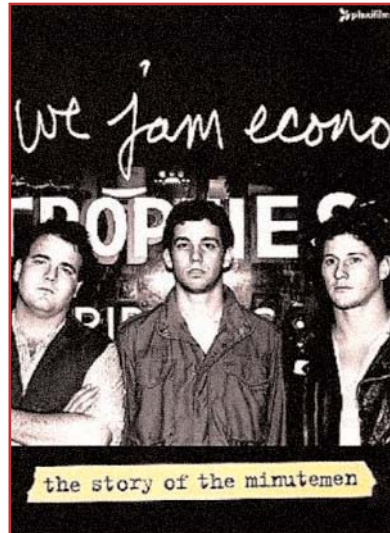


# ROCK DOCS

## FILMS THAT SPEAK TO TRUTH AND THE HUMAN CONDITION

What drives us to churn our human condition into a song? Life's twists and turns have long been the inspiration for verse. Each of the *poets* on this page shared a passion for rock-and-roll music. Each sought to break free from their own--often tumultuous--lives through their music. The lives shared in these films have brushes with fame and tragedy in equal portions. All were labeled "punks." They were rebels and non-conformists--and they rallied others to that cause. In their stories you find gritty realism, unbridled ambition, and occasional glimpses of Truth.



**DVD: We Jam Econo: The Story of The Minutemen**  
(Tim Irwin, 2005)

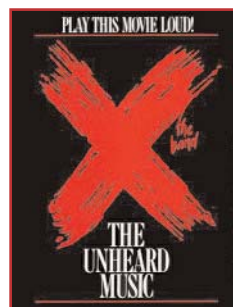
Later, with the addition of George Hurley on drums, they hit their stride with power-packed sets of brief, high energy rants and raves which weaved across stylistic boundaries. The Minutemen *jammed econo*. They didn't care about fame. They just loved to play.

By 1985 The Minutemen were gaining national attention. Plans for their next recording were just getting underway when D. Boon was killed in a car accident.

The film captures their spirit and indeed the freedom they found in music. Mike Watt narrates much of this DVD which includes interviews with many well-known musicians who drew inspiration from The Minutemen.

Their story begins like some Hollywood kid feature. The chunky nerd-of-a-boy falls out of a tree and lands on the neighborhood new boy--a tough, bully-lookin' kid. Of course the two become best friends. That's just how D. Boon and Mike Watt began their friendship. Boon's mom bought the boys instruments to keep them out of trouble (it worked).

They had no training, but they had records to learn from. Boon sang and played guitar; Mike attacked the bass; they enlisted Boon's brother Joe to play drums. They started with covers, but ultimately developed a groove of their own. They landed on a bill with a bunch of misfit bands--one of these was Black Flag.



**DVD: X: The Unheard Music**  
(W.T. Morgan, 1986)

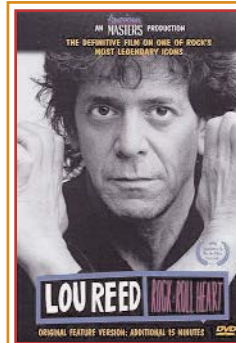
In the case of X you had rockabilly, blues and honky tonk intermeshed with Charles Bukowski-esque lyrics.

*The Unheard Music* speaks context into the life of this seminal rock outfit: the politics of the late 1970's and early 80's, their dire financial situation, and the L.A. music scene. While X more recently has morphed into the throwback outfit, The Knitters--*The Unheard Music* speaks to the human condition out of which some brutally truthful tales were

told. X is music worth being heard (and in this case of this film, seen).

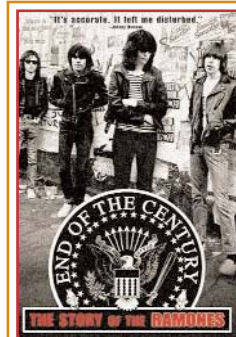
How does one define X? They had great stage names: John Doe, Billy Zoom, Exene Cervenka, DJ Bonebrake. Their sound...think Johnny Cash and June Carter backed by Green Day. The poetic nature of the band attracted Doors keyboardist Ray Manzarek to produce their first album.

*The Unheard Music* captures a moment in time in the L.A. music scene when the Whiskey-A-Go-Go was THE place to be heard. *The Unheard Music* demonstrates how "punk" and "underground music" of the late 70's and early 80's was just a re-working of other American music forms.



Lou Reed began his career in the mid-1960's writing novelty pop tunes for Pickwick Records. That's where he met John Cale. They formed Velvet Underground and were taken under wing by Andy Warhol. In 1970 Reed goes solo. He teams up with members of the band Yes for his first album. For *Transformer*, his second, David Bowie assists. Reed has been transforming ever since. He is a poet and artist with a deep spiritual side (which he recently revealed in an interview with Elvis Costello). He is a man with incredible street sensibility and a rock and roll heart.

**DVD: Lou Reed: Rock and Roll Heart** (Timothy Greenfield-Sanders, 1988)



The Ramones brought a style and attitude that defined a moment in time. Like The Minutemen, these guys were childhood friends. They emerged from the gritty New York City streets that Lou Reed loves to sing about. They were distinctly American and like X garnered the attention of an iconic producer (in their case Phil Spector) for one of their albums. They inspired many U.S. and English punk bands including The Clash. Their story isn't pretty; but it is told well in this documentary.

**DVD: End of the Century: The Story of the Ramones** (Jim Fields & Michael Gramaglia, 2003)



Born in Turkey in 1952 to a Scottish nurse and British diplomat, Joe Strummer spent his youth growing up on the streets of Mexico City, Cairo and Bonn. Failing in college and struggling to get his art career off the ground--the one place Strummer found success was as an R&B singer. Everything changed when he met some blokes at a Sex Pistols show who wanted him in their band. The Clash blended up punk with Reggae and Middle Eastern rhythms for a unique sound that would garner them and Strummer worldwide attention.

**DVD: The Future is Unwritten: Joe Strummer** (Julien Temple, 2007)

# critique

A RANSOM FELLOWSHIP PUBLICATION 2009 ISSUE THREE

Out of AFRICA ...Light

Freedom To Fail

A Place in The World

What Would Jesus Value?

How Stories End





# The Wonderful Freedom To Fail

Speaking at the 2009 Christians in the Visual Arts (CIVA) conference allowed me to attend some fascinating presentations. New York artist Makoto Fujimura, for example, talked about how artists need to see failure correctly. Failure isn't always a bad thing, he said. Often it's the best way to learn, it's necessary for growth, and since we have a God given yearning to achieve and participate in a level of perfection impossible for finite and fallen creatures it turns out to be the story of our lives.

Makoto was not referring to moral failure. He was referring to the chance to experiment, to try new things, to push into new areas. As he spoke I thought about how this doesn't just apply to artists. Being given the freedom to fail is a precious gift of grace we all need.

"Ever tried. Ever failed. No matter. Try Again. Fail again. Fail better," Irish author and dramatist Samuel Beckett said. "Go on failing. Go on. Only next time, try to fail better."

I've noticed that a few people seem to know their life's calling from childhood. It's as if they were made for one thing. Others discover their calling when some event or force narrows their focus in an unexpected way. Others stumble upon opportunities they couldn't have predicted but find fulfilling. And some seem unsure of having any calling or clear direction at all, and need the chance to experiment, to explore possibilities to see what fits them best. Their pilgrimage, as legitimate as the others, can take years.

It's the same for uncovering one's creativity. Some people seem to instinctively know their penchant to be creative. But others need untold number of opportunities to find theirs. Finding their way through life takes time and a chance to try various options. In such a world, providing a safe place for such failure is a necessary aspect of Christian faithfulness.

Our world esteems productivity, rewards decisiveness, and dislikes inefficiency. Which is good when you are making widgets, or an engineer, or a manager, or a physician. In the rest of life, however, these modernist values merely decrease human flourishing by demanding conformity when diversity is what God called into being.

"I have not failed," scientist and inventor Thomas Edison once said. "I've just found 10,000 ways that won't work."

Tim Keller says that the God of Scripture is prodigal. The word doesn't mean "wayward," but "recklessly extravagant, spendthrift, having spent everything until there is nothing left to give." And since God has been so prodigal with us, we can be prodigal with others.

I want my home to be known as a hospitable place where failures can safely fail some more. Where people can laugh together, help each other learn and grow, and cheer one another on to the next failure. I want it to be, quite simply, a place where the free exploration of creativity and meaning and vocation and calling can be safely nourished and encouraged by prodigal grace. ❖

## critique

ISSUE THREE 2009

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I don't read the last chapter of novels first, but when it comes to the final ending of The Story, I want to know the ending, or some hint of it. Which is one reason I am a Christian. The ending the Scriptures tell is so satisfying, so reasonable, so just, so full of improbable grace that it wins hands down. Other religions and worldviews propose alternative endings, of course, but I've found that in the end they all ruin the story and dash our deepest hopes.

"Sanity may be madness," Don Quixote said, "but the maddest of all is to see life as it is and not as it should be." To my mind at least, the biblical ending is the sanest ending of all. And I am glad for films, for good stories as delightfully different as *The Visitor*, *Slumdog Millionaire*, and *Vicky Cristina Barcelona* to raise the topic for discussion. ❖

### Questions for reflection and discussion:

1. What was your initial or immediate reaction to each of the three films? Why do you think you reacted that way?
2. Did you dislike the ending of any of the three? Did any of the endings "not work" for you? Why?
3. Consider each film as a work of cinematic art. In what ways were the techniques of film-making (casting, direction, lighting, script, music, sets, action, cinematography, editing, etc.) used to get the film's message(s) across, or to make the message plausible or compelling? In what ways were they ineffective or misused?
4. With which characters in each film did you most easily identify? Why? With whom were we meant to identify? How do you know? Discuss each main character in each film and their significance to the story.
5. Suggest alternative endings for each of the three films, and consider how each ending would change the entire story. If *The Visitor*, for example, ended as happily as *Slumdog* does, would the film work as well? Can you propose an ending that would work well?
6. To what extent are you convinced of the ending to The Story provided in Scripture? What difference does living in that Story with that ending practically change the way you see life? How does it change/effect the way you live out your life including your relationships, calling and vocation, rest and play, use of time, sense of meaning, success, and significance, perspective on art and beauty, political involvement, engagement with non-Christian religions and worldviews, understanding of justice, violence, morality, and poverty, involvement with the church?
7. Read and discuss *Millennium Fever & The Future of this Earth* by Wim Rietkirk, available for free download as an iBook in the Publications section on Ransom's web site. In it Wim reviews what the Scriptures teach concerning the ending of The Story (often referred to as "end times") and carefully notes where this differs from some of the popular but far less biblical versions in evangelical Christian circles.
8. *The Visitor* and *Slumdog Millionaire* both raise questions concerning issues of justice, specifically illegal immigration and majority world poverty. How have you tended to see these issues up to now? What/Who has most influenced your position? To what extent is your current political position shaped by the teaching of Scripture on these topics, and how do you know? What plans should you make?
9. What insight does each film give into the way postmodern people see life, meaning, and reality? How can you use the film as a useful window of insight for Christians to better understand and identify with our non-Christian friends and neighbors?





**Vicky Cristina Barcelona**

**Starring:**  
Rebecca Hall (Vicky)  
Scarlett Johansson (Cristina)  
Javier Barden (Juan Antonio Gonzalo)  
Penelope Cruz (Maria Elena)  
Chris Messina (Doug)  
Patricia Clarkson (Judy Nash)  
Kevin Dunn (Mark Nash)  
Julio Perillan (Charles)  
Christopher Evan Welch (Narrator)

**Director:**  
Woody Allen

**Writers:**  
Woody Allen

**Producers:**  
Charles H. Joffe, Javier Mendez,  
Helen Robin, Jack Rollins,  
Jaume Roures and others

**Cinematographer:**  
Javier Aguirresarobe

**Runtime:** 96 min

**Release:** USA; 2008

**Rated PG-13**  
for mature thematic material  
involving sexuality, and smoking

Vicky (played by Rebecca Hall) travels to Barcelona, Spain to do research for her thesis on Catalan art, and especially the work of the Spanish architect, Antoni Gaudi. She is engaged to a hard working young man who is handsome and dependable, if not exactly romantic. Vicky's friend Cristina (Scarlett Johansson), not exactly sure what she should do with her life, comes along for the chance to spend a summer in Europe. Soon after arriving in Spain they meet Juan Antonio (played wonderfully by Javier Barden), a flamboyant, handsome Spanish painter who invites them to spend a weekend with him, and to hopefully enjoy love together. Cristina finds the offer too good to resist, Juan Antonio's society of friends too exciting to miss, and though Vicky has her doubts, they accept. Then in the middle of their weekend adventure, Maria Elena (played brilliantly by Penelope Cruz), Juan Antonio's ex-wife suddenly appears. Emotionally unstable, insanely jealous, and always volatile, Maria Elena not only makes sparks fly, her presence forces each character to face serious questions of life, morality, and the meaning of relationships, sex, and marriage.

In the end, of course, Vicky and Cristina's romantic adventure must come to a close, and the final scene shows them in the airport returning to America to continue with their lives. "Vicky returned home to have her grand wedding to Doug," the narrator says. "To the house they finally planned to settle in. And to lead the life she envisioned for herself, before that summer in Barcelona. Cristina continued searching... certain only, of what she didn't want." But we know their doubts and questions. Can Vicky be certain she loves Doug since Juan Antonio so easily swept her off her feet? Will Doug suffice for a lifetime? Can Cristina find a love that will not fade in the morning light? Is there something that can possibly bring meaning to her life when adventures are fleeting and everyday life is so mind-numbingly ordinary?

Though he is considered dated by many, Woody Allen is a master storyteller who has his finger on the pulse of the culture. He is too honest to give a happy ending to *Vicky Cristina Barcelona*. He makes us laugh, and draws us in, and then makes us feel the quiet, wrenching despair that comes when we yearn for love but find no relationship big enough to fulfill our need for love.

The three films are very different, with very different endings. Yet each one works, at least in the imaginary world of the story. Given the assumptions made in the story, each ending fits. Which is why, in turn, the movies work as movies.

Each ending however, raises deeper questions, just as we should expect from good art well crafted, and from stories well told. Questions that touch on the things that matter most in life and which become sharper as we live in proximity to suffering, injustice, meaninglessness, and death. Questions like is there reason to hope? How do we live when justice blindly works injustice on innocent people and cycles of poverty crush millions? Do relationships matter for more than merely the moment? Is it possible that human love points to a greater reality beyond the horizons of time and space? If it does, is that reality forever out of reach? If it is within reach, how can we know for certain? Can there be happy endings in a broken world like ours or is that merely utopian dreaming? How does the ending we own in our story make a difference to how we live in that story? ►

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#### To the editor:

Brian Watkins in "Why the Gospel is NOT a Romantic Comedy" [*Critique* #5-2008] tries to make the case that "Hollywood's many violent or grotesque films" are "fictional stories... intended to be reflections on the state of the human condition, which centers on our heart-wrenching separation from God..." Well, some, maybe. He does not like films that are neat and clean because life is not neat and clean. OK so far.

He writes that "filtering out stories... is a form of watering down the Gospel, polarizing to the secular world, and is far more dangerous than the art we are so quick to shy away from." Brian goes on at length about censoring vision, how hope is only hope if it is not fulfilled, how showing redemption misses the point of violent films and is actually harmful to our witness. My, my. To love my neighbor as myself, I should watch him be murdered.

I suggest it is a false equation to make equal in value the stories in God's printed word, all of which contain hope and point to redemption even if violent, to Babylon's larger than life depictions

of violence and death on film, many of which are gratuitous and pointless. Let us start with what is most obvious to me: reading about violence is not the same as seeing it. Scripture is not "the original horror film." Man is made in God's image, and onscreen violence to people is tantamount to "being there." Watching a movie murder is not the same, nor does it have the same effect, as reading about Cain and Abel. One's eyes are windows to one's soul, and there is a reason to guard them, even if one is a Christian artist. We become what we worship.

If it were not so sad it would be amusing. Mr. Watkins undoubtedly belongs to one of the first generations in history to argue the necessity of the Gospel and the Art of watching violent films in order to access reality. My take is that Brian needs to get off his seat, get his head into the light of day and take a look at Reality. Ever heard of Africa? Find some soldiers just home from the war or missionaries home from a closed country. Check out Voice of the Martyrs. Visit a slaughterhouse--the closest you will get to Old Testament temple sacrifices. Have you read no history? Can it really be your life is so insipid? Come visit me and I will teach you to kill and butcher the meat you eat. Talk to my elderly neighbor: abused as a child, she ran a farm and raised a family with drunken abusive husbands and without running water. Come meet the widow with violent, mentally ill children. Let me see how committed you are to blood and guts reality. Those dealing with actual brokenness look and long for redemption. We have known enough first-hand ugliness, violence and evil and do not care to watch it enlarged and honored.

The last point is artistic. Contrast is very important in art. Brian argues against film stories with redemptive endings. Where is the contrast in unremitting violence and evil? That way lies despair. *Rob Roy*, *The Mission*, *The Constant Gardener*, and *Slumdog Millionaire* are some of the most powerful movies I recall that show unrepentant evil and violence. They also embody redemption on several levels. I am for God's violent redemption. Hope deferred makes the heart sick. But all the ends of the earth have seen the salvation of our God. The image, the fullness, the firstborn of the invisible God has made peace by the blood of his cross. And that is true romance.

Denis and Margie--you keep me thinking. Thank you.

Deborah Miller  
Freeville, NY

Then Tarek is picked up by US Immigration, jailed, and deported. Zainab is heartbroken and Tarek is sent back to a country in which his future if not his life is uncertain at best. Vale is shaken out of apathy by the unjust uncaring bureaucracy that upholds the letter of the law but is incapable of responding with either reason or compassion. It's an unhappy ending to the story with relationships shattered and a young man branded a criminal merely because he sought a better life in a free society. Yet, in the midst of the tragedy, we sense a glimmer of hope in Vale. Quiet healing begins to stir within because he has been touched by a hope for meaning in life found in a celebration of humanness, in relationship, in art and beauty, and in the yearning for justice in a broken world.

*Slumdog Millionaire* is a Bollywood extravaganza. The story is a succession of utterly improbable events in a plot so implausible and with an ending so happy it's a miracle the film works at all. But it does. I usually hate implausible, improbable films with sentimental endings, but I loved *Slumdog*. And after the very happy ending, just for happiness' sake there is a pull-out-all-the-stops, extended, rollicking dance sequence involving the entire cast--and that's during the final credits after the very happy ending.

There are sad elements to the story, and though they help accentuate the happy ending they are gritty in their realism. We are brought into life in the sprawling slums of Mumbai, India where tens of thousands are caught in a relentless cycle of crushing poverty. We see the cruel gangsters that rule the streets, inhumane torture at the hands of the police, and the hopelessness as boys grow up to be men without the opportunity for meaningful work.

*Slumdog* tells the story of two brothers. One becomes a thug working for the gangster that runs their neighborhood. The other brother ends up on the Indian version of "Who Wants to be a Millionaire." There he just happens to be asked a series of questions that he just happens to be able to answer because growing up he just happened to be in the right place at the right time to just happen to learn the answer. He wins the million dollars (rupees actually--but same idea), and proves he isn't cheating, and is released by the police, and the beautiful girl just happens to get to the phone in time, and he wins the love of the beautiful girl, and... then there is the credits with the dance scene.

You simply cannot have a happier ending than that.

*Vicky Cristina Barcelona* is a comedy, a love story written and directed Woody Allen. He makes us laugh with wit and romance and surprise and the beauty of art, but this is a very up to date love story. So, the final moments of the film show life going on, but in a meaninglessness that feels like quiet despair. There will be more laughs, we assume, more romance, and perhaps more adventures, but in the end, no love within reach seems capable of bearing the significance that we so desperately need and for which we so desperately seek as human beings. ►



#### Slumdog Millionaire

##### Starring:

Dev Patel (Jamal K. Malik)  
Madhur Mittal (older Salim)  
Anil Kapoor (Prem Kumar)  
Sanchita Couhdary (Jamal's mother)  
Freida Pinto (Lakita)  
Irfan Khan (Police Inspector)  
Ankur Vikal (Maman)  
Mahesh Manjrekar (Javed)  
Himanshu Tvagi (Mr. Nanda)

##### Directors:

Danny Boyle  
Loveleen Tandan (co-director: India)

##### Writers:

Simon Beaufoy (screenplay);  
Vikas Swarup (novel)

##### Producers:

Francois Ivernel, Cameron McCracken,  
Tessa Ross, Paul Smith and others

##### Original Music:

A.R. Rahman

##### Cinematographer:

Anthony Dod Mantle

##### Runtime: 120 min

##### Release: USA; 2009

##### MPAA Rating: R

for some violence, disturbing images and language

It's true that people approach reading books (fiction) differently. Some like to read the ending first, but insist this is not a character flaw. The rest of us do not understand how this is possible. My wife Margie often reads the last chapter of novels first; I always begin on the first page of the first chapter. She even does this with mysteries, which is a mystery (no pun intended) to me, even after 40+ years of marriage in a house crammed (no exaggeration) with books. Still, whether we begin with the ending or with the beginning, we agree that stories matter and that how they end is significant.

So, if you'd prefer not to know how these three films end, you should probably set aside this article until after you've seen them. I'm suggesting we think and talk about how they end, how the endings are different, and why it matters.

The three films that got me thinking about all this are *The Visitor* (2007), *Slumdog Millionaire* (2008), and *Vicky Cristina Barcelona* (2008).

*The Visitor* is a quiet film. It tells a simple story about a few people in a large city who happen upon one another, become friends without wanting to, and discover the friendship has changed them. Though from different cultures and different segments within society, their shared humanness transcends their differences.

A college professor, Walter Vale (played superbly by Richard Jenkins) comes to New York City for a professional conference. Recently widowed, he has long ago given up on life, repeating the same classes over and over, no longer caring about his research, his teaching or his students. When he arrives at his apartment in the City, he is shocked to discover a couple is living there. They are illegal immigrants, a Syrian musician named Tarek (played by Haaz Sleiman) and his Senegalese girlfriend Zainab (Danai Gurira). They escaped hopelessness in their native lands, and are trying to carve out a life for themselves in America.

Feeling guilty about throwing them out with nowhere to go, Vale allows them to stay. A relationship slowly develops, then trust and a growing respect. Something begins to stir in Vale, a man whose heart has not felt the joy of life for a very long time. They share simple meals, the beauty of music, and the meaning that comes in community shared with people he cares for. ►



**The Visitor**

**Starring:**

Richard Jenkins (Prof. Walter Vale)  
Haaz Sleiman (Tarek Khalil)  
Danai Jekesai Gurira (Zainab)  
Hiam Abbass (Mouna Khalil)

**Director:**

Thomas McCarthy

**Writers:**

Thomas McCarthy

**Producers:**

Omar Amanat, Chris Salvaterra, Jeff Skoll, Ricky Strauss,  
John Woldenberg and others

**Original Music:**

Jan A.P. Kaczmarek

**Cinematographer:**

Oliver Bokelberg (director of photography)

**Runtime:** 104 min

**Release:** USA; 2008

**MPAA Rating:** PG-13

for brief strong language

**Denis Haack responds:**

*Deborah.* I am glad Brian's article sparked so much reflection. I'll let the main response come from him, but did feel I need to add one note. How we talk to one another is as important as our content. Let's disagree freely and argue our position persuasively, but always with care. Someone may be wrong, but they remain created in God's image, a person of unimaginable significance. You may disagree, but it seems to me this means that sarcasm is never appropriate unless exercised with a light touch of humor; otherwise it merely implies superiority and seeks to intimidate without advancing the discussion. It means that even if you think an author's ideas about violence in art are mistaken, that does not mean that their life is insipid or that you are in a position to suggest it. You raise good questions, Deborah, and I look forward to reading Brian's response to your ideas. Let's continue the conversation, but with care.

**Brian Watkins responds:**

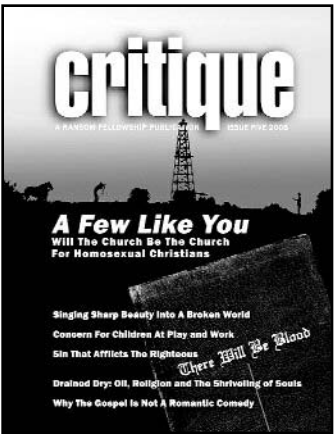
Thank you for your response. You seem quite emotional. Perhaps you missed the point of the article. You make an excellent point by stating that one's eyes are windows to one's soul. As I stated in the article, sensationalism is fruitless and there are definitely forms of artistic grittiness to stay away from (namely "horror" films). But there are also gritty pieces of art that can engage those around us into a discussion of the depths of our universal brokenness. Living in New York City, I can tell you that this is not an easy conversation to have in our increasingly pluralistic culture.

Out of all the popular art forms, film and theatre seem to be the ones that spark the most conversation among Americans. To choose to not see a film such as *No Country For Old Men* or *There Will Be Blood* because of the content is actively pulling oneself away from such cultural conversations, making Christian culture incredibly insular (a word that I've been told is the antithesis of the Gospel). As thinking audience members, I would hope that we could make the distinction between good art and bad sensational art, and between real violence and fictional violence.

In my stumbling attempts at being a Christian I've discovered that the scope of the Gospel is far larger than I ever give it credit for. The Gospel changes everything. In other words, we can find hope in the discovery that our world is more broken and more in need of a Redeemer than we originally thought. Of course, a visible hope represented in art is greatly important (especially to

those facing personal crisis) as in the films that you mentioned. But that is not all that is important. The title of the article "Why the Gospel Isn't a Romantic Comedy" refers to the fact that I have a hard time convincing people that the warm and fuzzy feeling they get after seeing Matthew McConaughey and Kate Hudson get back together for the tenth time is directly linked to a divine Redeemer. On the contrary, it seems to be the case that our culture better relates to the cross by coming to terms with one's own sin through the messy puzzle of the broken world around us. Flannery O'Connor, arguably the most influential Christian artist in the last century, engaged her readers by displaying the violence of our separation from God (literally) giving voice to the enormity of what Christ did on the cross. O'Connor once wisely put it this way: "Our salvation is a drama played out with the devil, a devil who is not simply generalized evil, but an evil intelligence determined on its own supremacy. I think that if writers with a religious view of the world excel these days in the depiction of evil, it is because they have to make its nature unmistakable to their particular audience." If O'Connor is correct in assuming that believing artists must make the nature of evil unmistakable, then treating our artistic standards like a moral compass is detrimental to extending the cultural conversation with those we are charged to love. The piece itself was never advocating actual violence. Nor was it advocating fictional violence. But I would hope we could make the distinction between the two, as "loving your neighbor by watching him being murdered" is a baffling conclusion one would take from the piece, even in an ironic sense.

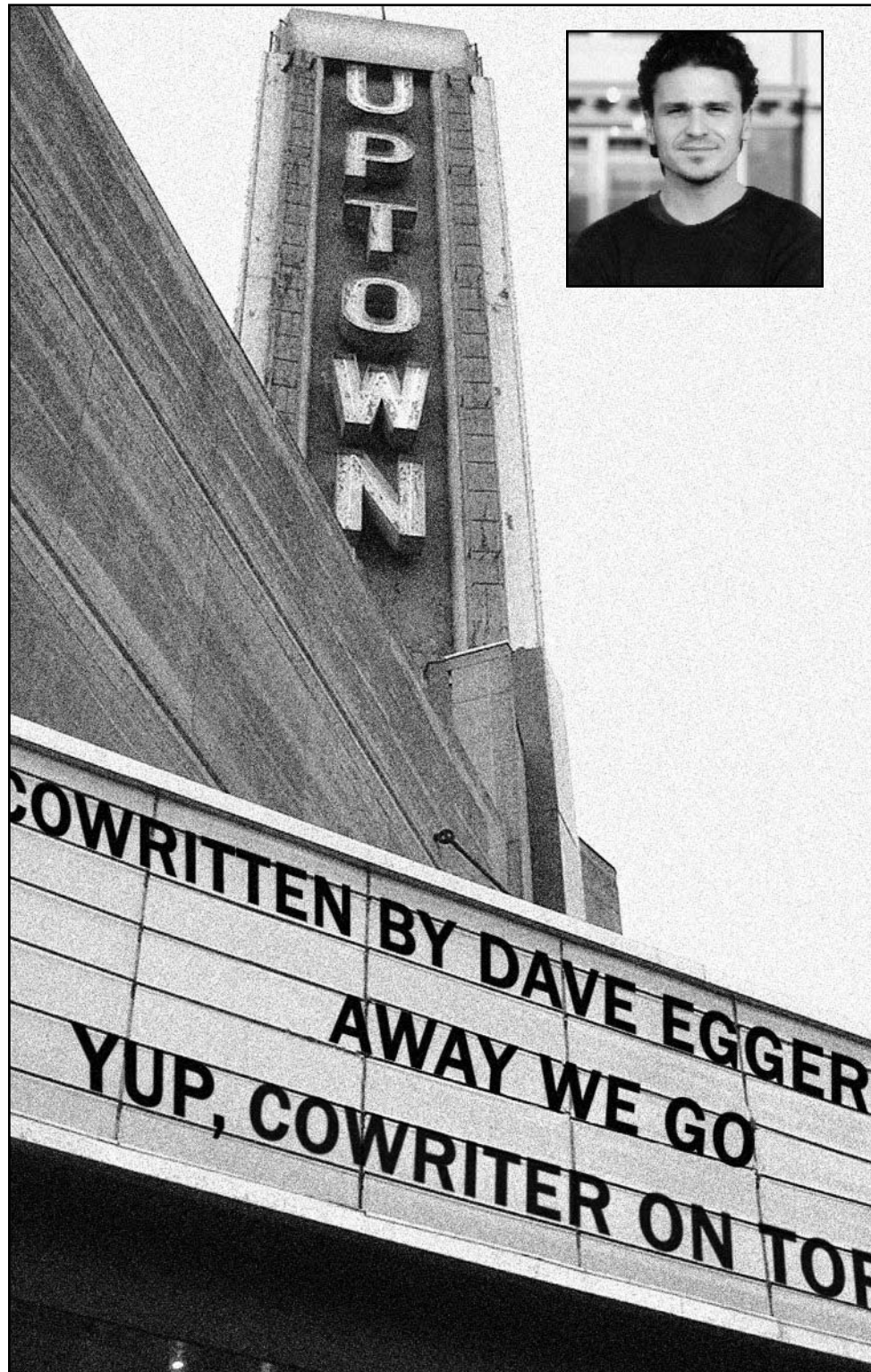
You are absolutely right when you say that, "the image, the fullness, the first-born of the invisible God has made peace by the blood of his cross, and that is true romance." It is my hope that great art, whether gritty in its darkness or bright in its visible hope, would further the discussion of understanding this complex reality.





# A HOUSE BY THE SEA A PLACE IN THE WORLD

Reflections on longing for home in film *Away We Go*



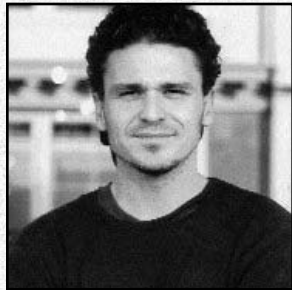
**COWritten BY DAVE EGGER  
AWAY WE GO  
YUP, COWRITER ON TOP**

That was what the big block letters read on the marquee at the Uptown Theater in Minneapolis when I drove past looking for a parking spot. It was an overt way of acknowledging what everybody already knows...

The main reason to see Sam Mendes' new film *Away We Go* is that one of the most arrestingly talented writers at work today--creator of McSweeney's publishing house; founder of 826 Valencia, an innovative writing center for kids (that sells awesomely hip pirate gear, besides); author of the cult favorite *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius* and co-writer for the upcoming film adaptation of *Where the Wild Things Are*--was the man behind the screenplay. (Note: Eggers' co-author was his wife, Vendela Vida, a noteworthy novelist in her own right.)

*Away We Go* is classic Eggers. All that we love in his fiction--the mordant humor; the offbeat situations and settings his peculiar characters land themselves in; the sense of drifting hope for something substantial to hold onto within the profusion and confusion of Gen Y culture--is here in abundance.

The story follows the long road trip of Burt and Verona, a restless young couple played by John Krasinski from NBC's *The Office* and Maya Rudolph of ▶



# HOW STORIES END

**Tension & Resolution in the endings of  
*Slumdog Millionaire*,  
*The Visitor*,  
and *Vicky Cristina Barcelona***



**If you've heard this story before,  
don't stop me, because I'd like to hear it again.  
[Groucho Marx]**



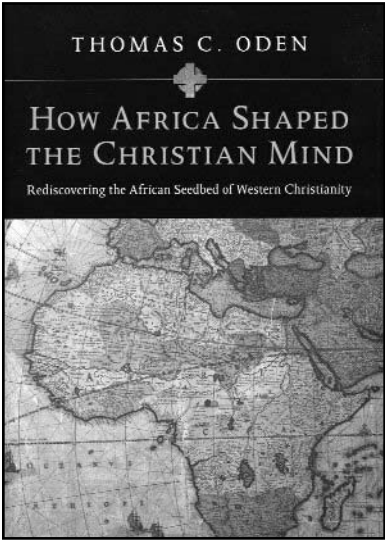
Three very different movies started me thinking again about how good stories end.

Every story has at least three parts, a beginning, middle and an ending. It's true some storytellers surprise us by ending suddenly in the middle--but there's still an ending, it's just that we have to supply it ourselves.

Compelling stories always contain some element of tension that the character(s) must face. We are drawn into that tension and immediately yearn for resolution, which comes usually in the ending of the story. We enter the imaginary world of the story, but discover that in good stories, at least, the ending compels us back into our own story but with greater clarity. Clarity which comes because the story deepened our imagination by being a metaphor for life, a slice of reality, or a way to see the ordinary in an extraordinary way. That's why people get so passionate about the stories that resonate in their souls, why it is impossible to receive a good story and then remain neutral about it.

We may not like the ending to a story, but it has to ring true. A good ending has to carry the story through with a measure of integrity, for blessing or for curse. It's the same with jokes, mess the ending up and the whole thing fails. That's why after some films people argue about the final few minutes, sometimes passionately.

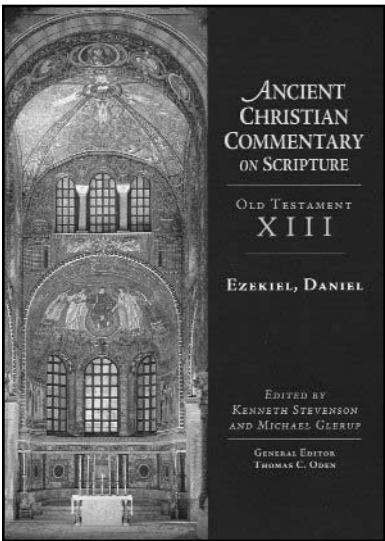
How the story ends matters a great deal. The reason is simple, so simple we may miss how profound it really is: how stories end matters because we are each living out a story, and how ours ends makes all the difference in the world. ▶



latest product of former colonial powers eager to bring something foreign into Africa

And third, we need to hear this story because we need to be reoriented to our changing world. The West once was the center of the Christian world, but it is the center no longer. One measure of the spiritual vitality of the Western church will be found in our eagerness to listen to and learn from the mature Christian voices increasingly heard in Africa. We were happy to send missionaries, but will we be as happy to receive teachers from Africa? Especially if, though grateful for the missionaries we sent, they are less impressed by how we live out our faith in a pluralistic world? Organizations like the Langham Trust (known in the US as John Stott Ministries) have for many years invested in the development of African Christian scholars. The Trust provides a healthy model for how the West might use its resources to minister to the African church where needs have changed since the beginning of the modern Western missionary movement in the 19th century.

It is a story I look forward to hearing. It will reveal, no doubt, bright evidence of the light of the gospel that for two millennia has stayed hidden in old libraries and dusty manuscripts scattered across the landscape of a continent so many have imagined to be dark. ❖



**BOOK REVIEWED**

**How Africa Shaped the Christian Mind: Rediscovering the African Seedbed of Western Christianity** by Thomas C. Oden (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press; 2007) 155 pages + Literary Chronology of Christianity in Africa in the First Millennium, 40 pages.

**SOURCES**

Lamin Sanneh's essay, "The Return of Religion," appeared in *The Cresset: A Review of Literature, the Arts, and Public Affairs*, a publication of Valparaiso University (June 2009) p 15-23].

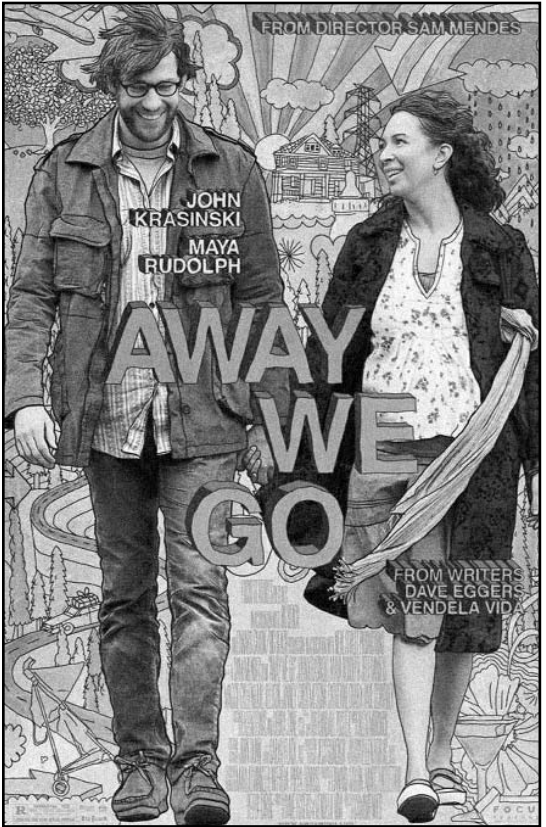
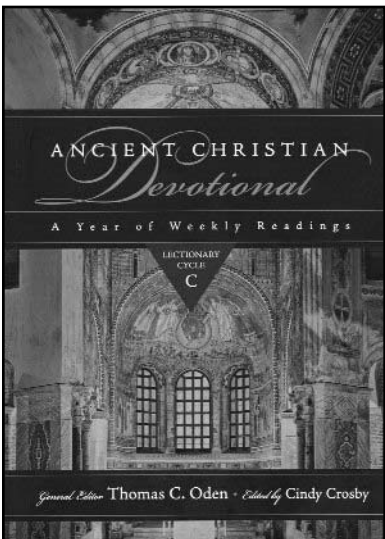
Oden in *How Africa Shaped the Christian Mind*, p. 42-43 and an author interview from IVP.

**MORE INFORMATION & FURTHER READING**

For access to numerous resources (maps, biographies, papers, timelines, lectures), and a summary of Oden's book visit **The Center for Early African Christianity** project online: [www.earlyafricanchristianity.com](http://www.earlyafricanchristianity.com)

Dr. Oden has been involved in a long-term effort to make the writings of the Patristic teachers more accessible to English speaking readers. One part of this effort has produced a new series of biblical commentaries, *The Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture* (InterVarsity Press). In the earliest centuries of the church few commentaries on books of the Bible were written. We do have, however, numerous sermons, letters, and reflections on Scripture that date to that period. *The Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture* editors, led by Oden, have sifted through this enormous collection of documents and drawn together reflections on the appropriate sections of Scripture. Many appear here in English translation for the first time.

*Ancient Christian Devotional: A Year of Weekly Readings* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press; 2009) 273 pp + notes + indices. Edited by Cindy Crosby with the help of Thomas Oden, this devotional allows Christians to meditate on brief excerpts of teachings taken from Patristic writings. The *Ancient Christian Devotional* can serve as a good introduction for those with no exposure to these earliest teachers of the faith. And for those who have been using devotionals written more recently, this one will provide a distinct enough change that you will likely find yourself reading more slowly, reflecting more deeply, and wondering more fully.



**Starring:**

John Krasinski (Burt Farlander)  
Maya Rudolph (Verona De Tessant)  
Carmen Ejogo (Grace De Tessant)  
Catherine O'Hara (Gloria Farlander)  
Jeff Daniels (Jerry Farlander)  
Allison Janney (Lily)  
Jim Gaffigan (Lowell)  
Maggie Gyllenhall (LN)  
Josh Hamilton (Roderick)

**Director:**

Sam Mendes

**Writers:**

Dave Eggers & Vendela Vida

**Producers:**

Pippa Harris, Sam Mendes,  
Mari-Jo Winkler and others

**Original Music:**

Alex Murdoch

**Cinematographer:**

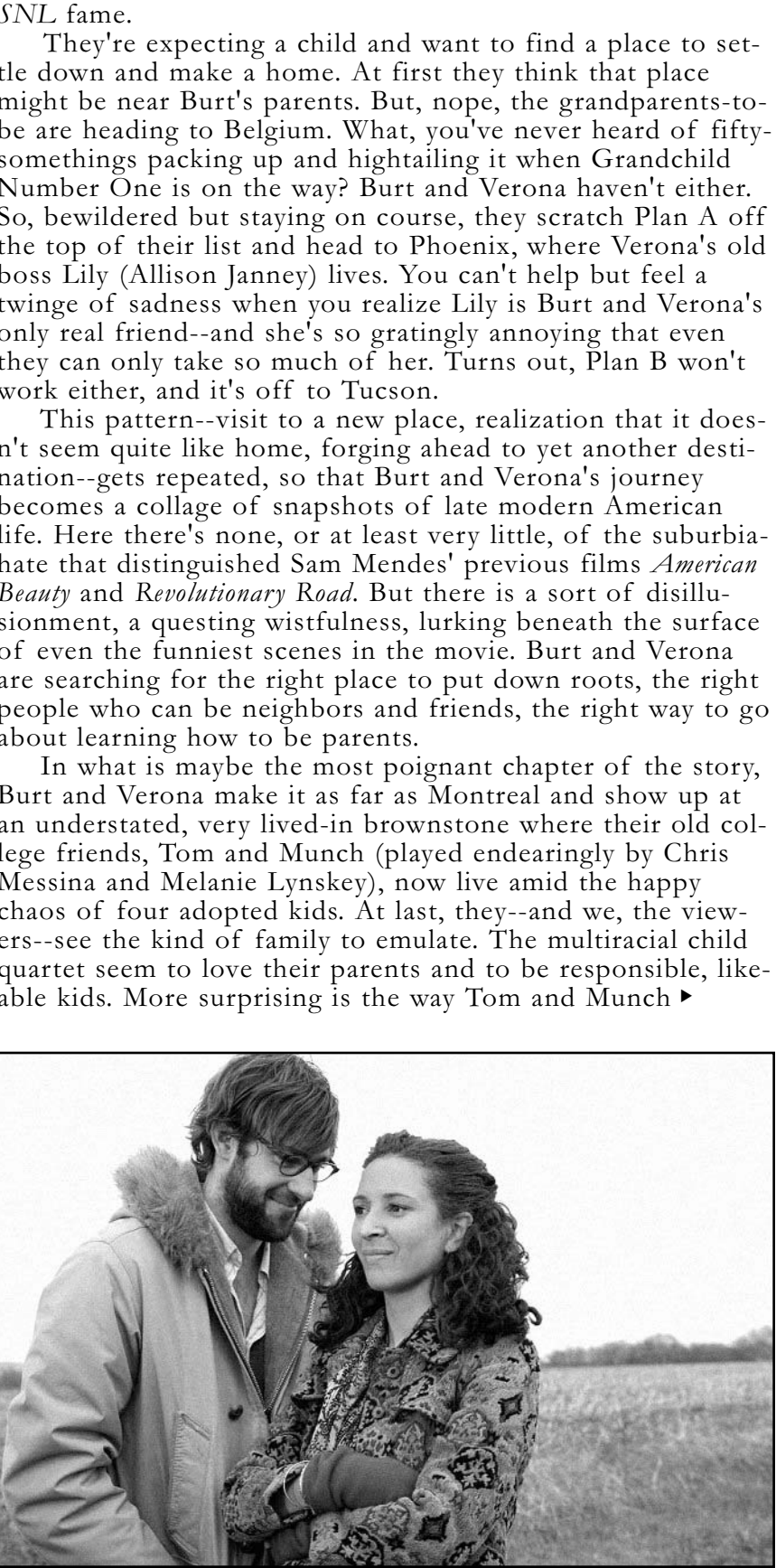
Ellen Kuras

**Runtime:** 98 min

**Release:** USA; 2009

**MPAA Rating:** R

for language and some sexual content



SNL fame.

They're expecting a child and want to find a place to settle down and make a home. At first they think that place might be near Burt's parents. But, nope, the grandparents-to-be are heading to Belgium. What, you've never heard of fifty-somethings packing up and hightailing it when Grandchild Number One is on the way? Burt and Verona haven't either. So, bewildered but staying on course, they scratch Plan A off the top of their list and head to Phoenix, where Verona's old boss Lily (Allison Janney) lives. You can't help but feel a twinge of sadness when you realize Lily is Burt and Verona's only real friend--and she's so gratingly annoying that even they can only take so much of her. Turns out, Plan B won't work either, and it's off to Tucson.

This pattern--visit to a new place, realization that it doesn't seem quite like home, forging ahead to yet another destination--gets repeated, so that Burt and Verona's journey becomes a collage of snapshots of late modern American life. Here there's none, or at least very little, of the suburbia-hate that distinguished Sam Mendes' previous films *American Beauty* and *Revolutionary Road*. But there is a sort of disillusionment, a questing wistfulness, lurking beneath the surface of even the funniest scenes in the movie. Burt and Verona are searching for the right place to put down roots, the right people who can be neighbors and friends, the right way to go about learning how to be parents.

In what is maybe the most poignant chapter of the story, Burt and Verona make it as far as Montreal and show up at an understated, very lived-in brownstone where their old college friends, Tom and Munch (played endearingly by Chris Messina and Melanie Lynskey), now live amid the happy chaos of four adopted kids. At last, they--and we, the viewers--see the kind of family to emulate. The multiracial child quartet seem to love their parents and to be responsible, likeable kids. More surprising is the way Tom and Munch ▶



haven't lost their zest for life; they still slip out for nights on the town and drink too much on occasion. Their youthful, hospitable personalities are infectious. Somehow, something has gone right. Theirs is a normal, happy, healthy family. Could the end of Burt and Verona's journey be in sight?

The night they roll in, Tom and Munch take them out for dinner and drinks. They wind up at a club. Verona slips away for a few minutes; Munch, slightly inebriated, takes to the stage for a slow dance. It's just Tom and Burt at the table. And despite their tipsiness, the conversation turns serious. We've been trying for a baby, Tom tells Burt. First it's one miscarriage, then two, then.... "I just wish I could make it work for her," Tom says. "If I could fix it all and just make a baby for her. It's terrible feeling this helpless, man." This dark tone bleeds into the next scene as Burt and Verona dash off to Miami to be near Burt's brother, whose wife just left him and their daughter.



Christians understand and identify with the longing for home at the heart of this film. We're exiles, according to Scripture (see 1 Peter 2:11), and, like Burt and Verona, we struggle to feel fully settled. Those of us shaped by our many re-readings of Wendell Berry's essays and novels also understand the more specific longing for a place--a piece of land and a house with a view to call our own, enjoyed and shared in community. With Berry's cadences ringing in our ears, we want to say to Burt and Verona, "Don't give up on your longing. With enough quiet cultivation of unpopular virtues like patience, hard work, and consistency, it just may come true."

And yet, we Christians also understand the ache that remains even after the dreams come true. We have a theological grammar with which to name the miscarriages that befall even the worthiest mothers, the abandonment that even the kindest husbands and daughters often experience. We live in the shadow of the Fall, east of Eden. Our teeth chatter and our bodies shake from the destabilizing aftershocks of Adam's sin and God's consequent judgment of death. And even after God has drawn near to rescue us through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, we see a world not yet fully permeated by the fullness of that rescue. "We groan inwardly," writes the apostle Paul, "as we wait eagerly for adoption" (Romans 8:23). "Here"--now, in this life--"we have no lasting city," adds another early Christian, "but we seek the city that is to come" (Hebrews 13:14). ▶

...how the birth of the European university was anticipated within African Christianity;

...how Christian historical and spiritual exegesis of Scripture first matured in Africa;

...how African thinkers shaped the very core of the most basic early Christian dogma;

...how early ecumenical decisions followed African conciliar patterns;

...how Africa shaped Western forms of spiritual formation through monastic discipline;

...how Neoplatonic philosophy of late antiquity moved from Africa to Europe;

...how influential literary and dialectical skills were refined in Africa.

I found this brief book both interesting and important. I'm not certain everyone needs to read it. I am certain, however, that everyone needs to know and process Oden's argument (I'll tell you why I think this in a moment). His argument can be summarized in three simple assertions: First, Western Christianity was shaped in very significant ways by African thinkers and culture in the earliest days of the church. Second, this rich historical heritage has languished unexplored and unstudied for 2000 years. And third, as Christianity flourishes now in Africa a generation of young African Christian scholars, historians and theologians should take up this needed task and fill in this gap in our historical understanding of the development of the church.

I think this is important for Western Christians to process.

First, as Oden explains, it turns longstanding historical assumptions on their head, rewrites the early history of Christian thought and practice, and challenges some commonly held unspoken perceptions of Africa. "It is incorrect to portray Africa to the world," Oden says, "as if Africa has always been a bit lacking in intellectual toughness and slow to awaken to Western achievement. The irony is that Western achievements themselves have often been profoundly indebted to Africa before they became accepted in Europe."

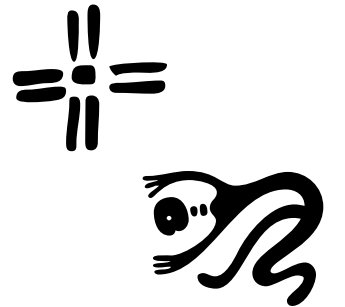
Second, we need to celebrate the impact this story can have on the African church as it rediscovers the richness of its own heritage. Thomas Oden again:

The story of early African Christianity needs to be told to African children in villages and cities. The story deserves to be told in a simple way. Though it will be heard by a global audience, it first must find a way of reaching African children.

It is a story of heroic proportions, replete with intrepid characters and surprise endings. It is not a myth, but a real history, laden with mystery, full of overflowing with unanticipated providences, heavy with sacrifice and miracle, with unrepeatably choices to be confronted, and much to be learned. It has the capacity to once again illumine personal struggles everywhere.

Global Christian believers are intrigued by modern Africa but most have not thought of it in the light of its history. Least of all have Africans had the opportunity to hear their own full story told.

Christianity is not a modern Western import into Africa. Instead, the Western church owes a debt of gratitude to the African church. She shaped the faith as it spread out of Jerusalem towards the far reaches of the globe after Pentecost. Contrary to popular myth, Christianity is not merely the ▶





# OUT OF DARK AFRICA LIGHT



Africa was long known in the West as the "dark continent." The explorer Henry Stanley (of "Doctor Livingstone I presume" fame) may have coined the expression for the title of his 1878 book, an account of his travels. Europeans found the vast landmass largely impenetrable and mysterious until the colonial period in the 19th century. Even today, influenced by incessant media reports of violent tribal rivalries, government corruption, disease, entrenched poverty, and vast populations of refugees, it's easy to see it as a dark place.

But that's only part of the story of Africa. To give some hint of the rest of the story, here are two facts worth noting, the first from our own day and one from the days of the early church.

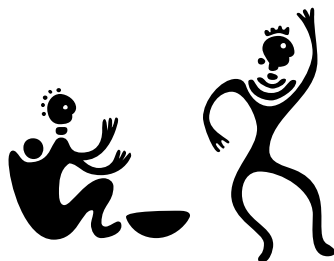
Fact #1: Christianity is growing in Africa at an explosive rate. In fact, the center of world Christianity in terms of numbers (of both churches and believers), outreach and missions, and the simple vitality of faith should no longer be imagined to be in America, England, and Europe. A massive shift has been underway: the center of world Christianity is now in the majority world, including Africa, Central and South America, and Asia. Lamin Sanneh, the D. Willis James Professor of Missions & World Christianity at Yale, draws together some of the latest statistics for Christianity in Africa:

Religious expansion in Africa entered its most vigorous phase following the end of colonial and missionary hegemony. In 1900, the Muslim population of Africa was 34.5 million, compared to roughly 8.7 million Christians, a ratio of 4:1. By 1985, Christians outnumbered Muslims in Africa. Of the continent's total population of 520 million, Christians numbered 270.5 million, compared to about 216 million Muslims. By 2000, Christians in Africa had grown to 346 million, and Africa's 315 million Muslims were concentrated mostly in the Arabic speaking regions of Egypt and in north and west Africa. Projections for 2025 are for 600 million Christians and 519 million Muslims in Africa.

"The Christian figures," Dr Sanneh concludes with keen understatement, "represent a continental shift of historic proportions." This rapidly growing African church is assuming increased importance at the beginning of the 21st century for Christian scholarship, church leadership, and global influence. And as astonishing as this might seem to Westerners, it turns out this is not the first time Africa assumed such a position of significance for the church.

Until his recent retirement Thomas Oden taught at Drew University. He is a scholar who devoted his life to what is known as the Patristic period of church history--the word is from the Latin for "father." It refers to the earliest teachers of the church, who were active as apologists, commentators, theologians, and preachers in the centuries immediately after Christ.

Now, in *How Africa Shaped the Christian Mind*, Oden identifies seven ways African thinkers and institutions were the actual genesis of what has been known ever since as Western civilization. As Oden's book title tells us--and this is Fact #2: Africa shaped the Christian mind of the Western church in the very earliest centuries after Christ by being the seedbed of western Christianity. More specifically, in his book Oden details... ►



At every stop on Burt and Verona's road trip, nothing turns out quite as hoped for. No place on their itinerary seems like the place they're searching to find. In the movie's final moments, they wonder if maybe it's best to try one more place they haven't yet: the house, now abandoned, where Verona grew up, right on the shore of the Atlantic in South Carolina. Easing the car along the quiet, kudzu--draped road up to the house, Burt asks, "Is it starting to look familiar?"

"I think so," says Verona. "I want it to... But I also want it to be new, you know? New for us? New enough to feel like we found it. Does that make sense?"

Finally they arrive. They get out of the car and walk up to the house. The front door creaks as it unlocks. The back door swings open to reveal a vista of ocean. "This is really us, don't you think?" Burt says, in a tone of hushed reverence.

"I hope so," Verona replies. "I really f\*cking hope so."

Our calling as Christians is to elevate that hope. Beyond seaside houses and babies and promises of lifelong love, we hope for more. We hope for a return to Eden, a final healing for our primal ache. ❖



## QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION & DISCUSSION

1. *Away We Go* invites comparison to other films about hippie wanderers and anxious twenty-somethings. What aspects of the film might be illuminated if you watch it alongside Zach Braff's *Garden State* and *The Last Kiss*, Ted Demme's *Beautiful Girls*, Charlie Kaufman's *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*, or even Sean Penn's *Into the Wild*?

2. With which character(s) did you most identify? Why?

3. The NYT critic A. O. Scott concludes that while you may like *Away We Go*, it does not like you--meaning that the film is meant to be more of an attack than a feel-good flick. It's true that Sam Mendes has garnered something of reputation for being a biting social critic, primarily because of *American Beauty*. To what degree do you think *Away We Go* is a critique of (post)modern American life? Does its lacerating wit ever come back to critique its protagonists also? If yes, how so? If not, why not? Who escapes attack in this film, and why?

4. What was the view of marriage communicated in this film? What were the differences between Burt and Verona on marriage? Why did they differ?

5. Did you admire Burt and Verona? Why or why not?

6. Is Burt and Verona's quest a selfish one? Why or why not? Do they want a place that they can share? Or do they hope for a retreat from the demands of love in community? How do our longings for home and a place of our own fit in (or not) with the Gospel's call to love others selflessly, including our enemies?

7. Burt and Verona's felt need is for a home. If you were to approach a conversation with them about Christ and His love, how would you delve deeper, below the surface of their felt need? How would you help them see the connection between their hope for a home in America and their ultimate desire (acknowledged or not) for an eternal home?

**Wesley Hill** is a graduate of Wheaton College (B.A.) and the University of Durham, U.K. (M.A.), where he will soon return to pursue a doctorate. His interests include hiking, camping, coffee, novels, unhurried conversation with good friends, and lived theology. He is currently at work on a book on Christianity and homosexuality.





# WHAT WOULD JESUS VALUE?

Surveys reveal there is apparently a marked disparity between the number of people--especially among males--who claim to believe in Christianity and the number who are willing to attend church. "More than 90 percent of American men believe in God," Gary Yagel says, "and five out of six call themselves Christians. But only two out of six attend church on a given Sunday. The average man believes in the reality of Jesus Christ but does not see enough value in church to be there. Almost every man in America has tried church, but two-thirds find it unworthy of two hours a week." The question worth reflecting on, of course, is why?

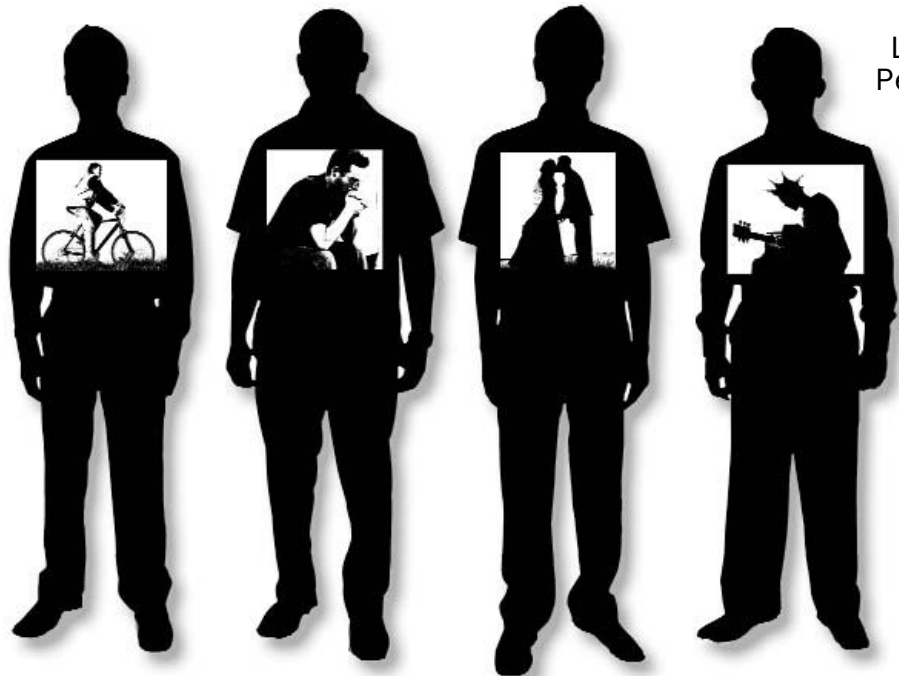
One possible answer is that it's simply an issue of gender, and would be true regardless of the religious faith involved. But that doesn't turn out to be true. The disparity between the Christian sexes in church attendance is not shown in Buddhist, Jewish, or Hindu communities. And in Islam males appear to positively relish their involvement in their religion, showing sustained commitment to attending mosque regularly.

One study suggests that part of the answer is due to conflicting values. In this study, people--both Christians and non-Christians--were shown two lists. "Which set of values," the researcher asked, the left set or the right set, "better characterizes Jesus Christ and his true followers?"

Here are the two sets of values that respondents were asked to choose between:

### LEFT SET

Competence  
Power  
Efficiency  
Accomplishment  
Achievement  
Proving Oneself  
Results  
Objects  
Technology  
Goal-Oriented  
Success  
Competition  
Skills



### RIGHT SET

Loving Cooperation  
Personal Expression  
Communication  
Relationship  
Beauty  
Support  
Help  
Nurture  
Feeling  
Sharing  
Relating  
Harmony  
Community

Note: For the sake of this discernment exercise, you might want to pause and make your own choice between the two sets of values before continuing reading.

David Murrow, the researcher in the study comparing the two sets of values, reports that more than 95% of those asked chose the right set as the values most characteristic of Christ and the church. Yagel continues, "Murrow then reveals that he took these two lists of virtues from the book, *Men are From Mars, Women are From Venus*, by John Gray. The right set includes the feminine values of *Venus*, while the left set includes the masculine values of *Mars*. Today's church, according to Murrow's ▶

study, exalts predominantly feminine values; no wonder it is repelling men."

It's worth noting, Yagel says, that when the explorer Ernest Shackleton needed men for his epic journey across Antarctica, he posted this advertisement in England:

**Men wanted for hazardous journey. Small wages. Bitter cold. Long months of complete darkness. Constant danger. Safe return doubtful. Honor and recognition in case of success.**

Shackleton needed 26 men, 5,000 applied. Shackleton apparently "knew the hardwiring of men," Yagel concludes. And apparently the 21st century Western church does not.

All this brings to mind the 1981 film, *Chariots of Fire*. It tells the story of two men who competed in the 1924 Olympic games. Harold Abrahams, a secular Jew, saw winning as a way to justify his existence. The other, Eric Liddell, a devout Christian Scot ran to "feel God's pleasure." Liddell was part of a movement within Victorian evangelical faith that was known as "muscular Christianity." It saw faith as a commitment to vigorous activism, involvement in missions, and a willingness to live for Christ regardless of the cost. True to form, Liddell later died in an internment camp when Japan invaded China. Apparently such muscular Christianity is not on offer in today's Western churches. All of which raises some interesting questions for discerning Christians. ❖

### QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. Have you noticed that women are more attracted to the Christian church (or to Christian faith) than men seem to be? Are there some age, socio-economic, or ethnic categories in which this trend is more evident?
2. When you first saw the two lists of values, the Left Set and the Right Set, how did you answer the question, "Which set of values better characterizes Jesus Christ and his true followers?" When you examine the two lists with greater care and in more detail, do you still come to the same conclusion? Why or why not? What list of values would you propose that should characterize Jesus Christ and his followers?
3. Use the two lists and the accompanying question to do a survey among your friends. What are the results? How do you interpret them? Do Christians answer the question differently than non-Christians? Do Christians in leadership, including clergy, answer differently than lay people do?
4. "The church of the first century was a magnet to men," Yagel says. "Jesus' strong leadership, blunt honesty, bold action, and fearless confrontation mesmerized them." Does the biblical witness--in the Gospels and Acts--seem to confirm this? Why or why not?
5. "Men learn best," Yagel argues, "by observing the lives of other men. Jesus' invitation, 'Follow me,' is masculine language. But in today's church the invitation seems to be, 'Come into this auditorium, sit for an hour, and I will give you a lecture.' That has far

less appeal to men--and the shortages in our pews proves it." Do you agree that mentoring, rather than a series of lectures, is more appealing to men as a preferred or more attractive method of learning?

6. In the Victorian period in England (as depicted in Eric Liddell's story in *Chariots of Fire*) the ideal was called "muscular Christianity." It combined physical prowess and spiritual maturity in a faith that was considered manly in its deep commitment, and fearless in giving one's life to some form of Christian activism (such as the worldwide mission of the church). Does the term, "muscular Christianity" sound attractive to 21st century ears? Why or why not?

7. For much of church history, the heroes of the Christian church were its martyrs, who gave their lives for the gospel. Their memories were honored and their stories were told to fire the imagination of each generation and to set them as a standard for Christian faithfulness. Has the evangelical church today continued this practice? Do you think it should? Why or why not?

8. Many young women complain that the Christian men they know tend to be unimpressive, hesitant to make a commitment or to take risks, relatively immature, and easily intimidated by intelligent active women. Do you think the complaint is valid? Why or why not? Is this related to the broader question we have been considering?

9. If you could tell the leadership of your church one thing as a result of this exercise, what would it be? What Scriptures would you reference?

### SOURCE

"Caution: Check your Manhood at the Church Door" by Gary Yagel in *ByFaith* (Winter 2008) pp. 20-22, which is archived at: [www.byfaithonline.com](http://www.byfaithonline.com)