

critique

A RANSOM FELLOWSHIP PUBLICATION

ISSUE TWO 2010



Text **Denis Haack** Photo **Bailey Mohr**



Bored by life, by God

I've been thinking about what we Christians experience when we read Scripture. On the one hand, we believe it to be God's revelation of himself, the Story of redemption in Christ that is unfolding in space and time. It is the telling of a gospel, Kevin Vanhoozer says, that "displays a goodness than which nothing greater can be dramatized." On this creedal level, it's dramatic. On the other hand,

we can hardly expect to be so overwhelmed every time we read, to be so swept up into the drama as to be rendered speechless. The brokenness of our lives and world is far too deep for that, so expecting it is nothing short of utopian.

Still, much of the time we find the task of reading Scripture to be at best mundane. If we do it, it is because we should, not because it is our delight. Yet "delight" is precisely the word David chose to express his response to meditating on God's law—the Old Testament law, for goodness sake. Jonathan Edwards used it too:

I had then, and at other times, the greatest delight in the holy Scriptures, of any book what so ever. Often times in reading it, every word seemed to touch my heart. I felt an harmony between some thing in my heart, and those sweet and powerful words. I seemed often to see so much light, exhibited by every sentence, and such a refreshing ravishing food communicated, that I could not get along in reading.

I yearn for this delight. Desire it. Not all the time, or every time, but at least occasionally. Which is why I have chosen Joseph Hart's (1712-1768) old hymn as my prayer this year:

*Come, Holy Spirit, come. Let thy bright beams arise;
dispel the darkness from our minds, and open up our eyes.*

*Convince us of our sin, then lead to Jesus' blood;
and to our wondering view reveal the secret love of God.*

*Dwell, therefore in our hearts; our minds from bondage free:
then shall we know and praise and love the Father, Son and thee. **

Source

Kevin Vanhoozer in *The Drama of Doctrine* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press; 2005) p. 50; David in Psalm 1; Jonathan Edwards in *Personal Narrative*, ed. Claghorn, 797; Joseph Hart in *Our Christian Hymn Writers* by Faith Cook (Evangelical Press) p. 156-157.

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Cover: "The Lamb" by James Disney. View more of Disney's work on the art section of www.RansomFellowship.org.

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DIALOGUE *readers respond*

Response **Denis Haack**

To the editor:

In reading “When Musicians Raise Questions About Faith (part 1)” [*Critique* #4–2009], the first thing that popped into my mind was “Context! Context! Context!” As *Critique* has taught in the past, it is critical to understand a work of art in its context!

The song comes from the opera *Porgy and Bess*. George Gershwin composed the music and his brother, Ira Gershwin, and DuBose Heyward collaborated on the lyrics for the opera.

Porgy and Bess is set in Catfish Row of Charleston, South Carolina during the 1930’s. Bess is the kept woman of a local stevedore, Crown. After a crap game, Crown picks a fight with Robbins, and kills him. Crown flees, but lets Bess know that he will come back for her. Bess is stunned, buys some happy dust from Sportin’ Life, the local drug dealer, and then is shunned by everyone except Porgy, a cripple. Bess is finally included in the community because of Porgy’s love for her. Sportin’ Life tries to woo Bess away from Porgy with offers of happy dust and an exciting life in New York.

A picnic day arrives and everyone heads over to Kittiwah Island except Porgy. The picnickers celebrate by dancing and singing “I Ain’t Got No Shame.” Sportin’ Life joins the group, contributing to the wild atmosphere by singing “It Ain’t Necessarily So.” The drunk picnickers agree with Sportin’ Life’s assumed skeptical attitude about rules and regulations in the Bible, but are chastised by Serena, Robbins’ widow, when she sings “Shame on All You Sinners.” Bess has wandered away from the crowd and is approached by Crown, who has been hiding on the island. He asks her for happy dust then insists she stay with him. She tries to resist, but she is left behind when everyone else leaves.

Two days later she is found unconscious and brought back to Porgy. Serena prays and sings over the delirious Bess in “Oh, Doctor Jesus” and then promises Porgy that Bess will be well by 5 o’clock. The fever leaves Bess, Porgy forgives her, and assures her of his love for her.

A hurricane rises, and all the residents gather in Serena’s room for shelter. All the “whole men” leave to rescue a capsized boat. Crown returns for Bess while the men are out, but is killed by Porgy. After the storm, authorities come to investigate Crown’s murder. They take Porgy away. While Porgy is gone, Sportin’ Life tells Bess that Porgy will be locked up forever, but that he will take care of her. Bess is confused and afraid, but accepts the happy dust and Sportin’ Life’s offer.

The next day Porgy is released. He returns only to be informed of Bess and Sportin’ Life’s departure. Porgy sets off to find Bess in New York, singing “Oh, Lawd, I’m on my way”.

This synopsis answers many of the questions raised in “When Musicians Raise Questions About Faith”.

Does the fact that George and Ira Gershwin were Jewish indicate anything about their view of the Bible as it relates to Porgy and Bess? No. The Gershwins were professional musicians and they knew how to bring reality into the music and the lyrics. George even lived in Charleston during the summer of 1934 so that he would understand the area and the people.

Does Sportin’ Life speak for the Gershwins or Heyward in “It Ain’t Necessarily So”? From the context of the opera, no—Sportin’ Life is interested in drumming up more business, and so he eggs on the already rowdy picnickers on the island. He knows the way to do this is to suggest perhaps (like Satan) that not everything in the Bible is exactly true. The implication is “oh yes, some is true, but not all of it is true.” His reasoning about Methuselah is hilarious, because he casts doubt that a man could live to be that old because no woman would “give in to no man what’s 900 years”! This is not a serious theological question! Sportin’ Life speaks for the character created for the opera. There are many other characters in the opera who sing songs that are contrary ▶





to the idea behind “It Ain’t Necessarily So.” Examine Serena’s sermon in “Shame on All You Sinners,” as one example.

Are the questions raised in the song honest questions that question the Bible? Again, from the context of the opera, the answer is no. These questions are sung as a way to indicate the power of Sportin’ Life in whipping up desire for “doing things my way” and thus getting more business for selling drugs.

Be careful about listening to music from compilations! I would encourage you to watch the opera if you can, read about it and how it came to be, and for a bare minimum listen to a series of songs all from *Porgy and Bess*. I can personally recommend the Dallas Symphony Orchestra and Chorus Dorian recording “The Gershwin’s Porgy and Bess Concert Suite” arranged by Andrew Litton.

In closing I would like to suggest perhaps some additional questions for discernment to be included in the “An Invitation to Critique Readers”.

To what genre does the song being examined belong? Categories might include—opera, rock-opera, classical, baroque, requiem, oratorio, jazz, hymns,

spirituals, blues, etc. [Another question would be added if you listen to music that has no lyrics.]

Who composed the music for the song? Who wrote the lyrics? Who is performing or singing the song?

What did the composer intend for the music? What did the lyricist intend for the lyrics? What did the musician intend in performing the song?

Who is singing the song? Are they words from the lyricist? Or are they words from a character?

To whom is the song being sung, and why?

Do research on the composer, on the lyricist, and on the musicians performing the work. Based on your findings, do you think that the composer / lyricist / musician personally believes what the song is saying? Why or why not?

What is the setting that the composer intended for the music to be performed in? Categories might include concert hall, church, anywhere, your car, your iPod, etc.

Sincerely,

Melinda Brown

Via email

Denis Haack responds:

Thank you for such a thoughtful response to my piece, Melinda.

I did not mean to imply that I thought the lyrics of the song reflected the beliefs of the Gershwins or Heyward. Nor did I intend to suggest that the lyrics of the song were somehow a reflection of their Jewish heritage. Having seen *Porgy and Bess*, I realize the song is from an opera and thus reflects the beliefs of the character who sang the piece, in this case, Sportin’ Life. Nor did I mean to suggest that “It Ain’t Necessarily So” summarizes a view of Christian faith taken by all the characters in the opera.

I would not agree, however, that Sportin’ Life’s intentions (to seduce his listeners to sin) means that he was not raising theological questions. He was not engaging in theological discussion, true, but the questions he poses are inextricably theological. Nor do I see any reason to conclude that Sportin’ Life’s was not raising honest questions in his song. To the contrary, taking the story seriously means taking what the characters say seriously.

Even in the context of the opera, this song raises issues that are perennial challenges to the integrity of Christian faith by raising doubts concerning the veracity of the Scriptures. I am sorry I did not communicate as clearly as I had hoped in the piece, but I would still conclude this song is worthy of inclusion in this series. ❀

More Redemptive Than First Love

Based on the irreverent coming-of-age novel by C. D. Payne, *Youth in Revolt* and directed by Miguel Arteta, doesn't begin there—with the revolt. Instead it starts benignly, in the bedroom retreat of a teen who knows he's a misfit. Literate, introverted, besotted by Italian cinema, Nick Twisp (played by Michael Cera) seems an unlikely candidate for a rebel. But at 16, he'll do anything to get a girl.

On a vacation with his mother (Jean Smart) and her live-in boyfriend (Zach Galifianakis)—they head to the boyfriend's friend's cabin for a week away, only to discover it's a rusting trailer in a park called the Restless Axles—Nick meets a girl his age, Sheeni (played by newcomer Portia Doubleday), also there on vacation with her family, and falls hard. At first, Sheeni is flirtatious, indulging Nick's infatuation. But then she drops the bombshell: There's a boyfriend back home, and Nick can't match him for daring and bravura.

In a bid to win the Francophile Sheeni over, Nick develops an alternate persona, François (also played by Cera)—his opposite in every way: contemptuous of authority, recklessly risk-taking, sexually experienced. Wherever Nick would play it safe, François urges rebellion. The turning point comes when Nick follows François's lead and stages a car wreck—only to have it blow up in his face (almost literally). Will Sheeni like him better if he's not the shy, unassuming kid he's been up till now? That's the bid, and the rest of the movie is the telling of the resultant tale.

I found myself surprised by the affecting power of some of the scenes in this offbeat, down-to-earth comedy. You don't normally go to a hormone-drenched teen flick to encounter profundity, but there are glimpses of it that flicker through. Then, too, there's the lovely ▶



Youth in Revolt

Starring:

Michael Cera (Nick Twisp/Francois Dillinger)
Portia Doubleday (Sheeni Saunders)
Jean Smart (Estelle Twisp)
Zach Galifianakis (Jerry)
Erik Knudsen (Lefty)
Steve Buscemi (George Twisp)
Fred Willard (Mr. Ferguson)
Ray Liotta (Lance Wescott)
Justin Long (Paul Saunders)

Directors:

Miguel Arteta

Writers:

Gustin Nash (screenplay); C.D. Payne (novel)

Producers:

Harvey Weinstein, Bob Weinstein

Original Music:

John Swihart

Cinematographer:

Chuy Chavez

Runtime: 90 min

Release: USA; 2010

MPAA Rating: R

(sexual content, language and drug references)

cinematography. A number of close up shots in the film highlight even the slightest and most emotionally revealing facial movements, the barely noticeable twitch of a lip or glimmer of an eye that speak volumes. I thought of Jean Bethke Elshtain's recent description in *Books & Culture* of some of the camera work in *Public Enemies*: "The close ups help us once again to appreciate why movie stars—real movie stars—are different from the rest of us, physically blessed with a kind of preternatural grace and beauty. The camera magnifies rather than diminishes these qualities. They are larger than life."

As one might expect, the chief theme here is desire—the desire for sex and, beyond that, for love. Without spoiling the ending completely, I'll say that Nick Twisp's redemption, his moment of self-understanding and his first real sense of rest and peace from the vortex of adolescence, involves the loss of his virginity.

There's no denying the power of this age-old trope: Being loved by another human being, even in a brief and fleeting moment, can have redemptive, healing power. But is it redemption of the deepest sort? Can sex really liberate and restore us in the way we most need and want liberation and restoration?

Christianity proclaims a different kind of salvation, one revealed not in moments of adolescent passion but in a cross and empty tomb and in broken bread and shared wine. "Early Christians were seen as atheists because they rejected the proposition that Caesar saves," says Rodney Clapp. "Christians [today] would be little less revolutionary in their 'atheism' if they now rejected the proposition that sex saves."

Proclaiming the salvation Christ has accomplished to teenagers like Nick Twisp (not to mention lonely and desiring people a few years beyond their teens) must take their desires seriously but also take them as pointers to even deeper needs and desperate conditions. The love Christ embodies is more profound, more powerful, more redemptive even than a first love—and as this movie shows, that's saying a lot. ❀

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION & DISCUSSION

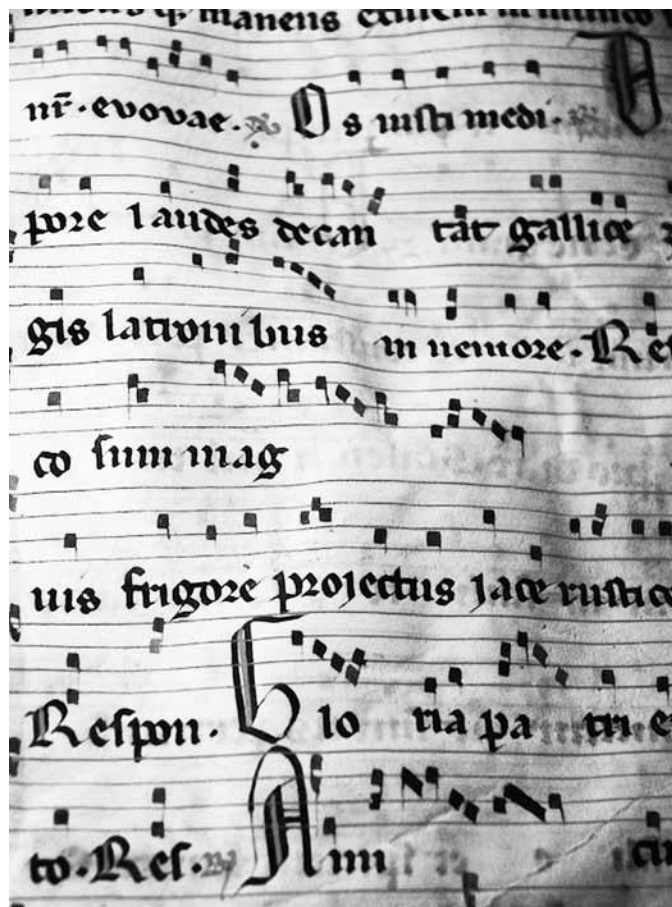
1. *Youth in Revolt* features a "good" character who turns "bad" on purpose. What perspective does the film as a whole take on this transformation? Does it "approve" of its main character? Is Nick's badness heroic? Why or why not?
2. What choices, attitudes, and actions are acceptable in the pursuit of love? Why do we feel the need for personality makeovers? What motivates us to want to change? What light does this film shed on these dynamics in your own life?
3. May Nick's quest to "be bad" for Sheeni's sake be interpreted as his hunger for grace? If we read his actions as the behavior of someone who is desiring acceptance and relationship (every man who knocks on the door of a brothel is looking for God, whether he knows it or not, as G. K. Chesterton said), how might this cause us to reevaluate our initial interpretation? Were you too judgmental of Nick at first?
4. What light does *Youth in Revolt* shed on youth culture in general? Does it give you new insight into the lives of teenagers whom you know personally? If so, how might you approach those relationships differently after reflecting on the issues this film raises?



Wesley Hill is pursuing a Ph.D. in New Testament studies at Durham University, UK. His book, *Washed and Waiting: Reflections on Christian Faithfulness and Homosexuality*, is due out this fall from Zondervan.

None Other Lamb None Other Name

In A Broken World,
A Quiet Confidence



I grew up around hymns and early learned to dislike them. It was the only music allowed in our fundamentalist home. I didn't have a word for it when I was young, but I do remember the huge disconnect that existed between the lyrics we sang and the reality of our lives. The lyrics spoke of abounding joy, rich freedom, the sweetness of God's presence, while our lives were solemn, judgmental, withdrawn, and regimented. The hymns we sang slowly ate away at my faith and were one reason I slid into doubt towards disbelief by the time I was in high school.

Hymns also occasionally provided comic relief, though we had to be careful to control our giggling during a service. One hymn, "Even Me," by Elizabeth Codner was based on Ezekial 34:26, a lovely promise of God to his people who have suffered horribly through a long dry spell. "I will send down the showers in their season," God says through the prophet, "they shall be showers of blessing."

The stanza that put us over the edge is the first one:

*Lord, I hear of showers of blessing,
Thou art scattering full and free;
Showers the thirsty land refreshing;
Let some drops now fall on me;
Even me, even me,
Let some drops now fall on me. ▶*

Trouble was, our old hymnbooks had the lyrics as Codner had originally penned them:

*Let some droppings fall on me,
Even me, even me,
Let some droppings fall on me.*

Once you imagine the congregation, singing lustily with grim expressions, standing below bird-crammed trees the hymn takes on new and delicious possibilities. The vision was strangely satisfying.

Hymn singing has been a part of the Christian faith from the beginning. The original Christian Scriptures was the Old Testament that contains the Psalms, an entire collection of sacred songs and prayers. St Matthew records that after Christ instituted the Eucharist, they sang a hymn and then walked together to the Mount of Olives (Matthew 26:30). I've often wondered what they sang, and what the experience was like. The apostolic legacy left to us includes singing (Acts 16:25, 1 Corinthians 14:26, Ephesians 5:19), and St John's vision of being in God's presence is suffused with joy and melody (see, for example, Revelation 4 & 5).

In college I was introduced to *The InterVarsity Hymn Book*, and for the first time I was introduced to hymns that expressed truth without sacrificing beauty and goodness. Two especially moved me, David Clowney's "God All Nature Sings Thy Glory" and the old Irish hymn, "Be Thou My Vision." The first embraced all of reality, expanding our horizon by taking in life within the life-affirming Story of Creation, Fall, Redemption and Restoration. The second, dating to the 8th century, evoked an ancient faith that was as fearless as it was creative.

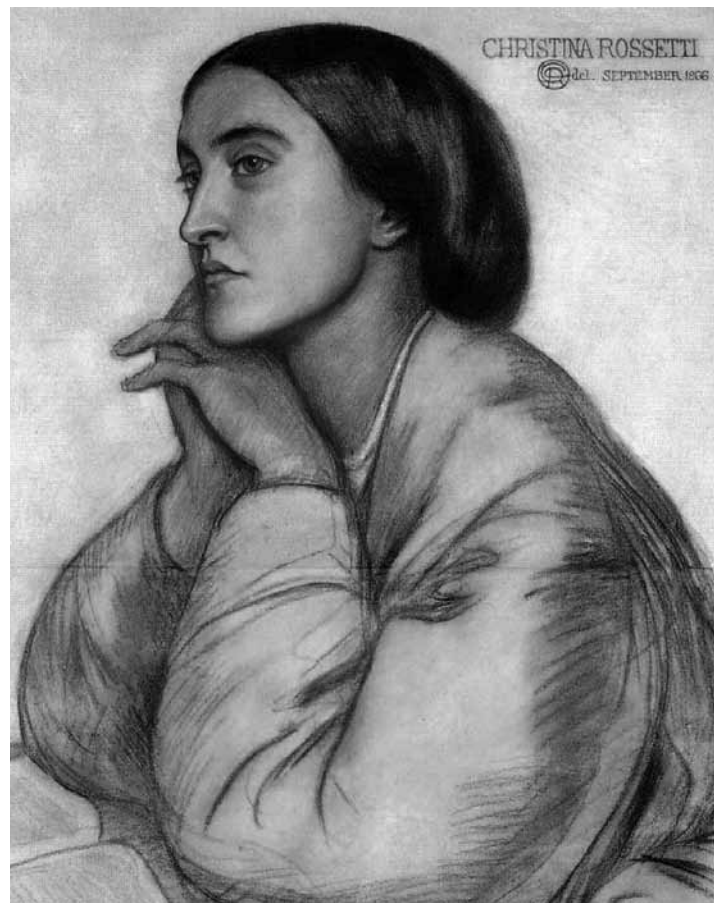
I have passed through and beyond that aching period of doubt, though remain sensitive to the hymns the church sings. Sometimes I simply sit silently, unable to voice words I do not believe to be true. Isaac Watts has written some fine hymns, but I will not sing, "At the Cross."

*At the cross, at the cross where I first saw the light,
And the burden of my heart rolled away,
It was there by faith I received my sight,
And now I am happy all the day!*

Sorry, but that last line is simply untrue. Anyone who can sing that and claim it is true of them is either too highly medicated or needs medication badly. I believe we'll be able to sing that someday, but not in this in-between-time in this sadly broken world.

None Other Lamb

One hymn that has captured my heart is Christina Rossetti's elegantly simple hymn to Christ, "None Other Lamb." It first appeared not in a collection of poetry or hymns, but in *The Face of the Deep*, a book she published in 1892. Taking her title for the book from a phrase in Psalm 36:6 ("your judgments are like the great deep"), Rossetti's subtitle captured her intent: *A devotional commentary on the Apocalypse*. Moving through St John's Revelation verse by verse, Rossetti reflects on the biblical text with the adoring meditation of poetic insight rather than the more usual—for commentaries on the book of Revelation—scholarly attempt to unscramble perceived puzzles in the visions the apostle records. Rossetti shows an admirable



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familiarity with Scripture and a good grasp of the basic theological implications of the details of John's writing. Scattered throughout her reflections are poems and hymns she has composed, meant to enable the reader's worship rather than to versify the text or to summarize its doctrinal content. She essentially worshipped her way through the Apocalypse, and in *The Face of the Deep* allows us to listen in to her heart's contemplation.

"None Other Lamb" is part of Rossetti's meditation on Revelation 5:6, a verse in the section of the book of Revelation in which John has been transported to the throne of God to see and hear the unceasing worship of all Creation before the Almighty's presence. The apostle had just been overwhelmed with sorrow when it appeared no one in all Creation could be found who was worthy to open the book of God—"the scroll and its seven seals" (Revelation 5:1-4). The apostle knew what was at stake, which is why he "began to weep bitterly" (Revelation 5:4). The seals on the scroll, once broken, would usher in God's justice so that wrong would be made right, so that darkness and wickedness would be replaced with the bright light of righteousness, and the unspeakable inhumanity, violence, and wickedness of human history would be once and for all undone. Having no one to open the scroll meant not just a sad ending to the story, but the worst of all possible endings. If the seals remained fastened and the

scroll unopened, no final justice would occur, and the cruel brokenness suffered by so many innocent victims over all the ages would turn out to be meaningless.

Then, as the apostle mourns the loss of all things, an elder who stands in God's presence tells him a Scroll-Opener has been found. This One is rooted deep in ancient tradition, of a royal lineage and the scion of a great tribe of humankind through whom the prophets had said the true Redeemer would come (Revelation 5:5). John looks up.

Then I saw between the throne and the four living creatures and among the elders a Lamb standing as if it had been slaughtered, having seven horns and seven eyes, which are the seven spirits of God sent out into all the earth.

—Revelation 5:6

This is the text of Scripture in Revelation that inspired Rossetti's poem.

*None other Lamb, none other Name,
None other hope in Heav'n or earth or sea,
None other hiding place from guilt and shame,
None beside Thee!*

*My faith burns low, my hope burns low;
Only my heart's desire cries out in me
By the deep thunder of its want and woe,
Cries out to Thee.*

*Lord, Thou art Life, though I be dead;
Love's fire Thou art, however cold I be:
Nor Heav'n have I, nor place to lay my head,
Nor home, but Thee.*

It might seem paradoxical, especially today, that a hymn of such gentle sensitivity can be evoked by a vision of the unleashing of God's final judgment. "None Other Lamb" contains no hint of pride or smirking triumph, neither the elation of one satisfied they are on the right side, or the glee of someone perversely anticipating the writhing of the damned. Instead Rossetti finds comfort in this One who can open the scroll, finding confidence not in her ability to believe but ▶



in the Lamb in whom her confidence rests, quietly certain that her Lord, not her suffering and the brokenness of the world, will have the final word.

Today the notion of God's judgment tends to prompt discomfort rather than assurance, a reason to disbelieve or to modify the meaning of St John's vision to something a bit more to our liking. It is hard not to be cynical about any notion of final justice in a pluralistic world. What would it look like? More to the point, is there anyone capable of such a wonder? Besides, even if at some point the brutal criminals of all time are found guilty and punished the suffering of the innocent still would cry out from the blood stained pages of history. Though this would be better than the insufficient justice of our world, it would be of limited value to the victims who were torn, body and soul. For many, what they knew of life was defined by suffering.

St John's vision, however, provides an understanding of reality that breaks through such cynicism. Of all the world's religions, at this point Christianity is unique in providing a hope that is qualitatively different. C. S. Lewis spoke of this great mystery, as what can only be described as "heaven working backwards." Timothy Keller sums it up this way:

The Biblical view of things is resurrection—not a future that is just a *consolation* for the life we never had but a *restoration* of the life you always wanted. That means that every horrible thing that ever happened will not only be undone and repaired but will in some way make the eventual glory and joy even greater...

Just after the climax of the trilogy *The Lord of the Rings*, Sam Gamgee discovers that his friend Gandalf was not dead (as he thought) but alive. He cries, 'I thought you were dead! But then I thought I was dead myself! *Is everything sad going to come untrue?*' The answer of Christianity to that question is—yes. Everything sad is going to come untrue and it will somehow be *greater* for having once been broken and lost.

In this understanding God's final judgment is not merely terrible but victorious, unleashing a righteous-

ness that does not merely end evil but that undoes it at the deepest level. Christina Rossetti properly takes comfort in St John's awful—awe-full—vision that is the prelude to the end of time and the fountain of hope. The Lamb that would open the scroll bore the marks of suffering, looking "as if it had been slaughtered," because it had. The Lamb who suffered the injustice of his fallen creatures would now take up the need for justice, not in revenge but so that glory would cover the earth as the waters cover the seas (Habakkuk 2:24).

Stanza 1: None Beside Thee

*None other Lamb, none other Name,
None other hope in Heav'n or earth or sea,
None other hiding place from guilt and shame,
None beside Thee!*

The first stanza of Rossetti's hymn celebrates the uniqueness of Jesus, the Scroll-Opener at the end of time. Five times she repeats, "none," that no one other than Christ is sufficient for the task. As in St John's vision this is not intended to be controversial. Rossetti does not write it as a challenge to any who might propose an alternative champion. St John's fear was that no one might be able to take and open the scroll, so that finally, in the end, our worst fears would be realized and the cries of injustice would simply echo forever ▶



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into the dark corners of an uncaring cosmos. But the Scroll-Opener appears, and hope revives.

This one, Rossetti says—and none other—is the hope not just of a few but of all, no matter where they be found, in heaven or on land or on the seas. The completeness is intended.

In this Rossetti sees a fulfillment of Scripture in seeing Christ not merely as one prophet among many but the promised One. An earlier John had called him, “the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world” (John 1:29). She celebrates his Name, for as St Peter insisted, “there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:12).

In this one, Rossetti sees, is found the solution to both guilt and shame. Guilt can only be solved by forgiveness, and in the Lamb’s death this is precisely what was provided (Romans 5:1-11; 8:1). Shame must be replaced by acceptance and glory, and this too is found in Christ. As our elder brother he is not ashamed of us (Hebrews 2:11) and even now as the Spirit sanctifies we share progressively in his glory (2 Corinthians 3:18). “Death will be abolished,” Rossetti says, “pain over, tears wiped away, weakness reinforced, loss made good, failure retrieved: these are remediable, and will be remedied.”

Rossetti’s five-fold repetition of “None” could not be simpler, yet the simplicity masks a progressive unfolding of why the Scroll-Opener is worthy of praise. In him is found the ultimate sacrifice, the identity of salvation, our final hope, and all forgiveness and glory. Indeed, when we get to the final line and she leads us to speak to him directly, “None beside Thee!”

Stanza 2: My Heart Cries Out To Thee.

*My faith burns low, my hope burns low;
Only my heart’s desire cries out in me
By the deep thunder of its want and woe,
Cries out to Thee.*

This stanza speaks with special force to our post-modern evangelical world. Too few Christians today know of the reality of which Rossetti speaks, to their great loss. Today, sincerity of faith, confidence that a



decision for Christ was made with heart-felt intensity is imagined to be the measure of faith and the foundation for assurance. “Not certain you really meant it then?” “Then go forward again, pray the prayer again—and this time really mean it.” The problem being, of course, that our sincerity, like everything else, is always partial at best, so the doubts creep back and the process is repeated, endlessly. Even when the advice comes with proof texts, it is the counsel of despair.

Rossetti is schooled in a more robust theology, where confidence is not located in the inward strength of the soul but in the historic reality of Christ’s cross. “Did Christ die and raise again?” Yes. “Then be at rest, in him, for his redemption is sure.”

Unlike so many of our evangelical contemporaries, Rossetti understood the difference between being an unbeliever, on the one hand who is kept from belief by doubt, and a believer who doubts, on the other. A person can be a child of God and yet struggle mightily and long with all sorts of doubts, perhaps for an entire lifetime. Some believe that without a “strong testimony” a person is likely unsaved. The truth of the gospel is that all testimonies are weak, and to be saved one needs only one thing, a strong Savior.

In a neat twist, Rossetti turns the weakness of her heart into a quiet confidence of faith. Her faith and hope “burns low” (repeated twice, nicely), so low that silence reigns. All that is left is desire and its cry, ▶



though unspoken, is a thunder of want and need and sad helplessness. That she offers, true evidence of true faith, knowing that it is heard by the One whose ears are delicately attuned to the prayers of his people (Isaiah 59:1; Romans 8:18-30).

Before the Scroll-Opener, Rossetti is reduced to knowing the great pit of “want and woe” (such good alliteration) that thunders in and from her heart. This is not reason to doubt her faith but a reason for quiet confidence that life has been birthed in her. She yearns, even as she mourns that her yearning is not as strong as she would wish. And so, in the end, she invites us to allow our yearning to join hers. We turn from the condition of our hearts to address the desire of our hearts. Indeed, our heart “Cries out to Thee.”

Stanza 3: No Home But Thee

*Lord, Thou art Life, though I be dead;
Love's fire Thou art, however cold I be:
Nor Heav'n have I, Nor place to lay my head,
Nor home, but Thee.*

Christina Georgina Rossetti (1830-1894) was born into a remarkably literate, artistic family. Her brothers, Dante Gabriel and William Michael were part of an artistic movement that came to be known as The Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood. She appears in some

Pre-Raphaelite paintings, having served as a model for the delicately beautiful woman they sought to capture on the canvas. She was deeply religious, and over time was attracted to the High Church Anglicanism of the Oxford (or Tractarian) Movement. This was a movement in the Anglican Church, associated with scholars at Oxford, who wrote a series of influential tracts arguing for a High Church understanding of Christianity. It developed into what became known as Anglo-Catholicism, in which Anglicans hold to a view of the sacraments that is barely distinguishable from Roman Catholic teaching. Her father died when she was 24, a loss the entire family keenly mourned, and twice she turned down suitors, on religious grounds, to remain unmarried. Christina suffered from ill health which kept her from making a living as a governess when she was younger, and became increasingly severe as she grew older. She knew what it meant to suffer, and was no stranger to loneliness, disappointment, periods of depression, and unfulfilled longing.

In this stanza Rossetti sets up three vibrant contrasting metaphors, each demonstrating the grace of the Lord. She might be dead, he is life; she may feel distant, he is love; she has no place to call her own, while he is home itself. Once again her state is noted but does not become the final word, her limitation is named, but is always met by his sufficiency. Rossetti is not blind to the reality of life in a broken world, nor does she retreat into some sort of sentimentalism that causes her imply that all is fine when it is not. Rather, she allows reality to stand, but knows that someone greater than reality stands behind all she feels and sees at the moment. In her calculus of life, her deadness of spirit, coldness of heart, and distance from heaven are met in One whose promise endures in this in-between time just before the Consummation.

Rossetti's hymn celebrates the paradox St John sees. His vision is of a Lamb, marked by death and suffering, yet bearing the symbols of omnipotence and omniscience.

The seven horns are a picture of unimaginable might, the seven eyes a holy-spirited picture of wisdom that tells the end from the beginning. William Barclay notes how Revelation 5:6 shows simultaneously “the majesty and the meekness” of Christ, the ▶

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Lamb of God.

Here, indeed, is a truly tremendous picture of Christ. He is the fulfillment of all the hopes and dreams of Israel, for He is the Lion of Judah and the Root of David. He is the one whose sacrifice availed for men, and who still bears the marks of it in the heavenly places. But the tragedy has turned to triumph, and the shame has turned to glory, and He is the one with all power and all knowledge, whose all-conquering might none can withstand, and whose all-seeing eye none can escape.

In these two stanzas Rossetti is refreshingly honest about the limit of her experience. She falls short, but the Lamb does not. John was able to see, if only for a moment, not some fantastical imagining of what we wish would be, but a glimpse of what is, even if we have not seen it yet. “Now it is blessed to believe without seeing,” Rossetti says, “then blessed will it be to see what unseen we have believed.” In this she seems to echo the yearning of an earlier hymn writer, Anne Steele (1716-1778):

*Thou lovely source of true delight
Whom I unseen adore
Unveil Thy beauties to my sight
That I might love Thee more.*

In the meantime, like the true believer she is, Rossetti lives as if it is true, and finds it so. This is the living faith from which her hymn is breathed.

Rossetti does not merely accept that Christ will provide a place for her, a dwelling place in his Father’s house (John 14:1-3). She wants more than this, wanting instead the object of her heart’s desire to be her dwelling, her place of safety and warmth, her final home.

In A Broken World, Quiet Confidence

Recently I shared an unhurried conversation with a young man over a glass of fine single malt. We talked of life and art, marriage and faith, knowing and doubt. He mentioned that the Christians he worked with

spoke often of God’s presence, and that he found that troubling, for he did not share the experience. I told him that in this regard my life would be best summarized as an experience of God’s absence. Not that I disbelieve in his presence with me, because I know his promise to be with his people (as in for example, Matthew 28:20 and John 14:17), and I believe it to be true. I even occasionally notice evidences of grace in my life I can only attribute to him, and I’m grateful. But feeling his presence or sensing his nearness? I thought so a few times, but by the time the experience faded I was no longer certain that the moment was anything more than a happy confluence of hormones, good weather, and the personal comfort afforded to ordinary middle-class Americans.

Like my young friend, I find a kindred spirit not in the triumphant testimonies I hear in church, but in the poetry of Christina Rossetti. I share her quiet confidence but am always keenly aware of the brokenness of the world—which always makes even my deepest yearnings suspect.

Tom Waits’ “Dirt in the Ground” (*Glitter and Doom*) expresses a postmodern vision of the end, but the horizon is far more limited than what Christina Rossetti knew. Though Waits appeals to Scripture he ▶



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stops too soon, so there is no lamb, no sacrifice, and no final home.

*What does it matter, a dream of love
Or a dream of lies
We're all gonna be in the same place
When we die
Your spirit don't leave knowing
Your face or your name
And the wind through your bones
Is all that remains
And we're all gonna be
We're all gonna be
Just dirt in the ground*

*Now Cain slew Abel
He killed him with a stone
The sky cracked open
And the thunder groaned
Along a river of flesh
Can these dry bones live?
Ask a king or a beggar
And the answer they'll give
Is we're all gonna be
Yea yeah*

*We're all gonna be just
Dirt in the ground*

It's either/or. If St John is merely a religious mystic, in an exile so harsh that sensory deprivation drives him to see strange apparitions that do not count, then Waits is correct and all that remains is dirt in the ground. But if the apostle caught a glimpse of the reality that undergirds all that is, as Christina Rossetti believed (as do I), then there is more and the more is more than we could possibly have hoped for on our own.

Rossetti glimpsed St John's glimpse, and "None Other Lamb" was the result. I sing her hymn, and find not just an authentic expression of the gospel, but the very deepest yearning of my heart. ❀



William Holman Hunt, "The Scapegoat", Public Domain

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The Reason for God: Belief in an Age of Skepticism by Timothy Keller, (New York, NY: Dutton; 2008), 32-33; Margaret Drabble, ed.

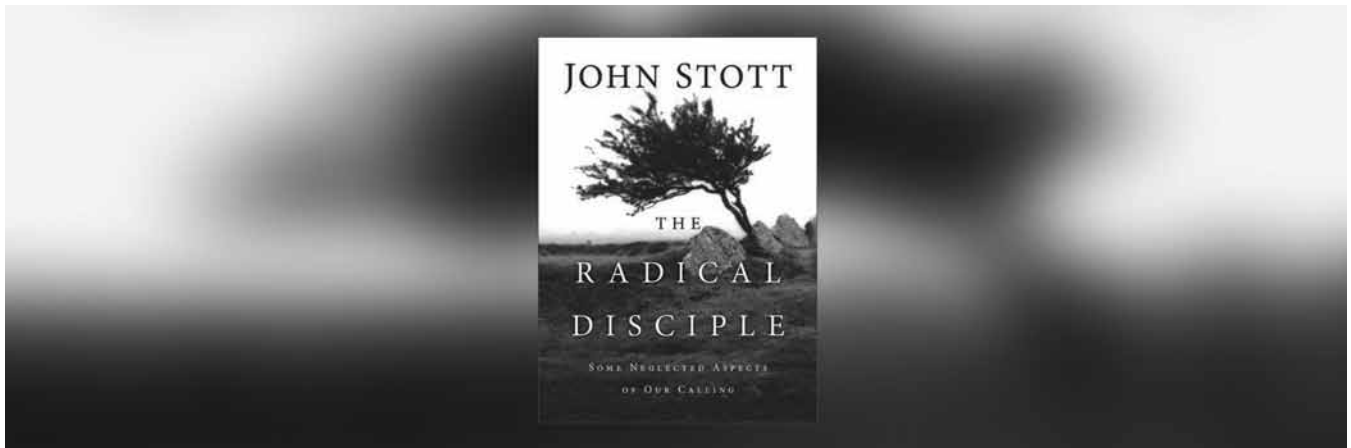
The Oxford Companion to English Literature (New York, NY: Oxford University Press; 1985), 785-786, 848-849. All biographical information on Rossetti in this paper, unless noted otherwise, is taken from this source;

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Glitter and Doom Live by Tom Waits (Los Angeles, CA: Anti, Inc; 2009).

Text Denis Haack

Final Words of Wisdom



Over the years, John Stott's writings have nourished my soul. His faithful exposition of Scripture, always beguilingly simple, never fails to engage my heart and mind, and always spurs me on to greater obedience and fuller adoration. Now he comes to old age, and he ends his life as he lived it, namely, well.

In *The Radical Disciple: Some Neglected Aspects of Our Calling*, Stott reflects biblically on eight issues, and then closes his public ministry with a word of Farewell. This slim volume is good reading, a lovely immersion into the truth of God's revelation in Scripture, full of wise words for those who find themselves on a pilgrimage through a dark world towards a City filled with divine light. The brief excerpts that follow are not intended as summaries of Stott's chapters, but as appetizers intended to stimulate you to read the book.

Nonconformity. "We are not to be like reeds shaken by the wind, bowing down before gusts of public opinion, but as immovable as rocks in a mountain stream. We are not to be like fish floating with the stream (for 'only dead fish swim with the current,' as Malcolm Muggeridge put it), but to swim against the stream, even against the cultural mainstream" [p. 27].

Christlikeness. "Why is it that our evangelistic efforts are often fraught with failure? Several reasons may be given, and I must not oversimplify, but one main reason is that we don't look like the Christ we proclaim" [p. 35-36].

Maturity. "When I was traveling in the 1990s in the interests of the Langham Partnership International, I would often ask an audience how they would summarize the Christian scene in the world today. I would receive a variety of answers. But when invited to give an answer to my own question, I would sum it up in just three words, namely, 'growth without depth'" [p. 38]. ▸

Creation Care. “We human beings find our humanness not only in relation to the earth, which we are to transform, but in relation to God whom we are to worship; not only in relation to the creation, but especially in relation to the Creator. God intends our work to be an expression of our worship, and our care of the creation to reflect our love for the Creator. Only then, whatever we do, in word or deed, shall we be able to do it to the glory of God (1 Corinthians 10:31” [p. 54].

Simplicity. Quoting from *An Evangelical Commitment to Simple Life-Style*: “So then, having been freed by the sacrifice of our Lord Jesus Christ, in obedience to his call, in heartfelt compassion for the poor, in concern for evangelism, development and justice, and in solemn anticipation of the Day of Judgment, we humbly commit ourselves to develop a just and simple life-style, to support one another in it, and to encourage others to join us in this commitment” [p. 82].

Balance. “We have followed Peter in the six metaphors which go to make up the portrait he paints of the disciple [in 1 Peter 2:1-17]. Here they are again: as newborn babies we are called to growth, as living stones to fellowship, as holy priests to worship, as God’s own people to witness, as aliens and strangers to holiness, as servants of God to citizenship. This is a beautifully comprehensive and balanced portrait” [p. 97-98].

Dependence. “I sometimes hear old people, including Christian people who should know better, say, ‘I don’t want to be a burden to anyone else. I’m happy to carry on living as long as I can look after myself, but as soon as I become a burden I would rather die.’ But this is wrong. We are all designed to be a burden to others. You are designed to be a burden to me and I am designed to be a burden to you. And the life of the family, including the life of the local church family, should be one of ‘mutual burdensomeness.’” [p. 110].

Death. “Death is unnatural and unpleasant. In one sense it presents us with a terrible finality. Death is the end. Yet in every situation death is the way to life. So if we want to live we must die. And we will be willing to die only when we see the glories of the life to which death leads. This is the radical, paradoxical Christian perspective” [p. 133].

Farewell! “As I lay down my pen for the last time (literally, since I confess I am not computerized) at the age of eighty-eight, I venture to send this valedictory message to my readers. I am grateful for your encouragement, for many of you have written to me.

“Looking ahead, none of us of course knows what the future of printing and publishing may be. But I myself am confident that the future of books is assured and that, though they will be complemented, they will never be altogether replaced. For there is something unique about books. Our favorite books become very precious to us and we even develop with them an almost living and affectionate relationship. Is it an altogether fanciful fact that we handle, stroke and even smell them as tokens of our esteem and affection? I am not referring only to an author’s feeling for what he has written, but to all readers and their library. I have made it a rule not to quote from any book unless I have first handled it. So let me urge you to keep reading, and encourage your relatives and friends to do the same. For this is a much neglected means of grace... Once again, farewell!” [p. 136-137].

In none of these chapters does Stott say all that needs to be said on the topic, and many are explored in more detail in his previous publications. *The Radical Disciple* is more like what I imagine he might say to a young friend who is accompanying him to the place of his retirement, and who has the chance to listen in on what Stott is most exercised to pray for when he thinks of the church he has served so faithfully for so many years. It isn’t the final word, perhaps, but it’s a timely one, and a word of wisdom worth heeding. ❀

Book Recommended

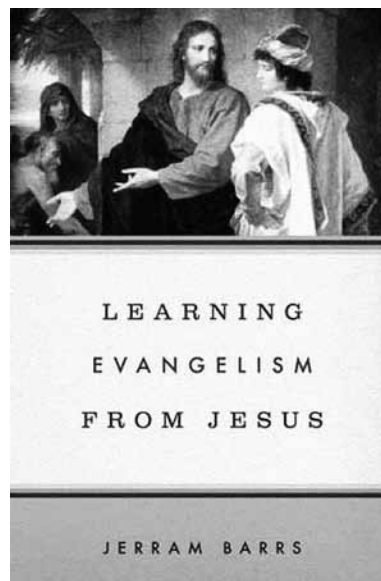
The Radical Disciple: Some Neglected Aspects of Our Calling
by John Stott (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press; 2010) 137 pp. + notes.

Who do you follow, Who are you like?

The longer I am an elder in the church the more dismayed I am at so many of the ideas held by Christians about evangelism. Some simply fear it, having been convinced it is a technique or method to use, dropping it into conversations with the dread that whatever happens next will be bad. Some insist it needs to include drawing a line about sin, ignoring the fact that the Scriptures forbid our doing so and insist it is the Holy Spirit's job, not ours, to open people to the realization that they have shame and guilt that needs atonement. And some argue that such direct evangelism is counterproductive, and so opt for relational evangelism, hoping that their friendships will somehow communicate the truth of the cross to non-Christian friends.

A child of missionaries, I have been around evangelism my whole life. It was one factor in pushing me into a period of dark doubt that almost ended in unbelief.

It was at this point in my life that I stumbled upon L'Abri through the books of Francis Schaeffer. I did not latch onto his writing hoping to learn about evangelism, a topic that I was not only supremely disinterested in but that filled me with disgust. I latched onto Schaeffer's writings because for the first time Christian faith was seen as having something of significance to say to all of life and culture, as offering true answers to the deepest questions of meaning, beauty, life and death. It wasn't until much later that I realized that in the process Schaeffer also taught me about evangelism. That it isn't a program or a technique, a thing to do because you feel guilty, or an event to be planned. It's rather a part of a life well lived, in friendships of growing intimacy, as the things that matter most are talked about and laughed about and as questions are asked so that hearts are shared, in all their glorious ruin. And later I realized that instead of being taught evangelism, I had been taught Christ—and there is the difference.



In *Learning Evangelism from Jesus* long-time L'Abri Worker and now Covenant Seminary professor Jerram Barrs walks through the Gospels to let us watch Jesus interact with people, some devout, some questioning, and all lost. His expositions are simple, direct, careful to honor the text, and always with an eye to letting us see Jesus more clearly so we can know what following him actually looks like.

Learning Evangelism from Jesus is for people who love Christ and want to be like him. It's for people who are sick and tired of evangelism, or scared of it, or disgusted by it, or convinced that it can't be done except by fundamentalists who mistake the proper rejection extended to rude, unkind, judgmental strangers as persecution.

Full disclosure, here: Jerram is my friend. I have one son, named after him. Few people I know are as qualified to write this book, because few are as gentle, as compassionate, as winsome, as compelling, as unthreatening, as... well, as like Christ.

Please read *Learning Evangelism from Jesus*, and work through the study questions that are provided for each chapter. Like what the book teaches about evangelism, some of the questions will surprise you. ✱

Book Recommended

Learning Evangelism from Jesus by Jerram Barrs (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books; 2009) 251 pp. + study guide + notes + indices.

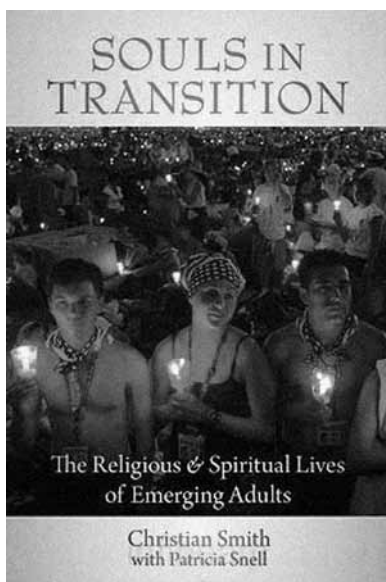
Text **Denis Haack**

What Postmoderns Believe

Christian Smith has been following a nation-wide sample of teenagers, using surveys and extensive interviews to track their religious beliefs and values. In 2005 he reported his findings on 13-17 year-olds in *Soul Searching*, an insightful and probing study. The population he has been following is now 18-23 years old, and he summarizes his updated findings in *Souls in Transition*.

Scholarly, carefully researched, and clearly written, *Souls in Transition* should be read and discussed by Christians who are concerned for the spiritual welfare of the postmodern generation. If I had my way I'd make it required reading for parents, church elders, pastors, teachers, and youth workers.

Some of the book thoughtfully summarizes the findings of the research that has been so painstakingly pursued over the years. Some of it reports the data itself, along with case studies to allow the numbers and averages to take on flesh and blood. And throughout Smith reaches conclusions, some of which are surprising, some of which put words to trends many of us had already sensed, and some of which challenge long-held assumptions about faith and religion in our increasingly pluralistic postmodern world.



What becomes increasingly clear is that Christians serious about their faith will need to think beyond the normal clichés which tend to shape the way we seek to pass the faith on to the next generation. Some of us simply keep doing whatever we've always been doing, forgetting that the approach was developed at a time long past and in a culture much different from our own. Others set to work with a desire to strengthen the foundations, purify the doctrine, and be uncompromising about the truth. Understandable, as far as it goes, but this approach tends in the end to pacify an older generation more than it convinces a younger unchurched generation with a faith largely devoid of mystery and any resonance with daily life. In other cases the tendency is to be "relevant," which becomes a catchword for updating things to fit with the sensibilities and aesthetics of a world immersed in popular culture. Again, this can be appreciated for at least understanding that the world doesn't stand still, but the result is often a faith gutted of its ancient roots, accompanied by shallow music, self-centered worship, and a perverse pride in having thrown over the beliefs and traditions of previous generations.

None of this is sufficient, nor biblical for that matter. Christians must be willing to take the incarnation seriously and follow Christ into a fallen world to befriend and care for unlovable, marginalized, and lost people, seeking to flesh out a demonstration of God grace and presence in every aspect of life and culture. We must cultivate discernment, unhurried lifestyles of hospitality and listening, and be quiet demonstrations of a community of faithfulness that is both countercultural and profoundly human.

Soul Searching can help us in our yearning to be faithful. Smith has essentially spent untold hours talking to postmoderns and now writes up what he has heard so we can learn from his careful listening. Let all those who have ears, hear. ❀

Resource

Souls in Transition: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of Emerging Adults by Christian Smith (with Patricia Snell) (New York, NY: Oxford University Press; 2009) 299 pp. + notes + appendices + Index.

A black and white photograph of a manuscript page from the Voynich manuscript. The page is filled with dense, handwritten text in an unknown script. Several large, irregular, light-colored patches are visible, obscuring portions of the text. A white, wavy line is drawn across the right side of the page, with small, handwritten labels in a modern script placed along it. These labels include "write", "the other hand, the rest of", "you have", "written a", "book on", "known", "the", "that", "drama of", "new", "the", "into", "series", "new", "program, and", "on the changes made", "the", "book", and "continue".