation Island* is that four couples would be split up and invited to date other people to see whether they would be willing to cheat on their

significant other. (Committed fornication is challenged by adulterous fornication—sex within marriage being outside the purview of the audience.) The scandal here is more than encouraged infidelity; it is the blatant attempt to manipulate the couples’ emotions. One distraught participant in *Temptation Island* needed



“The Christian must resist the spirit of the world in the form it takes in his own generation. If he does not do this he is not resisting the world spirit at all.”

reminding that he was less a person than a commodity under contract. When his relationship, the topic of the show, was under great stress, he tried to get the cameras to stop filming. “This is not about the show, this is about my life,” he pleaded. To which the cameraman responded, “Actually your life is the show.” The cameras rolled on. A spokesman for the Parents Television Council was widely quoted as saying, “If we’re putting this kind of thing on TV as a form of entertainment, we might as well throw Christians to the lions.” In our culture of bread and circuses, nothing can be understood apart from what sociologist Robert Bellah calls, “market totalitarianism.” There is nothing that is so sacred that it will not be sold to the highest bidder, nothing so private that it will not be revealed to a nation of mass voyeurs.

Do not be duped. Reality TV is deadly serious advertisement. Its goal is to provide viewers who are 18- to 34-

year-olds with disposable income to advertisers. On *Survivor II* contestants were allowed, as a reward, to shop online using a Visa card, Visa being one of the show’s sponsors. More abnormal than eating insects is not having the opportunity to shop. The free market, unfettered by personal conscience or social norms, produces reality programming like *Jackass* and *Fear Factor* with no thought to depravity or dehumanization.

Some might want to compare shows like *Fear Factor* to *Candid Camera*. But one should note some differences. The victims of *Candid Camera*’s humorous surprises were not paid for their involvement, it was premised on harmless fun. Peter Funt, the creator of *Candid Camera* has this rule for his program, “Don’t

put someone in a situation that you wouldn’t want to be in yourself. We never want to cross the line and make people look bad.” It is likely, however, that today’s Reality TV producers would not want to be contestants on their own show—eating cockroaches on *Fear Factor*, for example. Note promotional language of Spike TV’s program, *Most Extreme Elimination Challenge*: “If you enjoy broken bones, splattering spleens, high impact hematomas, and watching people get them, then you’ll love *Most Extreme Elimination Challenge*.” This is a long way from Funt’s Golden Rule dictum. Whether in its hedonistic or Spartan formats, Reality TV teaches its viewers that the good life is found in things and anything can be bought or sold. *Reality TV Lesson Two: Life is pimping and nothing is beyond the pimp.*

Jesus challenged the moneychangers in the temple, not because their actions were not helpful to temple worshippers,

but because there are some places that are sacred and not enhanced by buying and selling. A Starbucks in the Holy of Holies is to offend our spiritual sensibilities. In a country that celebrates unconstrained capitalism and in a world where consumerism is the only functional metanarrative, we do well to listen to the prophetic words of Karl Marx who warned that market forces would one day engulf all of life. "All fixed, fast-frozen relations, with their train of ancient and venerable prejudices and opinions, are swept away, all newly-formed ones become antiquated before they can ossify. All that is solid melts into the air, all that is holy is profaned." We may not like the messenger, but we had better listen to the message, for that day has arrived with Reality TV.

Loss of the Soul—*Extreme Makeover*

Reality TV not only weakens our grasp on reality and appreciation for the sacred, but ignores the priority of the soul. Reality TV is not about depth, but surfaces; not about invisible qualities, but visible attributes. Going with her "feminine gut instinct" Larissa chooses the blonde hunk in lieu of Bryan, the Boston "Average Joe." Ah, but when Gil finds out that Larissa had dated Fabio in her past, having been "out hunked," he dumps Larissa. In the world of Reality TV, reality is what you see, and looks are everything. The commodity of exchange in these relationships is measured in abs and boobs.

The losers need not worry for they can audition for a part in *Extreme Makeover* where a team of cosmetic surgeons, stylists, nutritionists, trainers, and fashion experts promise to "change your life." "Following nationwide open casting calls and over 10 thousand written applications, the lucky individuals are chosen for a once-in-a-lifetime chance to participate in *Extreme Makeover*. These men and women are given a truly Cinderella-like expe-

rience: A real life fairy tale in which their wishes come true, not just to change their looks, but their lives and destinies," reads the ABC website on the program. The premise here is salvation by liposuction. Sweden's *Fame Factory* sells participants what the media has exclusive power over, making people celebrities. With massive structural rehabilitation and proper handling, even the loser on *Average Joe* has a chance to win the girl—or so goes the promise, "We'll stop at nothing to turn ordinary into extraordinary." Plastic surgery as entertainment. French performance artist Orlan has nothing on Caroline and Catherine, 32-year old twins from Carson City or Cynthia, a mother of three from Baton Rouge. Participants choose from a cornucopia of surgical enhancements: breast augmentation, liposuction, nose jobs, brow lifts, eye surgery, chin augmentation, teeth whitening and straightening, collagen injections, tummy tucks, upper and lower eye lifts, porcelain veneers, and neck lifts gracefully supplemented with Botox, skin peels, and laser treatments. And when your body has healed and is ready for the next step, a team of home architects and interior decorators can accessorize your new body with *Extreme Makeover: Home Edition*.

Then there is the six-week series being produced by MTV News and Docs, *I Want A Famous Face*. This show combines MTV's show, *Becoming*, where guests are recreated in the image of their favorite celebrity by taking on their lifestyle as a way of taking on their life, with the surgical elements of *Extreme Makeover*. Life swapping. Here contestants

have surgery in order to look like their favorite celebrity. "We know that if we look like Brad Pitt, more girls will definitely dig us," states Matt and Mike, 21-year-old twins. They want to be entertainers, but first they

want to look like celebrities, an ambition that seems to have become completely detached from entertaining anyone. Hyperreality embodied. In this vein, a story is told of a woman named Cassandra who had plastic surgery in order to look like Pamela Anderson, but ended up being rejected by *Playboy* for looking too fake. It is the post-modern irony of a bad fake not looking as real as a good fake. *Reality TV Lesson Three: You are what others see and nothing more.*

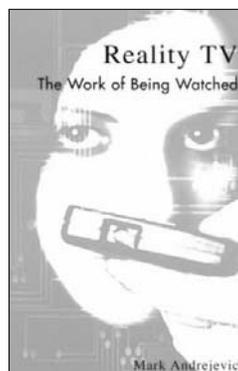
This is the inversion of the biblical priority. "The Lord does not

look at the things man looks at. Man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart" (1 Samuel 16:7b). It is unlikely that Mother Teresa would audition for *Extreme Makeover*. For her life was about the inner life and things that last without the surgeon's knife.

Reality TV requires discerning viewing since it is more than entertainment, it's an education. And as an education, it's an inversion of biblical priorities—on basic things like objective reality, the sacred, and the soul. Here is where resistance begins. ■

~John Seel

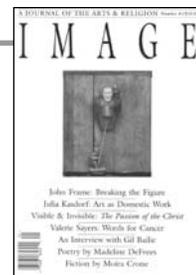
David John Seel, Jr., M.Div., Ph.D., is headmaster of The Cambridge School of Dallas and author of Parenting Without Perfection: Being a Kingdom Influence in a Toxic World. Copyright © 2004 by David John Seel, Jr.



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Discussing Art & Faith

<http://www.imagejournal.org/studyguide/>



Denis Haack

Image Discussion Guide

Image: A Journal of the Arts and Religion, is a literary and arts quarterly which seeks to unpack the relationship between Judeo-Christian faith and human creativity in art. Issues include fiction, interviews, memoirs, and pieces exploring dance, architecture, painting, sculpture, film, and music. We have long appreciated *Image* and find it always informs and educates us, challenges our thinking, and more often than not pushes us out of our comfort zone. Beautifully printed in color on high quality glossy paper, it is a great resource to leave on a coffee table for folks to browse. Now there is also a free online discussion guide to accompany the journal, a useful tool for group discussion.

Ransom Ratings

Design: Attractive, with a good mix of text and graphics—which is what one would expect from *Image*.

Content: The study guides cover fiction, nonfiction, poetry, and the visual arts. Permission to print and use the guides is freely given, and the guides include discussion questions, creative activities, and suggestions for further reading and study. Copies of the journal are available at bulk rates, so each member of the group can have a copy. Small group and Sunday school leaders should reflect on whether the curriculum they are following provides the opportunity for their members to reflect Christianly across all of life and culture. The new online study guides accompanying *Image* provide the opportunity for groups to reflect on the arts—even if no one in the group is an artist.

Ease of Use: Not everything I tried clicking on worked immediately, but finding the study guide and printing a copy was easy.

Critique Mailing List:

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Critique is a newsletter (published nine times each year, funds permitting) designed to accomplish, by God's grace, three things:

1. To call attention to resources of interest to thinking Christians.
2. To model Christian discernment.
3. To stimulate believers to think biblically about all of life.

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