

Critique

Helping Christians Develop Skill in Discernment

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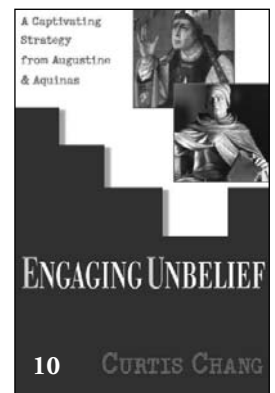
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Editor's Note

Discernment means being choosy.

I stirred up a bit of controversy by a comment I made in answer to a question following my lecture at the 2001 Rochester L'Abri Conference. My assignment as a speaker had been to reflect on some of the images of technology and humanity depicted in film. I chose to concentrate on three films which are of significance both in the history of film, and in reflecting and molding the ideas and values, hopes and fears of entire generations. I argued that *2001: a space odyssey*, *Blade Runner*, and *The Matrix* raise important questions about technology and humanity—questions that are worth asking and discussing.

After my lecture a woman asked if I had seen any of the apocalyptic films being produced by the Christian community, such as *Left Behind*. I don't remember my exact words, but what I tried to say was simply that I hadn't seen them and had no interest in doing so. That my time is very limited, and that therefore I try to choose carefully which films I watch. If I have reason to believe—from critics and from trusted and discerning friends—that some film isn't worth viewing, I tend to skip it, and unfortunately these films fall into that category.

The response to my answer was interesting. Older folks questioned my position, and said I wasn't being very open-minded. One wondered why I wouldn't see those films but then choose to lecture on movies that are R-rated. Someone else suggested that I should watch them, and then give a lecture on the difference between film as art and film as propaganda. Younger listeners, on the other hand, said it was refreshing to hear someone say we weren't obligated to view a film just because it was produced by fellow believers. They are embarrassed by the stuff which masquerades as art in the Christian community, they told me. It alienates their generation from the gospel, and they want nothing to do with it.

I'm really very grateful to the friends who

spoke to me after my lecture. Developing skill in discernment happens primarily in community, as different people with different gifts and different concerns seek to apply the truth of Scripture to life and culture. Even when we disagree we can sharpen one another's thinking, and that, in this broken and fragmented world, is a very precious grace indeed.

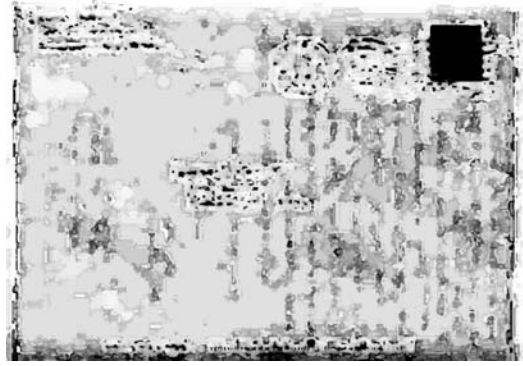
Being discerning includes choosing, out of the myriad possibilities before us, which films we will view, which books we will read, which concerts we will attend, which tapes we will listen to—the list could go on and on. Why would we waste precious time with things not worth our time? Especially when we don't have enough time to get to all the good ones? I realize, of course, that we won't be able to identify the time-wasters perfectly, but that doesn't mean we shouldn't try. By God's grace we can develop means by which to make these initial choices thoughtfully. If I read all the books sent to me each year I would have no time to see any films at all, nor to read many of the books I've already identified as ones I need to read. The question should not be whether this is a legitimate part of discernment for the Christian, but whether we have developed a good method by which to make our initial choices.

I hadn't thought of the idea of developing material on the difference between film as art and film as propaganda. That's a good idea, and one I'm planning to pursue. I also think that it might be good to do some work on the films being produced by Christians today, which I also plan to do. And that means I'll be seeing *Left Behind* after all.

Discernment means being choosy and being willing to reevaluate our choices. ■

~Denis D. Haack

Dialogue



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

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

Correction to *Critique* #9 - 2000

The Cyber Hymnal website (p. 16) has moved. The correct address is:

<http://www.cyberhymnal.org/>

Critique Reprints

available from Ransom Fellowship

These articles have appeared in past *Critique* issues, either in part or in a series, and are available as reprints. Denis Haack's book is also available. See ordering information below.

HOW TO STUDY THE BIBLE by Denis Haack

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Questions About Doubt

An issue in need of discernment.

Reflect on the following questions. As you do, think about the extent you struggle with doubt. Think about how there are some believers who would answer these questions very differently than you do. And think about whether you understand doubt, and can talk about it Christianly in terms of its relationship to knowledge, faith, and unbelief.

“Have you ever felt intellectually embarrassed to admit that you were a Christian?”

“Do you ever feel somewhat schizophrenic about the relationship of your faith to the rest of your life? Do you find yourself compartmentalizing different aspects so that tensions between them are minimized?”

“If given a chance between sharing an island with Jerry Falwell and Dove Music Award winner Steve Green on the one hand, or with Jerry Seinfeld and

Grammy Award winner Santana on the other, does one upset your stomach less than the other?*

“Do you ever think, ‘Those close to me would be shocked if they knew some of the doubts I have about my faith?’ Do you ever scare even yourself with your doubts?”

Unfortunately the church speaks only rarely about doubt, and often in terms that cause doubters to hide their questions rather than resolve them.

“Have you sometimes felt like walking out of a church service because it seemed contrived and empty?”

“How often do you find yourself at odds with your surroundings—intellectually, socially, spiritually? Is there part of

you which feels out of place no matter where you are?”

“On a controversial issue are you most likely to agree totally with one side, find all sides partially persuasive and attractive, or find yourself saying, ‘A plague on all your houses?’”

“Someone at work says, ‘Christians check their brains at the door of the church every Sunday, and most of them don’t bother to pick them up on the way out.’ Do you find yourself objecting or agreeing?”

“Someone at church says, ‘The humanists are destroying our country. We have got to elect Christian politicians and get this country back to God like it used to be.’ Are you more likely to say ‘Amen’ or ‘Baloney’—or to grunt and change the subject?”

“Do you personally find a high degree of paradox in matters of faith, or does it seem primarily reasonable and logical?”

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. To what extent do you relate to the questions in the above list? How would you characterize yourself in terms of doubt?
2. “The world of the Christian is not a fairy-tale, make-believe world, question-free and problem-proof, but a world where doubt is never far from faith’s shoulder,” Os Guinness writes. “If we constantly doubt what we believe and always believe-yet-doubt, we will be in danger of undermining our personal integrity, if not our stability. But if ours is an examined faith, we should be unafraid to doubt. If doubt is eventually justified, we were believing what clearly was not worth believing. But if doubt is answered, our faith has grown stronger still. It knows God more certainly and it can enjoy God more deeply. Obviously, then, each one of us should understand doubt for God’s sake and for ours.” How do you respond to this?
3. Do you feel comfortable sharing your doubts within your Christian community? Why or why not? Since the Christian community should be a place which warmly welcomes doubters, providing a safe place to search for answers to honest questions, what is the problem? What can we do to help our Christian community be a safe haven for doubters?
4. How would you define doubt? How would you define its relationship to faith? To knowledge? To unbelief? Can you define them in terms an unbeliever can relate to? To what extent do you understand doubt? What plans should you make?

“How confident are you that you know God’s desires regarding the specific political, social, and moral issues which face our society?

“Would it bother you more to be thought a hypocrite or a cynic? Why?

“Is it more immoral to act incorrectly in a significant situation or not to act at all?”

Just about everything about doubt is unsettling. It’s unsettling to doubt, especially if the stakes are high and if we find ourselves doubting when everyone else seems content. It’s unsettling to discover that sometimes our very best reasoning isn’t sufficient to resolve our doubts, or that the search for answers simply increases our uncertainty. It’s unsettling to meet Christians who never seem to doubt, and who are unsettled instead by the fact we doubt things they consider settled. And it’s unsettling when non-Christian friends hesitate to believe, and raise an endless stream of doubts instead.

Unfortunately the church speaks only rarely about doubt, and often in terms that cause doubters to hide their doubts rather than resolve them. “Christianity places a premium on the absolute truthfulness and trustworthiness of God, so understanding doubt is extremely important to a Christian,” Os Guinness writes. “Of course, faith is much more than the absence of doubt, but to understand doubt is to have a key to a quiet heart and a quiet mind. Anyone who believes anything will automatically know something about doubt. But the person who knows why he believes is also in a position to discover why

he doubts. The Christian should be such a person.”

Without doubt, doubt and its relationship to faith, knowledge, and unbelief is worth some careful reflection by the discerning Christian. Understanding doubt is important not only for our own faith, but also if we expect to help others come to faith and resolve their doubts biblically. ■

~Denis D. Haack

Recommended reading:

God in the Dark: The Assurance of Faith Beyond a Shadow

of Doubt by Os Guinness (Westchester, IL: Crossway Books; 1996) 224 pp.

Sources:

Guinness from *In Two Minds: The Dilemma of Doubt and How to Resolve It* by Os Guinness (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press; 1976) p. 15-16. Questions adapted from *The Myth of Certainty: The Reflective Christian and the Risk of Commitment* by Daniel Taylor (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press; 1986, 1992) p. 14-15.

*Some of the names in this question were changed for this article.

Discernment Reminder

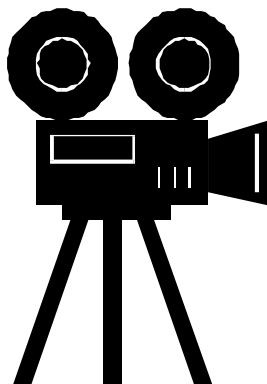
Being discerning is a process which involves answering four simple but probing questions. The questions are simple enough to be taught to children; they are probing enough to help us get to the heart of whatever we are trying to reflect on as Christians. The questions can be learned and used, until with practice they become a habit, a way of biblically interacting with ideas and issues in a fallen world.

Discernment Questions for Believers

1. *What’s being said?* What is the nature of the challenge confronting us? What ideas are presented, or are implicit as assumptions? What’s really at stake, or being requested, or argued for, or disputed?
What are the essential or foundational issues? What are the secondary or less important issues? It’s vital to distinguish between the two, so we don’t get distracted by things that may have significance, but are not of primary importance.
2. *What is a Christian response?* Notice we are concerned with “a” Christian response, not necessarily “the” Christian response. Minds renewed by the truth of God’s word may not agree at every point on every issue, and there is room for diversity among the people of God.
Where do we agree? Where do we disagree? Seek points of agreement before identifying areas of disagreement. Christians have the unfortunate reputation of being unnecessarily negative and disagreeable, unlike Paul, who in Athens began his discussion with a pagan audience by finding a point of contact with them.
3. *Why do we believe the Christian position?* What reasons would we give?
4. *How can we talk about and live out the truth creatively and winsomely in a pluralistic culture?* Since most of our friends and neighbors see things differently, how can we make sure we are being understood? ■

by Denis D. Haack.

Dysfunction Junction



A review of *You Can Count on Me*

by Drew Trotter, Jr.

Film Credits

Starring:

Laura Linney
(Samantha 'Sammy')

Mark Ruffalo
(Terry Prescott)

Matthew Broderick
(Brian Everett)

Rory Culkin
(Rudy)

Kenneth Lonergan
(Ron)

Halley Feiffer
(Amy)

Director:

Kenneth Lonergan

Screenwriter:

Kenneth Lonergan

Producers:

Martin Scorsese
Steve Carlis
Donald C. Carter
Morton Swinsky
and others

Music:

Lesley Barber

Cinematography:

Stephen Kazmierski

Costumes:

Melissa Toth

109 minutes

Rated R for language,
some drug use and a
scene of sexuality.

Some movies settle for being “light entertainment;” others ask profound questions about “life, the universe, and everything” from the first frame. We seem to live in a time when light entertainment is defined by the grotesque and repulsive (cf. *There’s Something About Mary* or *Me, Myself and Irene*), but the movie industry cannot give the viewing public enough of it nevertheless. On the other hand, movies with depth are as common as snowstorms on a summer’s day in Florida. One tires of waiting for them and even when they arrive, the films are often pretentious and shallow since they build on the uncertain foundations of humanism, absurdism or both. Just when you are ready to throw in the towel, a movie comes along that is both funny and poignant, reflective and enjoyable. *You Can Count on Me* is just such a film.

Written, directed and even acted in by Kenneth Lonergan, *Count* is built around the brief visit of a rootless, undisciplined twenty-something to the homestead where his sister and her son live in upstate New York. Orphaned in childhood, Samantha and Terry Prescott have a complicated but deep love for each other that forms the heart of the movie, and a subplot of the growing relationship between Terry and Samantha’s son Rudy movingly mirrors that love, while developing its own themes.

Count could have been the sappy telling of another “relationship” story where two lonely, dysfunctional characters

find true happiness in the end by learning to live with each other and triumphing over the world together. But none of that for Lonergan. Sammy and Terry will not so easily give up their stubborn, independent, coping mechanisms, hard won in starkly different ways, and the film rocks achingly back and forth between their unselfish love and concern for each other and their self-centered adherence to themselves and their contempt for each other’s choices.

Sammy, played by Laura Linney who has been nominated for an Oscar for her performance, is a loan officer at a bank. An avid church-goer, devoted mother, and trustworthy employee, she nevertheless has learned to handle the demons of her pointless life by avoidance, finding the comfort of sex and a cigarette the only means of really relaxing.

Mark Ruffalo plays her brother Terry, a drifter and his sister’s polar opposite. In and out of jail, jobs and even states (he has lived vaguely in the South and in Alaska), Terry stubbornly holds to a philosophy of movement. He avoids anything that even smells of permanence.

If the movie had stayed there, it would have been like too many others since *Easy Rider*: existential loners find each other and, though they remain in their despair, they at least have each other. Yawn.

But *Count* does something radically different for this secular age: it introduces the question of God. He is creeping back



into film after a long absence; comedies like *Keeping the Faith* and *Dogma* and action pictures like *Stigma* and *End of Days* are becoming common. But dramas—"real life" pictures as it were—have lagged behind; *The Big Kahuna* comes to mind, but little else.

Perhaps an unbelieving Hollywood doesn't know how to even begin to write religion, but it is a gap that the movie-going public seems to want closed. Even Bergman's *The Seventh Seal* is being shown at a movie club in my hometown, a sure sign both of interest and the lack of



This movie gives us a window into that silent majority out there who really do live lives of quiet desperation as they go about their daily tasks of work, love, eating and praying.

substantial films to satisfy that interest.

But in three scenes of extraordinary, quiet power, *You Can Count On Me* portrays many of the questions people really ask of their pastors (and comments that are made to them by those who don't believe). The questions of God's existence gently invade the story and force the viewer to ask themselves and the characters: What does matter in life? Where do I find a "still point in a turning world?" Are there answers to the mess I find

myself trapped in?

Lonergan was nominated for an Academy Award for his script. Clear, simple editing, direction and camera work also help create an atmosphere of reality in small town America, a quality often missing in Hollywood these days. Even independent, small, relational films are set in exotic climates like the New Mexico of *The Tao of Steve* for instance. But this movie feels like you and me. It gives us a window into that silent majority out there who really do live lives of quiet desperation as they go about their daily tasks of work, love, eating and praying. And *Count* offers no pat answers for that despair. As we all know, neither does life.

This review will not go further; you must take a friend and discuss with them whether the responses the movie gives are true, realistic, neither or both. But go at all costs; you won't find a more challenging film for discussing the big questions of life. ■

~Drew Trotter

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



QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. The character of the Methodist pastor Ron, played by the writer/director of the movie Ken Lonergan, is ambivalent at best. Do you think the movie respects or satirizes him? How would you change him if you could rewrite the script?
2. What is Terry's response to Ron? Do you identify with him in that response? In what ways?
3. What role does hypocrisy play in the movie? Who is more hypocritical, Sammy or Terry? Why?
4. What is missing from the movie's portrayal of Christianity that you would like to see included? How could your suggestion have been incorporated?
5. What do you think the ending signifies?
6. What does the title tell you about the theme(s) of the film and/or about its maker, Ken Lonergan?

A Transcendent Novel

I first heard of *Foreign Bodies*, a novel by a young Oxford educated Singaporean writer now living in New York, in a review in *re:generation*. Andy Crouch, the author of the review, is editor of *re:generation* and on staff with InterVarsity Christian Fellowship at Harvard University. What he wrote so piqued my interest, I logged on and ordered a copy of Hwee Hwee Tan's book.

Foreign Bodies "is an astonishing first novel that can best be described," he wrote, "as a cross between Douglas Coupland and Gerard Manley Hopkins." If you are unfamiliar with these two names, suffice it to say that seeing them linked like this is hardly a common occurrence. Coupland is the quintessential postmodern author known primarily for his books *Generation X* (1991) and *Life After God* (1994): "ME-ISM: A search by an individual, in the absence of training in traditional religious tenets, to formulate a personally tailored religion by himself. Most frequently a mishmash of reincarnation, personal dialogue with a nebulously defined god figure, naturalism, and karmic eye-for-eye attitudes."

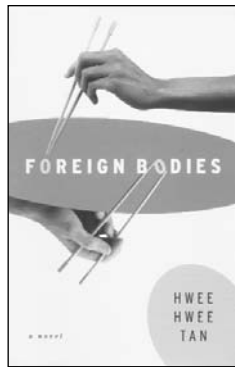
Hopkins (1844-1889), on the other hand, was a Jesuit poet for whom the transcendence and glory of God defined all of life and reality:

"Glory be to God for dappled things
"For skies of couple-color as a brindled cow
"For rose-moles all in stipple upon trout
that swim..."

Unlikely as this comparison seems, Crouch is correct: *Foreign Bodies* is a postmodern novel in which the transcen-

dence of God in the gospel of Jesus breaks through into the lives of its characters, bringing hope and redemption.

As Crouch acknowledges, however, the comparison with Hopkins is not fully apt, since *Foreign Bodies* is not a Catholic, but rather a Protestant story. "If Douglas Coupland's characters embody life after God departs, these characters embody life after God arrives," Crouch says. "I will give this book to my non-believing



A postmodern novel in which the transcendence of God breaks through.

friends to explain what being 'born again' means, and I will return many times to the high points of Tan's narrative to be reminded myself."

Don't expect to find *Foreign Bodies* in many religious bookstores; though written from a distinctly Christian perspective, it is not sanitized. Just as Tan does not shirk in telling the truth of the gospel, she does not shirk in telling the truth about how people tend to talk in a post-Christian world.

The story in *Foreign Bodies* has three main characters, and each chapter is written from the perspective of either Mei, Andy, or Eugene. Andy is accused of masterminding a gambling ring in Singapore, and Mei, an attorney, has nine days to prove his innocence. Eugene, a friend from the Netherlands, flies in to be with them. *Foreign Bodies* is not merely about a search for justice; it's about the big questions of life, the search for significance and relationship in a world in which the wages of sin—our own, and our father's—seem, at times, to strangle

hope. And then, against all odds, the gospel brings redemption and hope, even in the midst of dark times.

Foreign Bodies is a good read, witty and insightful, and though in a style that may not appeal to every reader, is written by someone who clearly loves to write well. For example, Mei's mother hosts karaoke parties for her middle-aged friends in their flat. "Trust me," Mei says, "you haven't seen something truly Satanic until you've seen your mother belting out

'Chain Reaction' complete with Diana Ross hand actions and bum wiggles." With Hwee Hwee Tan's characters we are brought into the world of the postmodern generation, with its unfailing sense of irony and love of pop culture. And once there, we discover once again how much God loves the world.

We recommend *Foreign Bodies* to you. Ms. Tan's second novel, *Mammon, Inc.*, is scheduled for publication in May 2001. ■

~Denis D. Haack

Sources:

Crouch from "Life After God, With a Twist" by Andy Crouch in *re:generation quarterly* (issue #4.4) pp. 36-37; Coupland from *Generation X: Tales for an Accelerated Culture* by Douglas Coupland (New York, NY: St. Martin's Press; 1991) p. 126; Hopkins poetry from "Pied Beauty" in *An Introduction to Literature: Poetry* edited by Edmond L. Volpe and Marvin Magalaner (New York, NY: Random House; 1967) p. 311.

Fiction reviewed:

Foreign Bodies by Hwee Hwee Tan (New York, NY: Persea Books; 1997) 279 pp.

Knowing & Numbers

The beauty of “I don’t know”

One of the myths prevalent among Christians is that our witness to Christ is compromised if some non-Christian asks a question for which we have no answer. Or that we will have failed as a Bible study leader if someone proposes some unorthodox interpretation for which we have no immediate and compelling response. “What was I supposed to say to that?” I am sometimes asked by believers who tell me how they were at a loss for words. Why not say, “I don’t know?” I always reply.

Don’t get me wrong. We need to have reasons for our faith, and honest questions deserve honest answers. But where did we get the idea it had to be instant or not at all? Besides, isn’t “I don’t know” an honest answer?

We are finite creatures and that means there will always be more to knowing than we will ever know. Honesty is a precious commodity in a culture where spin has been elevated to an art form. “By giving yourself permission not to know,” Richard Wurman writes, “you can overcome the fear that your ignorance will be discovered. When you can admit to ignorance, you will realize that if ignorance isn’t exactly bliss, it is an ideal state from which to learn.” Perhaps the problem is that the model we have in mind is that of an expert leading a workshop, or a debater winning an argument instead of friends having a conversation. We can ask questions of our questioner, and promise to do some research. Better yet, we can research it with them, so that the pursuit of truth is shared.

People aren’t looking for experts, and nobody enjoys being vanquished by a debater. People are yearning for community—for real relationships with real people. “True Christianity produces beauty as well as truth,” Francis Schaeffer said, “especially in the specific areas of human relationships.” And few things are more beautiful than an

honesty which is made possible by knowing that my calling isn’t to be an expert nor a debater, but to love God with my entire being and to love my neighbor in a way fitting for someone created in the very image of God.

~Denis D. Haack

Source:

Wurman quoted in *The Overload Syndrome: Learning to Live Within Your Limits* by Richard A. Swenson (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress; 1998) p. 141. Schaeffer from *2 Contents, 2 Realities* by Francis A. Schaeffer (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press; 1974) p. 23.

Numbers and such

Numbers can deceive, and we need to be discerning about statistics, but that doesn’t mean some aren’t worth noting...

AIDS

Since 1980, 83% of all deaths from AIDS have occurred in Africa.

19 out of every 20 children orphaned by AIDS lives in Africa.

An estimated 2,500 Zimbabweans die each week from AIDS.

In 1999, for each African killed by warfare, 19 died from AIDS.

Nature

Number of months two British neighbors hooted at owls at night before discovering they were hooting at each other: 12.

Average number of meteors which enter the earth’s atmosphere every year that are larger than a car: 12.

A dragonfly consumes approximately 300 mosquitoes/day.

In 1998 mosquitoes were so thick on Florida’s Key Island that swarms killed cattle. The cattle died not through blood loss, but

by suffocating after inhaling the insects.

American society

33% of Americans who believe abortion is “sometimes the best course” also believe it is murder.

It is estimated that 240,183 people could be fed for one year with the food Americans waste in one day.

Ratio of the average size of a Tokyo residence to that of an American two-car garage: 4:3.

Estimated average number of words in the written vocabulary of a 6- to 14-year-old American child in 1945: 25,000. In 2000: 10,000.

21% of Americans report being “regularly bored out of my mind.”

Christianity in Korea

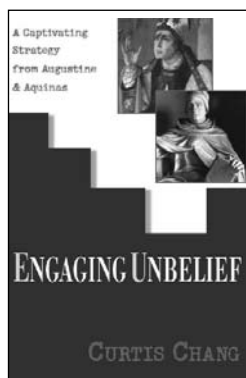
In 1889 there were 74 known Protestants in Korea and approximately 10,000 Roman Catholics. In 1930 it is estimated there were 415,000 Christians in Korea. In 1955, 1,117,000 and in 1998 over 10,000,000 professing Christians. ■

~Denis D. Haack

Sources:

Data on AIDS from April 1999 (p.15), February 1999 (p. 13), August 1999 (p. 13), and December 2000 (p. 13) *Harper’s*. On nature from October 1997 (p. 11), April 1997 (p. 13), May 1998 (p. 15) *Harper’s*, and the July 20, 1998 *St. Paul Pioneer Press* (p. F1). On American society from March 1998 (p. 13), October 1997 (p. 11), March 2000 (p. 19), August 2000 (p. 11), November 2000 (p. 13) *Harper’s*. On Korea from *Banner of Truth* (December 1998).

Reaching the Present



The first introduction many Christians were given to postmodernism came not by reading some postmodern thinker, but in a vague sense of unease.

Somehow it felt as if the ground beneath our feet was shifting. It's one thing to know that fewer neighbors share our deepest convictions and values, but it's unsettling to discover that they are attracted not to Christianity, but to alternative religions and world views. Most unsettling of all, however, is the discovery that our cherished arguments seem increasingly to fall on deaf ears. Neighbors who support abortion are unmoved by the evidence we present that the fetus is an unborn child. Many even agree, but insist abortion might still be the best course for a woman. Reasons to believe in Christ which had seemed compelling not too long ago now appear unconvincing. A few decades ago, for example, the historical evidence for Christ's resurrection often moved unbelievers to a point of decision, whereas the same evidence today usually draws little more than a shrug of the shoulders. "I'm really glad that being a Christian works for you," our friend might say. "I'm a Druid."

So, as usually happens when people feel their message isn't being heard, we've tended to either withdraw into our own world, or to become more shrill.

Curtis Chang, an InterVarsity worker ministering at Tufts, MIT and Harvard, believes the best way to understand what is happening is to realize that

we are facing an "epochal challenge." One epoch in history (modernity) is giving way to another (postmodernity). The church feels threatened, and believers "feel that the ground they have taken for granted is shifting." Chang also believes that this is not the first time in history when the church has faced such a situation. "Like us," he says, "Augustine and Aquinas faced questions such as what to proclaim to a society that previously understood itself to be 'Christian' but now seems to be fragmenting, and what to say when truths previously held to be universal are under assault from a disorienting religious pluralism."

Augustine (354-430) ministered as bishop in North Africa at a time when the fabric of society was unraveling. In the previous centuries Christianity had moved from being a small band of disciples in Jerusalem, to being a persecuted yet growing religion, to finally becoming the religion of the empire. The known world had been made Christian, and though pagan unbelievers existed, they were simply a mission field waiting to be won. Even pagans said it was a "Christian era." An "Eternal City" had been established, where peace and civilization would be maintained and where the true God was worshiped. Then Rome fell, and pagans argued that Christianity was to blame. Society began to fragment, and many found the pagan arguments to be compelling. The civilization which had been so grand was in danger of dying, and the Christian message no longer seemed to be very convincing.

Aquinas (1225-1274) faced a very different challenge in his day. After the collapse of the Roman empire, the church became the repository of literature and

knowledge. Monks kept learning alive, copying old manuscripts and teaching a largely illiterate populace. Or as Chang describes the situation, "the church did not just dominate the society, it became the society, the only society." Unbelievers were outside this society, unlearned and without knowledge, in need of both the gospel and of civilization. Then a rival civilization appeared, one with learning, art, and science. A civilization which was

This is not the first time in history when the church has faced an epochal challenge.

unimpressed by Christianity, and believed itself superior. Islam had surrounded the "Only City" of medieval Christianity, and demanded attention. And since the Christian message seemed to be unconvincing, voices once again became shrill, until fighting words gave way to actual fighting in the Crusades.

Chang is convinced that we have much to learn from these two Christian leaders who like us faced an epochal challenge. Both Augustine and Aquinas put pen to paper to respond to the challenge of their day, and Chang argues that both adopted the identical strategy. "My thesis," Chang writes in *Engaging Unbelief*, "is that both *City of God* and *Summa contra Gentiles*, although very different works written by very different men in very different epochs, have a basically similar purpose and plan." That plan or basic strategy he calls "taking every thought captive," a term Chang borrows from 2 Corinthians 10:5.

"This rhetorical strategy," Chang explains, "involves three main components: 1. *entering* the challenger's story;

By Reading the Past

2. *retelling* the story; and 3. *capturing* that retold tale within the gospel metanarrative.” By entering, Chang means that both Augustine and Aquinas made contact with their opponents by first operating within their opponents’ world view. They began the discussion by accepting their authorities and finding points of agreement which they could endorse and appreciate. Retelling involved knowing their opponent’s position better than the opponents did themselves. This allowed Augustine and Aquinas to identify the “tragic flaw” in their opponents’ position. They revealed it not by comparing it to Scripture, an authority their opponents did not accept, but in terms of the alternative world view itself. Then, in a final move, they capture their opponents’ story with the story of the gospel. They did this by showing how the story of Scripture gave meaning to their opponents’ story, and how it solved the tragic flaw while not obliterating the truth the opposing world view contained.

I am not in a position to say whether Chang has correctly read *City of God* and *Summa contra Gentiles*. Nor did I necessarily find every detail of his argument equally compelling. Nevertheless, the three-fold strategy he unpacks in *Engaging Unbelief* resonates deeply within me for four reasons: First, I see it as the strategy which Paul used in Athens on Mars Hill. As such, it is a biblical model for Christians seeking to bear witness to their faith in an increasingly pagan culture. Second, it resonates with the instructions the prophet Jeremiah wrote to the Old Testament people of God in exile in Babylon, and helps make sense of what we read concerning the lives of Daniel and his friends as they sought to live faithfully in a pagan culture. Third, it parallels what I saw Francis Schaeffer do as he talked with non-Christians, a conversation which was always filled with questions, and give and take. It was never a debate, but always a compassion-

ate attempt to see inside the other person’s world. And finally, Chang’s strategy outlines an approach which seems to make sense as I struggle to be a faithful witness to my post-modern friends and neighbors.

Even before I was finished reading *Engaging Unbelief*, I asked Margie to join me so we could discuss it together. In the heart of the book are two chapters in which Chang moves slowly through *City of God* and *Summa contra Gentiles* to show how Augustine and Aquinas followed the strategy of “taking every thought captive.” Scholars will read these chapters to see if they agree; the rest of us can read them as an illustration of what the strategy might look like.

A few things seem certain. We face an epochal challenge. The ground beneath our feet has shifted, the society we once imagined to be “Christian” is fragmenting, and rival world views and religions confidently assert

that they, rather than Christianity, should be embraced. Some believers are lapsing into an uncomfortable silence, while others grow more shrill. And unless you happen to be comfortable with this state of affairs—I certainly am not—you will agree that we need to rethink what it means to faithfully bear witness to the gospel in our generation. Passionate and thoughtful, scholarly yet accessible, *Engaging Unbelief* was written to help the Christian community do precisely that.

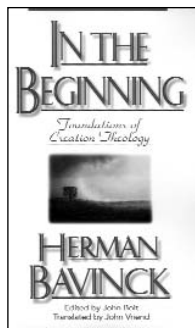
I recommend it to you warmly. ■

~Denis D. Haack

Book reviewed:

Engaging Unbelief: A Captivating Strategy from Augustine and Aquinas by Curtis Chang (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press; 2000) 173 pp. + appendix + bibliography.

In the Beginning



by Denis D. Haack.

“Knowing that God created the world around us, and ourselves as part of it,” Dr. Packer writes, “is basic to true religion.” The doctrine of Creation is not merely something to use in a debate with evolutionists, but is foundational to all that we think and do, because all that we believe as Christians is rooted in the Creation. Sadly, many Christians have failed to comprehend the full riches of this doctrine because of either an inappropriate emphasis on issues such as the age of the earth, or simply a lack of teaching on the topic. Many of the weaknesses of modern Christianity, in fact, can be traced to this lack. Herman Bavinck (1854-1921) was a Dutch theologian who unpacked the doctrine of Creation in *Reformed Dogmatics*. *In the Beginning* is the section of that four volume work dealing with Creation. This is serious theology for serious Christians, and we recommend it to you. ■

Sources: Packer from *Concise Theology* (p.22).

Book reviewed: *In the Beginning: Foundations of Creation Theology* by Herman Bavinck, edited by John Bolt and translated by John Vriend (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books; 1999) 260 pp. + bibliography.

A Poem Worth

Neuro Series

Researchers at the University of Florida Brain Institute have discovered that minutes to hours before a seizure occurs, neurons from different sites in the brain begin to oscillate in synchrony. The electrical disturbance eventually generated in the epileptic event may represent the body's attempt to restore the brain's naturally chaotic state by interrupting the buildup of organized, harmonious signals.

They have different names *tonoclonic*
 every ten years *myoclonic*
 but they are always *seizing*
 the same, I am *partial*
 never continuous *possessed*
 like the scarecrow *simple*
 Oh the thoughts *complex*
 I'd be thinking *grand*
 Chaos theory *mal*
 has recently been applied *petit*
 in predicting them

*Patient awake and cooperative
 with mild frontal headache
 during recording.*

I have no ear,
 have no ear, no ear.
 No voice. No song. I don't know
 if I'm talking too loudly.

*Low voltage
 fast beta activity
 present diffusely.*

The worst thing is this leadenness,
 to be robbed of poetry.

*Limited amounts
 of normal alpha activity.*

To have
 a brain, a body, that runs
 in fits and starts. *During photic stimulation
 flash-dependent self-limited
 spike wave complexes*

and polyspikes occur. One morning
 you turn on the radio and it
 will only play the

cheesy all-news broadcast that repeats
 every twenty minutes

*Moderately
 abnormal EEG
 with bilateral dysfunction
 and right frontal accentuation.*

I cry at work, more than once,
 and stand like a lame horse
 watching other people's careers
 speed by me. I stand punch
 drunk and eat their dust.

*Thank you for referring this patient.
 As you know, she is a 38 year old woman with
 a history of generalized tono-clonic seizures
 and partial complex seizures triggered
 by flashing lights or complicated linear patterns.*

Hurt and dizzy in
 front of my computer,
 I look at my semester plan
 for grad school. I recite it
 like a novena against stupidity.

*She also has had migraine headaches and chronic daily headaches
 for the last 15 years. The headache is stabbing
 in character. The patient has premonitory symptoms
 of distorted visual appearances and feeling giddy or happy
 prior to the onset of migraine, which is accompanied
 by photophobia, phonophobia, and nausea.*

I lie on my back in bed.
 The sheets are cool but hurt
 to look at, mismatched floral pillow cases,
 a top sheet with maroon and green
 triangles. My master's thesis on ecstasy,
 that harpy gadfly, buzzes
 my ears.

*On examination
 the patient had a normal mental status.
 Her cranial nerves were without deficit
 and her reflexes were 2+ throughout
 with down-going toes.*

I turn mean. My
 girlfriend is only a noisemaker
 and I am intolerant
 as a New Year's Day hangover

Contemplating

when I should be kissing
midnight.
They give me a new drug, ergot-
based, and I pray for Kubla Khan
visions but there is
no stately pleasure dome. I love nothing,
only cool sheets
and sick days counting down.
A petulant
migraine diva, and sometime
dumb workhorse, people
look at me sideways, and the syllables,
like dust, drift and gather.

*I saw your patient on October 11. Once
I had a sore throat and I went to the doctor.*

*Last week she was given a decongestant, Guiatex-PSE
for an upper respiratory infection. I woke up at 2 am
that night, and couldn't go back to sleep. My thoughts
ran faster and faster, louder, and stranger.*

*She became extremely confused shortly thereafter and was told to stop
all medicines. She had racing thoughts and giddiness.*
I went to the bathroom and thought I saw tiny bugs
crawling on the tile. I leaned closer and saw that it was
the colored dots on the tiles themselves,
racing around like frightened ants.

*She had no overt or witnessed seizure. She has had
a prolonged recovery for days after this reaction.*

I worked as a secretary then. All that week,
I would forget who was holding on the other line,
and kept pencilling appointments into the calendar
in the wrong places. *She had insomnia*

*and the surfaces of things were crawling
and seething but there were no visual hallucinations.*
At night I would lie on the couch and watch the plaster
of my livingroom walls ripple like tent canvas in the wind.

*There were no focal sensory or motor disturbances.
This transient encephalopathic reaction
is an uncommon but well-recognized interaction.*

*Remember, they are not dangerous to others.
The movements produced by a seizure
are almost always too vague, and
and too confused to threaten the safety of
anyone else. Be reassuring and helpful*

*as awareness returns. Confusion,
agitation, irritability, or belligerence are all
possible aftereffects.*

Used tissues, magazines, and a crumpled
blanket cluttered the chairs
of the waiting room. A woman brought me
into the MRI scan room, had me empty
my pockets and lie on the narrow bench
that protruded like a tongue from the face of the machine.
She held my head as I lay down, like the police
do when they put you handcuffed into a cruiser.
“There will be three scans, seven minutes each,” she said.
“Touchless, painless, and very noisy.” She put
a pillow under my knees. “You’re going to have to lie
very still.” A whirring noise came from all around me,
and the bench moved, shuttling me part way into the machine,
head first. She adjusted the headrest, sticking pieces
of foam between my head and the frame. She stuck cotton in my ears,
more foam in the sides, so my head was held firm, before she snapped
a frame like a catcher’s mask over my face.
“Get comfortable,” she said. “There will be three scans,
seven minutes each. Touchless, painless, and very noisy.”
I folded my arms over my stomach. She left the room
and the machine grew louder. The table moved in by increments,
pausing every six inches. The tube was just wide enough
for my elbows, pushing my hands against my body.
I felt hysterical laughter rising in my throat, wanting to
see if I could get out on my own if I tried, afraid
to find out that I couldn’t. The machine knocked like a submarine,
then faster, like a jack hammer.
Later, they let me out. I was dizzy with relief.

The radiologist sat at a console, swiveling images
of my head on video screens. He pointed out my
cartilage, spine, temporal lobes, skull, teeth. “You’re
missing your top right molar,” he said, like a fortune
teller trying to convince me of his powers. He
spun his pictures of my round, wrinkly brains.
“Pretty, pretty,” he said. “Very pretty.” ■

~Tracy Mendham

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in Brooklyn with her partner, two cats, and a dog.

Reality TV



Temptation
Island



Conservative pundits are red-faced over the shameless Machiavellianism of CBS's *Survivor* and speechless over the exploitative voyeurism of Fox's *Temptation Island*. They are shocked by the ratings these shows are commanding—nearly one in five Americans watched *Survivor* (the conclusion drew some 51 million viewers) and *Temptation Island* has nearly trumped NBC's prime-time award winner *West Wing*. Adam Buckman asks in the *New York Post*, "Will Cheap and Nasty Reality TV Never End?"

Reality TV, with its roots in documentary film and cinéma-vérité, has emerged as the hottest TV genre of the new millennium. Surrounding these shows has emerged a pop culture cottage industry—web sites, newspaper headlines, magazine profiles, and now television shows about the shows, which provides reality TV news and highlights. The megashows of the genre have captured viewers' and the media's attention—*Real World*, *Who Wants To Be a Millionaire*, *Survivor*, and now *Temptation Island*—but the list of shows airing or in production is expanding to well over thirty. This is a cultural phenomenon that won't go away.

Reality TV is inevitable because it is economically viable, technologically possible, and culturally isomorphic. It is the consequence of a congruence of trends.

Network television has in recent years been facing a crisis of identity and market share. It now competes with the fragmenting proliferation of cable channels, growth in video renting and increased Internet use. Production values have risen, but without the compensatory viewers. Amidst this downward spiral, reality TV has come as a welcome break-through. Here is a TV format that offers the potential of low production costs coupled with high viewer demand. "The average hour-long reality show costs networks about

\$400,000, a third as much as a typical new drama and a fraction of the price paid for top-rated *ER*, currently fetching a record \$13 million," explains Gary Levin in *USA Today*. The success of the new genre is based on three key ingredients: unpredictability, danger, and voyeurism. This much is certain: the genie is out of the bottle; the gladiator is in the house. It is inevitable that in the lust for market share, reality TV will only get more outrageous, more violent, and more naked.

There are reasons for this. Reality TV represents the public face of the growing web-cam world—a world comprising the fusion of narcissistic exhibitionism and cyber-voyeurism. The web cam is a small digital or video camera that broadcasts its images over the Internet. Over 26,000 web-cam sites are instantly available through a computer and high-speed Internet access. EarthCam.com, a search engine for web-cam sites, posts fourteen different categories including: arts & entertainment, business, education, news, scenic, society & people, space & science, sports & recreation, traffic, weather, and weird & bizarre.

The premise of web cam is *The Truman Show* in reverse—Big-Brother-R-Us. The control over the camera's gaze is not a hidden manipulator, but ourselves. We are the source of our own objectification. In 1996, Jennifer Ringley opened up her life to millions surfing the web and as a result of her pioneering self-exposure, she has become a minor cyber-celebrity. "I keep JenniCam alive not because I want to be watched, but because I simply don't mind being watched," Ringley explains.

Consider also Josh Harris, a New York City artist and his live-in girlfriend who are providing a live 24/7 feed from their loft. Harris explains, "The We Live In Public Experiment archives our daily life at the dawn of a new era for man... Tanya and I have placed cameras, microphones, and phone taps all over our loft in order to capture the detailed moments of daily life. You can watch us fight, make love, eat meals, and use the bathroom as well as see how many guests react to this modern living style." Reality TV is but a tame alternative to the expanding excess of reality Internet.

Reality TV is not only a cost-effective television genre and a tame equivalent to web cam voyeurism, but it also reinforces the commodification of reality in a celebrity-oriented culture. “We are making the transition,” writes social critic Jeremy Rifkin in *The Age of Access*, “into what economists call an ‘experience’ economy—a world in which each person’s own life becomes, in effect, a commercial market... Life is becoming more and more commodified, and communications, communion, and commerce are becoming indistinguishable.” While social conservatives may complain about the “infidelity chic” of *Temptation Island*, the real lesson of the show is that many people are willing to trade a personal relationship for a Caribbean vacation. Perhaps none dare call it prostitution, but the show is based on the buying and selling of intimacy. “The only relevant question in our culture is what sells,” laments columnist E.J. Dionne in *The Washington Post*. “The strongest day-to-day threat to traditional values doesn’t come from those much-denounced liberals. It comes from a certain kind of capitalist who is perfectly willing to demean human beings to make a buck.”

But one wonders whether it is possible to demean another human being, if the meaning and value of humanness itself is only a question of market value? The “Brand Called You” is only as valuable as the commercial that promotes it, a “commercial” otherwise known as your life. Shakespeare ventured, “All the world’s a stage.” Today his words must be modified, “All of life’s a commercial” and “Every person’s a celebrity in waiting.” Reality TV or reality Internet is simply a new portal to identity creation. To be objectified in the gaze of another is to be known. To be known is to be somebody. “I am seen, therefore, I am.” There are no web cams that do not have visitor counters and guest registration. Identity is based on knowing one is known. The gaze no longer reduces the person, but creates them. If the person is only the persona, then there is nothing to reduce. Life becomes the ultimate commercial, a metastasis of the commodity form.

Reality TV: A blind stare in the wrong direction.

While the nation may be glued to the TV to see what will happen on the next episode of *Temptation Island*, much more is at stake than the fidelity of their pseudo-commitment. Americans are living in a culture addicted to the shameless lust of the eye. The cyber-voyeur objectifies others in his gaze and thinks nothing of it. She exposes herself to the gaze of others and feels no shame. It is a straight line from Jenny Jones to JenniCam.

In a world without God, the postmodern is desperate to know. In a world without God, the postmodern is desperate to be known. Such is the cyber-voyeur’s vision—an illusion of a god-like perspective. But the voyeur is not God any more than the image on a television or computer screen is the person. It’s only an illusion of omniscience and a false persona. The Psalmist David acknowledges the real state of affairs, “O Lord, you have searched me and you

know me. You know when I sit and when I rise; you perceive my thoughts from afar. You discern my going out and my lying down; you are familiar with all my ways. Before a word is on my

tongue you know it completely, O Lord” (Psalm 139:1-4, NIV). Before God’s gaze we are KNOWN. For in all our “seeing,” we remain blind to what matters. We remain oblivious to the state of our hearts. As the Lord reminded Samuel, “The Lord does not look at the things man looks at. Man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart” (1 Samuel 16:7, NIV). The 24/7 images from the live-streaming web cam miss the heart of the matter and thus obscure rather than reveal. “Reality” TV is an addictive exercise in self-deception. It’s a blind stare in the wrong direction. ■

~David John Seel, Jr.

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by
David
John
Seel,
Jr.

<http://www.salon.com>

Salon.com: an alternative voice

Salon.com is an online magazine with an edge—an interesting, offbeat, always provocative, usually irreverent, and often cynical alternative to mainstream weekly news publications. Columnists include Garrison Keillor, and my personal favorite, Camille Paglia. Departments include Audio, Arts & Entertainment, Books, Comics, Mothers who Think, News, People, Politics, Sex, and Technology & Business. The last time I logged on, two of the hot topics were an audio tape of J. R. R. Tolkien reading from *The Two Towers* (which could be ordered or downloaded), and a link to a participatory site entitled “Have Yourself a Pagan little Christmas: A Beginner’s Guide to Wicca.” What you read here may not be mainstream, but it accurately reflects the values and thinking of a growing number of postmodern friends. (During September 2000, for example, 2.6 million different visitors logged on to Salon.com.)

Ransom Ratings

Design: Attractive, as would be expected from a site that has become something of an Internet standard.

Contents: A wide variety of perspectives on a wide variety of topics. Parents should be aware that some content will be objectionable for viewing by children.

Ease of Use: The site is free and easy to navigate.

<http://www.ijm.org>

International Justice Mission

Around the world there are multitudes of people suffering injustice and oppression who are not able to call upon local authorities for help. The International Justice Mission exists to help meet this need. Begun in 1997 by attorney Gary Haugen after the U.S. Department of Justice sent him to investigate the massacre in Rwanda, IJM is led by human rights professionals who document and monitor cases of oppression, educate the church and public, and mobilize intervention and rescue for victims. For print information about IJM see “Good News for the Lost, Imprisoned, Abducted, and Enslaved” by Wendy Murray Zoba in *Christianity Today* (August 9, 1999; pp. 34-43), or *Good News About Injustice: A Witness of Courage in a Hurting World* by Gary Haugen (InterVarsity Press).

Ransom Ratings

Design: Better than average; attractive and creative.

Contents: Information on IJM, principles of biblical justice, case reports, resources, and how individuals and churches can work for justice as well as opportunities to become involved with IJM.

Ease of Use: The opening graphics, though attractive, take a bit of time to unfold. Navigating the site is easy, however, and designed to inform and motivate.

The articles and resources reproduced or recommended in *Critique* do not necessarily reflect the thinking of Ransom Fellowship. The purpose of this newsletter is to encourage thought, not dictate points of view.

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

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

Critique is sent as a ministry to all donors to Ransom Fellowship, which is a 501(c)(3) non-profit, tax-deductible ministry. Everyone on Ransom’s mailing list also receive *Notes from Toad Hall*, a newsletter written by Margie Haack in which she reflects on what it means to be faithful in the ordinary and routine of daily life, and gives news about Ransom’s ministry.