

# Critique

Helping Christians Develop Skill in Discernment

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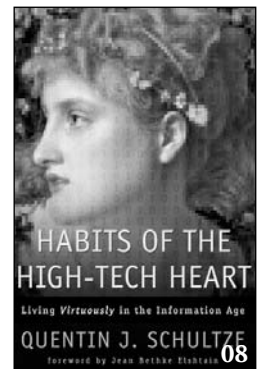
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# Editor's Note



## Grace at Work

**S**ecular decline  
In *Digressions*  
(p. 12) I mention  
an encouraging  
report from the Sudan  
where the church is  
growing in spite of  
persecution as Mus-  
lims are turning to  
Christ. The fact that  
people are believing

the gospel is always encouraging, all the more so when they are being converted from world views and religions which tend to be especially antagonistic to the Christian message. A similar phenomenon has been occurring in the West in recent years, but hasn't attracted much notice. Though it involves a population who have traditionally tended to be antagonistic to Christianity, the numbers involved are not massive, which may be why the church hasn't noticed it. But we should take note of it, and as with the news from the Sudan, be grateful.

Robert Osburn, director of the MacLaurin Institute ministering to students and faculty at the University of Minnesota, notes an interesting article, "The Metaphilosophy of Naturalism" which appeared in the Fall 2001 issue of *Philo*, a journal for humanistic philosophers. In the article Quentin Smith, professor of philosophy at Western Michigan University writes of "the embarrassment' of belonging to the only academic field that has allowed itself to lose the secularization it once had." What has happened is that philosophers like Dr. Alvin Plantinga have risen to prominence in the field, combining keen scholarship with a deep commitment to Christian faith. Smith reports that "realist versions of theism... [have begun] to sweep through the philosophical community, until perhaps one-quarter or one-third of philosophy professors are theists, with most being orthodox Christians."

What Dr. Smith bemoans—correctly, from his perspective—I give thanks for, from mine. God is at work in this dark world, which remains true even if he chooses, for reasons of his own, to keep us in the dark concerning how his grace is transforming lives and culture. But here he has granted us a glimpse, and that glimpse should remind us of what we claim to believe: that the gospel is the power of God for salvation, and that no gate of hell can prevail against God's grace at work in and through his people.

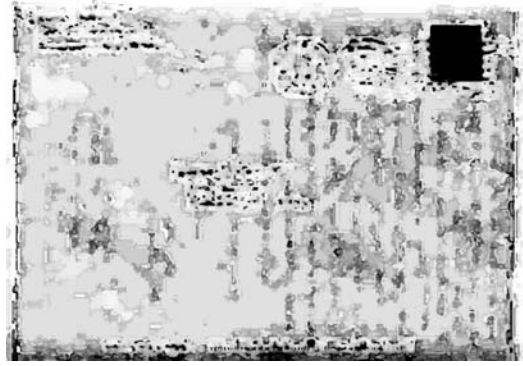
Our calling—yours and mine—is identical to that of Dr. Plantinga: to be faithful in the ordinary things of life. Our ordinary might be very different from his, but the calling is the same. By God's grace may we deepen our discipleship and develop discernment so we can engage our world with the gospel with a keen and winsome integrity.

## SEN brochure

Those of you receiving this issue by mail will note a brochure for "Mission Awareness," sponsored by SEN. This group of creative, devoted Christians are working to engage the peoples, countries, and cultures of Eastern Europe with the gospel. Now they are providing an opportunity for Western Christians to visit their center in Bratislava, Slovakia, and spend a week learning how the Holocaust and the fall of Communism has shaped the reality of life in that part of the world. Through lectures and discussions, visits to Auschwitz, tours of Krakow, Poland and Bratislava, and the chance for cross-cultural fellowship with God's people, you will not only learn about God's grace in Central Europe, but in your own life. Consider joining them for one of the Awareness weeks. For more information contact SEN via email <sens@citygate.org>.

~Denis Haack

# Dialogue



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

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or e-mail:  
marsena@itis.com

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

I have to write every now and then and say how much I appreciate Ransom's publications. I so wish that we had known about them years ago, but alas, better late than never ... We have our friends the Phelps to thanks for finally "spilling the beans."

Margie's reflections in the most recent *Notes From Toad Hall* about the mentally ill person's value and giftedness before God was especially meaningful to me for various reasons too numerous to go into.

Every issue in *Critique* brings something new for me to reflect on—book reviews (that Steve Turner one is high on my list right now), movie reviews to help us process the movies we see (AND begin to discuss these themes with our kids as they mature), discernment exercises that make me think (even when I don't want to...hehe).

Your publication is the ONE that I can't open without reading (mostly) cover to cover as soon as I yank it out of the mailbox.

Please know that what you do means so much to us and our growth in Christ.

**Becky Wimer**  
Pittsburgh, PA

I may never get the opportunity to tell you in person how much *Critique* and *Notes from Toad Hall* mean to me, so I thought I'd just tell you in this note. Your writings encourage me greatly! A friend in a prayer group gave me a copy some months ago; immediately I knew I was hooked. Thank you so much for your faithfulness to your gifts.

**Jonathan Smith**  
Greensboro, NC

Thank you for the sample copy of your newsletter sent to us earlier this year at Louise Campbell's request. We enjoyed it. I'm sure that the enclosed check is only a drop in the bucket of your expenses but we wished to at least give a "widow's mite" to your ministry. Aside from our own enjoyment in your publication, I noticed that our 23 year old daughter picked it up recently!

**Janice Nash**  
LaCrosse, WI

## American Foreign Policy

Since 9/11 our country and our churches have once again been interested in just war theory. Since the attack on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, America has bombed Afghanistan, is now talking about the possibility of an attack against Iraq, and recently admitted using a precision missile to take out a car in which an al-Qaeda operative was riding. Christians believe that though citizenship is part of the calling of every believer, our commitment to the truth and kingdom of God must take precedence over our patriotism. “My country, right or wrong” is not a slogan the believer can adopt. We would be wise to reflect on these issues with care, being careful that the surge of patriotic

feeling not keep us from thinking in clear, biblical categories.

Just war theory was originally proposed by Augustine, the early 5<sup>th</sup> century theologian who served as bishop in the city of Hippo in North Africa. *First Things* summarizes just war theory thus: “the criteria of the just war are divided into two categories. The first have to do with the reasons that justify going to war, and the second with how a just war is to be conducted. According to the first set of criteria, a just war is defensive, aimed at protecting the innocent against unjust aggression. It must be undertaken with the right intention of establishing a just peace, and a reasonable expectation that the means employed will be proportionate to the ends sought. A just war is a last

resort, undertaken when it is reasonably determined that there are not alternative ways to resolve the conflict, and when there is a reasonable probability of success in achieving the aims of war.

“The second set of criteria is quite distinct. [T]he criteria are essentially two: proportionality and discrimination. The first requires the use of no more force than is necessary to vindicate the just cause. The second pertains to what is called ‘noncombatant immunity,’ meaning that there must be no intentional killing of innocent civilians.”

With all the talk of war—and just war theory—in the news, this raises some questions for discerning Christians. ■

~Kevin Hilman

### QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. Do you accept just war theory as a sufficient guide for Christian thinking about war in a fallen world? Why or why not? What other theories have been proposed? If you accept just war thinking, is your understanding of it developed enough to be capable of applying it to American foreign policy?
2. Some Christians argue that war cannot be reconciled with Christ’s call for us to love our enemies. Or the fact that not only did Christ never teach that a legitimate response to evil in the world is to eliminate it, he submitted himself to be tortured and killed by an unjust state power. How would you respond?
3. John Chrysostom (345-407), the late 3rd century bishop of Constantinople said this to his people: “So long as we continue to behave as sheep, we are victorious. Even if ten thousand wolves surround us, we conquer and are victorious. But the moment we become wolves, we are conquered, for we lost the help of the shepherd. He is the shepherd of sheep, not of wolves. These are his words: ‘Do not be troubled that I send you out in the midst of wolves and tell you to be like sheep and like doves. I could have done just the opposite, and not have allowed you to suffer any hurt. But I chose a better way. My way makes you more glorious and proclaims my power.’ These were his words to Paul: ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness. That is the way I made you.’” Does this conflict with just war theory? Why or why not?
4. Will our claim to be concerned about a just war be convincing if we are not equally involved in working for justice in other ways (e.g., economically, for oppressed peoples, caring for creation)?
5. Is a nation bound by the just-war criteria if it is obvious that her enemies are not? If so, could a war be won that way? An underlying assumption in just war theory is that it is better to lose a war righteously than to win a war unrighteously. Do you agree? Why or why not? Do America’s military strategists ever think in such terms? Does the Christian respect for the gift of life, and the belief that every life is sacred transcend the borders of a nation? Related to that, is it “Christian” to mourn only the loss of American lives?

## Humanity's Racket

Kevin Hilman lives in Seattle, WA, with his wife Ann where they are members of Bethany Community Church. He enjoys sharing good food with good friends, skiing, studying Christianity, brewing beer, and works as a software developer. He can be reached at <kjh@hilman.org>.

(This piece was written with some editing help from Denis Haack. Copyright © 2002 by Kevin Hilman.)

**Source:** Just war theory summary from "In a Time of War," an editorial in *First Things* (December 2001).

### QUESTIONS CONTINUED

6. Is it a Christian priority to be the richest and most powerful nation, militarily, on the planet? Is Mark 10:42-45 relevant for this discussion? Why or why not?
7. To what extent is it appropriate to use the Christian just-war tradition to justify the military actions of a post-Christian nation? What problems or issues might this distinction require that we keep in mind? Would the U.S. ever decide not to engage in a war if Christians thought it unjust? Are American goals in Iraq, and in the war on terrorism, solely for the protection of the innocent? Why or why not? How should the answer to these questions shape the application of just war theory to American foreign policy?



### An excerpt from Quentin J. Schultze

**G**rasping a religious tradition does not begin with clever techniques and crafty plans. It begins rather inauspiciously with listening. Information technology rarely leads one to living expressions of wisdom, only to information *about* religion and religious institutions. We carry religious traditions within ongoing, nontechnological customs such as prayer, worship, and contemplation. Only when we intimately encounter believers and God through such customary practices do we begin to hear the heart of a tradition. This is why the prophetic ministry of the Old Testament contrasts the silence of God with the trivial racket of human beings. It is also why the medieval Christian church emphasized contemplation as a route to a living faith and to a deeper fellowship with God. Of all human activities, however, listening is one of the most difficult to grasp because we cannot see anyone doing it. Listening happens in the mind and in the heart—*within* our being.

The more racket we create, the harder it is to hear ourselves, others, and God. "Lately I have had too many visits and there has been too much talking," the Trappist monk Thomas Merton wrote self-critically in his journal in 1964. The rule in one monastery was not "Do not speak" but rather "Do not speak unless you can improve on the silence." In the information age, we can use the noise of messaging to avoid intimacy with God, just as we use the daily diversions of videos and recorded music to circumvent troubled interpersonal relationships. Throughout the centuries, humans tried to transform religious traditions into "noisy" activities, virtually guaranteeing that they would not hear

God because of the resulting racket. Today, for instance, much "church work" makes congregants so busy that they have scant time and little capacity for listening. Cyberculture wrongly assumes that good can occur only when there is a lot happening. "The feeling that 'if nothing is happening, nothing is happening' is the prejudice of a superficial, dependent and hollow spirit," writes Václav Havel, "one that has succumbed to the age and can prove its own excellence only by the quantity of pseudo-events it is constantly organizing, like a bee, to that end."

Religious traditions record in their customs how a people listened to the Almighty and to each other, and then how they responded by seeking to live obediently. The lexical roots for the word "listen" (*akouo* and *hupakouo*) derive from the word for "obedience." When we listen to others, we give them an opportunity to define our reality by revealing things to us; we use the remarkable gift of empathy to put ourselves under their counsel, into their words and gestures. Loving God and other people depends on getting to know them intimately by listening to them "with the ear of the heart." As the work of an obedient will, heartfelt listening is fundamentally a moral act that can foster intimacy and bind people together under the authority of God. ■

~excerpted, Quentin J. Schultze

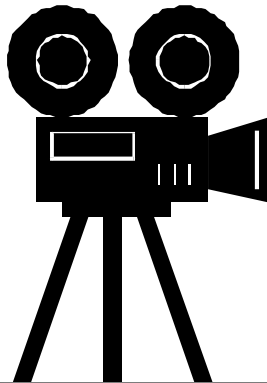
#### Note:

See full review on page 8.

**Book excerpted:** *Habits of the High-Tech Heart: Living Virtuously in the Information Age* by Quentin J. Schultze (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House; 2002) pp. 78-79.

# The Darkened Room

## It's All Greek to Me



### A review of My Big Fat Greek Wedding

by Drew Trotter

#### Film Credits

##### Starring:

Nia Vardalos

(Fotoula 'Toula'

Portokalos)

John Corbett

(Ian Miller)

Michael Constantine

(Gus Portokalos)

Lainie Kazan

(Maria Portokalos)

Andrea Martin

(Aunt Voula)

Joey Fatone

(Angelo)

Christina Eleusiniotis

(Toula, age 6)

##### Director:

Joel Zwick

##### Screenplay:

Nia Vardalos

##### Producers:

Paul Brooks

Mark Hufnail

Tom Hanks

and others

##### Original Music:

Xandy Janko

Chris Wilson

##### Cinematographer:

Jeffery Jur

##### Costume Designer:

Michael Clancy

Runtime: 96 min

Rated PG for sensuality  
and language.

In a year of multiple surprises at the box-office, the one that takes the cake (the wedding cake, that is) surely must be *My Big Fat Greek Wedding*. The simple, clichéd comedy about a plain-Jane, Greek-American woman falling in love and marrying a good looking, Anglo college professor (one reviewer called him “her WASP Fabio”) has almost nothing extraordinary about it. The plot is unoriginal, the performances very good, but not great, the direction pedestrian, the camera work plain, but uninspiring. Critical reaction, while generally positive, was decidedly luke-warm (Gene Seymour of the *L. A. Times*: “All told, this is going to make passable television. Eventually.”).

Yet in its box office popularity, *Wedding* has accomplished feats virtually unknown prior to its release. Most successful movies have their largest box office take on opening weekend; sometimes it comes in their second or third week. Many low-budget, less-promoted independent films, like *Wedding*, open unspectacularly, grow by word-of-mouth for a few weeks, or even a month or two if really successful, then close, declaring success at having made a profit at all. Opening on April 19, *Wedding* had a moderate take in excess of \$500,000, and its owners (including Tom Hanks and his Greek-American wife Rita Wilson) were pleased. But as the spring and summer wore on, the film simply got more popular each week, until the third week of September when it peaked at \$14.6M only to lose in the box office race to another

ethnic comedy, *Barbershop*. Still playing, as of this writing, on an incredible 1,977 screens, *Wedding* earned \$5.6M in the first weekend of its seventh month of release. Even *Titanic*, by comparison, made less than \$1M on less than 500 screens at the same point in its tenure in American theatres.

What makes this film so appealing? Some have attributed its success to the humor that is apparent in almost every scene. The father of the bride, Gus Portokalos played by Michael Constantine, regularly causes the biggest belly laughs with his simple solution of Windex for ailments from upset stomachs to pimples, and his fantastic etymologies, relating almost every distinctive word he hears to its “Greek roots” (including “kimono” and “Miller”!). Aunt Voula (Andrea Martin) cops the funniest scene in the movie as she describes the medical history of a suspicious lump in her shoulder to the poor, unsuspecting parents of Ian, the bridegroom played by “Sex in the City’s” John Corbett. At every point in the film, we are never far away from a laugh, and certainly that has much to do with the movie’s success. But lots of movies are knock-down funny without being the success *Wedding* is, and even *Wedding’s* gags, as Seymour wrote, are “funnier the first or second time than...the seventh or 12th.”

Other hypotheses for the movie’s popularity involve the plainness of its central



characters, the sweetness of the love story, and the interesting nature of the ethnic premise. Only Corbett is really good-looking, and his good looks are deconstructed by his wonderfully goofy performance as the slightly awkward odd-man-out whose love for Toula (the central character played by Nia Vardalos whose project this was and who wrote the screenplay) gradually enables him to become comfortable with his new-found family. This atmosphere creates a sympathy with the audience; this is a family and a story that could happen to any of us. The love story is uncomplicated and unalterably sweet—no arguments or break-ups with these two. And the interest in ethnic custom as it relates to family is a well-established box-office draw (anyone ever heard of *The Godfather?*). Perhaps all these, done well, combine to create the phenomenal success *Wedding* has enjoyed.

Let me make another hypothesis, however. This movie succeeds where others have failed because it comes at a time in our nation's history when we want stories that take us beyond the complexity and,

particularly, the harshness of life as we have known it in the last 20 months. After the difficulties of



*The central themes of love-conquering-all and family being a crucial support to any successful marriage are straightforward and enjoyable, leaving little else to say.*

2001, with its interminable recount of election tallies, gruesome reminder of our vulnerability in the events of 9/11, and long, slow depressing slide in the economy, we needed to laugh—long and hard and with the least convolution possible. This film rarely gets serious. When Toula's brother, Nicky, tells her: "Toula, you did it. Don't let your past dictate who you are, but let it be part of who you become" and she begins to tear up, telling him how sweet the thought is, he says, "Yeah, that Dear Abby really knows her stuff." The standard, "mother-tells-the-over-

ly-concerned-father-that-they-love-each-other-and-he-needs-to-recognize-it-fast-or-lose-his-daughter" scene is punctuated by Constantin's wise-cracks, refusing to let the scene fall into melodrama. Scene after scene begins to get dramatic, only to dissolve into one hilarious joke after another.

While every movie ought to be discussed and thought about, if we, as Christians, are going to receive the full benefit of it, *Wedding* resists all but the lightest of analysis. There are important points to talk about to be sure (see the questions attached to this review), but the central themes of love-conquering-all and family being a crucial support to any successful marriage are straightforwardly told in this simple, enjoyable fairytale, leaving little else to say. Perhaps we should kick back, enjoy *My Big Fat Greek Wedding*, and let tomorrow take care of itself. But when tomorrow comes, you may want to think a little about what you've seen. ■

~Drew Trotter

*Dr. Andrew H. Trotter, Jr., is the executive director of the Center for Christian Study in Charlottesville, VA, where he teaches and writes on theology and culture, focusing on modern American film. Copyright © 2002 by Andrew H. Trotter, Jr.*

## QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. When Ian gets baptized and thus joins the Greek Orthodox church, he says "Now I'm Greek." What is the connection made between ethnicity and the church in the movie? What do you think about this?
2. This is the lightest, breeziest of comedies, yet Toula, after resisting briefly, sleeps with Ian well prior to their wedding. How did this affect you? Did you sweep it under the rug in order to enjoy the overall experience of the movie? Is this a legitimate reaction from Christians as they view films? Why or why not?
3. Do you agree with the assessment of some reviewers that *Wedding* is a fairytale? How realistic is the movie's portrayal of courtship?
4. The movie portrays a dating system that centers around the parents trying to select a mate for their daughter. In Genesis, the Bible reports a number of "arranged" marriages. Why do Christians no longer engage in this practice?
5. List and discuss five things Ian and Toula have in common. How important are each in a realistic courtship?

## Faithfulness in a

A friend recently contacted us after moving across the country. He was back online, he said, but had 1100 email messages waiting for him—and more were arriving as he tried to work through the backlog. Some were spam, but most were from people who expected replies, and not a few were follow up messages wondering why he hadn't replied yet. Email isn't simply a technological development, it's a development that has brought clear expectations about what constitutes efficient communication. Along with the ability to communicate instantaneously comes the expectation that we will do so. Which is, of course, just another way of pointing out the obvious: namely, that no technology is value-free.

If we imagine that our pace of life is identical to how people have always lived, we know little of history. Prior to the Industrial Revolution, the speed of life was limited by how fast horses could gallop or ships could sail, and those speeds had not changed significantly since the dawn of time. But then railroads and steamships accelerated the speed of transportation. In 1875, the telephone permitted, for the first time, instantaneous communication over distance. A year later the alarm clock was invented, making punctuality increase dramatically in value. In 1951, long-distance phone service was introduced, and suddenly mail seemed painfully slow. In 1973, Fed Ex service began, and suddenly having to wait for a couple of days for a package to arrive was an irritation. In 1985 the fax machine made overnight

delivery seem slow. And now fax machines sit silent and unused much of the time, since email is more efficient. Email not only changes the method I use to communicate, it also subtly transforms the value I place on time management, efficiency, and punctuality—and in the end speeds up the pace at which I live my life.

Another value that has subtly infiltrated our thinking is the belief that every problem can be solved by some sort of technique. We might need some new technology to solve whatever is plaguing us, or we might



***“Information technologies are not just tools, but also value-laden techniques that we rely on increasingly to organize and understand nearly every aspect of our lives.”***

need to use time more efficiently by dividing it into smaller increments, or learn better management techniques, but regardless of the details, proper administration and sharper control will produce the solution. This value is antithetical to Christian belief, but that doesn't mean Christians aren't susceptible to it. Just as the Old Testament people of God were occasionally seduced by the beliefs and values of their pagan neighbors, so living in an Information Age can similarly seduce the people of God living in a neopagan world. Some problems will never be solved on this side of the Consummation, and those that are solved, by God's grace, will always be partial and temporary. This is a fallen world.

Yet, sometimes we act and talk as if we thought right living with the correct techniques and tools will cause all crooked paths to be straightened.

“Information technologies are not just tools,” Quentin Schultze writes in *Habits of the High-Tech Heart*, “but also value-laden techniques that we rely on increasingly to organize and understand nearly every aspect of our lives.”

That doesn't mean the Christian must refuse to use these tools, nor should we fall into the trap of assuming that writing a letter (by snail mail) is somehow more spiritual than communicating by email. The information technologies that have been invented are works of creativity and ingenuity, and can be used as good gifts of God, for which we should be grateful. Nevertheless, the fact that these technologies are value-laden must be of concern for the discerning Christian. The command to remain free of the world's molding power isn't limited only to concerns about organized religion. All values that we hold, consciously or not, must be brought under the scrutinizing light of the truth of God's word. Every expectation we have about ourselves, our lives, and others needs to be examined in terms of the Christian world view. *Habits of the High-Tech Heart* was written to help us do precisely that.

Dr. Schultze is professor of communication arts and sciences at Calvin College, and his previous books have been recommended in these pages. *Habits of the High-Tech Heart* might be the best thing he has ever written—it is certainly the best thing I've read by him and on this topic—and is the culmination of a life of sharp scholarship wedded to a deep love for God. There is no need to smash our computers in a church parking lot. We need, instead, to reflect on the habits



# Hi-tech World

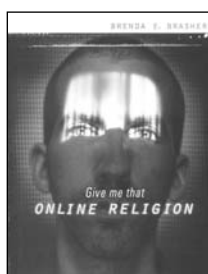
of our hearts and to ask how in the deepest recesses of our souls we have been effected by living in the Information Age. “We need to understand information technologies,”

Schultze argues, “in the light of the virtues nurtured historically within religious traditions.”

Schultze helps us to stop and see the world in which we live. It’s like the problem of the fish noticing the water, and Schultze’s careful expertise helps us shed the blinders we weren’t even aware we were wearing. Then, in succeeding chapters, he reflects on the information technologies that shape our world in light of the habits of the heart (discernment, moderation, wisdom, humility, authenticity, and diversity) we know to be important. How does the push for efficiency affect our need to nurture patience? What does it mean to be people of humility if we believe (at some level, at any level) that there is a solution to every problem if we just apply our minds to it? “To be virtuous people in a high-tech world,” Schultze writes, “is to be neither moralists nor pragmatists but rather *sojourners* who humbly seek goodness in an eternal adventure that began before we were born and will continue after we die” [author’s emphasis].

Read *Habits of the High-Tech Heart* more than once. First to learn from a godly mentor, a scholar who has thought deeply about what it means to be faithful in our pluralistic world. Read it a second time to see how Schultze thinks the issues through and unfolds his argument, because the book is an exercise in

Christian discernment. This is a Christian mind at work, and we can learn from his example. And then read again when you discuss it with a small group who is willing to examine the subtle ways we are being swept along by our high-tech world even as we are reminded of the importance of being virtuous people, even at cost.



## Cyber-Religion

An important development in our world is the interest in spirituality and religion evident online. Multitudes who would never darken the door of a church light up the Internet to discuss their concerns, share their ideas, and find like-minded people who are willing to talk about things that matter most. The fact that much of this information and discussion seems ungrounded and amoral should not cause us to miss the significance of the phenomenon. The apostle Paul always went to the marketplace because he knew non-Christians would be there who were willing to talk about religion. I wonder where he would go today?

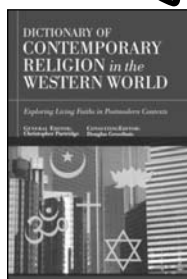
In *Give Me That Online Religion*, Brenda E. Brasher, professor of religion and philosophy at Mount Union College (Ohio), has written what is as far as I know the first attempt to survey this online world of religion and spirituality. As such this is a book worth noting, though I found Brasher’s approach far from satisfying. Her prose was too often dry, and a lack of a clear foundation for her ideas made many of her conclusions seem questionable. Still, as a first survey, *Give Me That Online Religion* can be helpful for those who wish to keep their finger on the religious pulse of our world which is shaped so powerfully by cyberspace and its technologies. ■

~Denis Haack

**Book reviewed:** *Habits of the High-Tech Heart: Living Virtuously in the Information Age* by Quentin J. Schultze (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House; 2002) 209 pp. + notes + bibliography + index.

**Book also noted:** *Give Me That Online Religion* by Brenda E. Brasher (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass; 2001) 187 pp. + notes + index.

## Briefly Noted: Myriad Beliefs



by Denis Haack

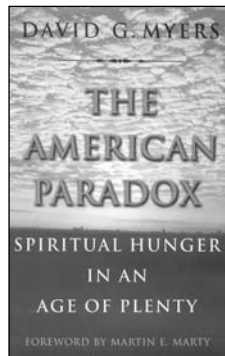
As our postmodern world becomes increasingly pluralistic, we find ourselves encountering an ever wider array of religious beliefs, practices, and values. As Christians we dare not assume that our neighbors, friends, and coworkers share our deepest convictions and values. If we are to engage this pluralistic culture with the gospel, we will need insight into world and life views that are foreign to us—and that are, at least at first glance, perhaps even incomprehensible to us. Asking questions and listening with care is a vital part of this learning process, as is having access to resources in which scholars define terms, provide background, and point us to further reading which may be of help. The *Dictionary of Contemporary Religion in the Western World* is not all we will need to be faithful in our pluralistic world, but it is a helpful resource. It can clarify the questions we need to ask, and provide a context for the convictions and practices we are seeking to understand. ■

**Book reviewed:** *Dictionary of Contemporary Religion in the Western World: Exploring Living Faiths in Postmodern Contexts* edited by Christopher Partridge and Douglas Groothuis (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press; 2002) 367 pp. + index.

## Social Science and God

**D**avid Myers' textbooks on introductory and social psych are widely used in colleges and universities, making him an influential social scientist. While striving for an objective social science based on empirical research, he has never denied that his faith influences what findings to report and how to report them.

In *The American Paradox: Spiritual Hunger in an Age of Plenty*, Myers collates and analyzes thousands of surveys and studies from across the developed world to show that America (really the entire West) has been in a serious social recession from the 60's through the 90's. The breakdown of civility and community correlates with a culture-wide loss of meaning and is evident in a wide range of problems from divorce and father-absent families to drugs, violence, and educational problems. This social recession is closely tied to radical individualism in American culture, whether this individualism is the civil libertarianism of the left or the economic



*Myers' work shows so well that biblical moral rules make sense and serve the human good.*

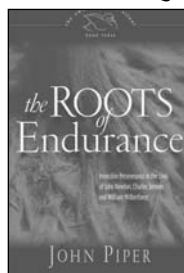
libertarianism of the right.

These are some of Myers most noteworthy findings:

1. The sexual revolution brought a large loss in human well-being: increases in STDs, rape, non-marital pregnancy, cohabitation, and divorce.
2. Cohabitation brings poor results: much higher rates of later separation and divorce, increases in domestic violence, and very little of the increase in happiness that normally accompanies marriage. Cohabitants also report less sexual satisfaction than married couples.
3. Divorce wreaks havoc on people, promoting depression, often causing poverty, and damaging physical health about as much as smoking.
4. Many children's problems: abuse, delinquency, drugs, crime, poverty, school problems, depression, etc., are closely tied to growing up without a biological father in the home. On the basis of these findings, Myers argues for "the transcultural ideal: children thrive best when raised by two parents who are enduringly committed to each other and their child's welfare" (p. 87).
5. While poverty is destructive of human well-being, for those well above poverty there is little correlation between wealth and well-being. "We have bigger houses and broken homes, higher income and lower morale, more mental health professionals and less well-being. We excel at making a living but often fail at making a life... Moreover, individuals who strive most for wealth tend to live with lower well-being" (p. 138).

## Briefly Noted: Heroes of the Faith

by Denis Haack



Each year at the Bethlehem Conference for Pastors, John Piper gives a biographical sketch of one of his heroes of the faith. And each year Piper's sketch—full of insight, wit, and a passion for the grace and glory of God—is always a high point of the conference. Now these lectures are being published in book form, the third of which is *The Roots of Endurance: Invincible Perseverance in the Lives of John Newton, Charles Simeon, and William Wilberforce*. "They are three of the healthiest, happiest, most influential Christians of the latter eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries," Piper says. "My overwhelming impression, after seeing their lives woven together in preparation for this book, is the remarkable mental health they shared. Not that they were perfect or without dark seasons. But on the whole, they are extraordinary examples of deep and joyful maturity. Their lives—as one person said of Wilberforce—were fatal not only to immorality but to dullness. There was an invincible perseverance because there was invincible joy." We recommend this book—and the series—highly. ■

**Book reviewed:** *The Roots of Endurance: Invincible Perseverance in the Lives of John Newton, Charles Simeon, and William Wilberforce* by John Piper (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books; 2002) 166 pp. + index.

# in the Classroom

6. Because of a fundamental need to belong, people are happier and healthier if they have strong connections to others in a variety of small communities. "Like marriage, civic connections are significant predictors of happiness and satisfaction with one's life. People who eat with friends and are active in their churches are happier than those who don't" (p. 181).
7. Society's story tellers, the media, hold tremendous power because images and social scripts have a large effect. Media portrayal of violence and violent or degrading sex do affect behavior. Does it make sense to tell tobacco companies not to poison people's bodies and then allow the media to poison children's minds?
8. When schools do not promote the morally good, the results will be bad. Feigned moral neutrality sends a message of minimal moral expectations which children quickly pick up. But social studies consistently show that, excepting a few controversial issues, there is a high level of consensus on values (e.g., honesty, respect, responsibility, fairness, compassion, good citizenship) that should be taught in all schools. Turning schools into communities of character development supports learning in all subjects.
9. It is well documented that people who regularly participate in a church enjoy a higher quality of life. They are happier, more generous, less violent, and less addicted. This change comes by church participation, not just by theoretical religious beliefs.

Myers' work could use a stronger theological framework, relating the general revelation of God's law in human nature to the special revelation of law in Scripture while also contrasting God's law with the gospel. He could also describe the moral law as a

means of common grace closely tied to the creation orders (marriage, family, work, society, etc.). As a teacher in a university setting, I like Myers' work because it shows so well that biblical moral rules make sense and serve the human good. Many of my European students see Christian ethics as arbitrary and irrational, but using this book, I might argue in class that it makes good sense for even an atheist to follow God's law. ■

~Thomas K. Johnson

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**Book reviewed:** *The American Paradox: Spiritual Hunger in an Age of Plenty* by David G. Myers (New Haven: Yale University Press; 2000) 295 pp, + notes + index.

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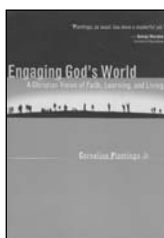
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## Briefly Noted: Life of the Mind

by Denis Haack



Written for college students, *Engaging God's World* needs to be read by everyone who has a passion to love God with their minds. Dr. Plantinga, the President of Calvin Theological Seminary, writes an engaging book (no pun intended) designed to help us see learning from the perspective of biblical faith. Chapters on Creation, Fall, Redemption, Vocation, and Hope provide a solid foundation so that the life of the mind can be in tune with the truth of God's word. "The Christian gospel tells us that all hell has broken loose in this sad world," Plantinga says, "and that, in Christ, all heaven has come to do battle. Christ has come to defeat the powers and principalities, to move the world over onto a new foundation, and to equip a people—informed, devout, determined people—to lead the way in righting what's wrong, in transforming what's corrupted, in doing the things that make for peace, expecting that these things will travel across the border from this world to the new heaven and earth." Read *Engaging God's World* to sharpen your skill in discernment, and use it in mentoring young people. ■

**Book recommended:** *Engaging God's World: A Christian Vision of Faith, Learning, and Living* by Cornelius Plantinga, Jr. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans; 2002) 144 pp. + discussion guide.

## Converts, #s, & Noise

### The “final apologetic”

Given the history of past centuries, it can appear that the Islamic world is impervious to the gospel of Christ. Not so. Bishop Andrew Wawa reports that though Christians are persecuted in the Sudan, increasing numbers of Muslims are turning to Christ. “The Church is exploding in the Sudan,” he says. “In 1984, the Africa Inland Church had just ten churches, and they were all in the south. Today, we have 150 growing congregations, with 100 pastors and evangelists, including 20 churches in Khartoum itself, at the seat of the Islamic government... The Lord is using all kinds of means, just like in the Bible. Muslims, even Imams, are becoming believers as a result of dreams and visions turning them to the Bible, through healings, and especially through the attractive loving concern of Christians. But such converts are given the choice of the gun or money—either they recant (with material rewards), or they are threatened with death.”

Francis Schaeffer used to stress that though giving honest answers to honest questions is essential, the “final apologetic” for Christianity is found in the way we love one another and our non-Christian friends and neighbors. “Have we exhibited this community in our evangelical churches?” Schaeffer asked. “I want to say no, by and large, no. Our churches have often been two things—preaching points and activity generators.” It is worth pondering whether this indictment remains true today.

“Pagan converts to the early church did not absorb Christian teaching intellectually and then decide to become Christians,” George Lindbeck says. “They

were attracted to what they saw of the faith and practices of the early Christian communities.”

**Sources:** Bishop Wawa quoted in *Touchstone* (November 2002; pp. 4-5) from the *Anglican Communion News Service* (September 6, 2002); Schaeffer from *Two Contents, Two Realities* by Francis A. Schaeffer (Downers Grove, IL:

*Muslims are becoming believers as a result of dreams and visions, healings, and especially the attractive loving concern of Christians.*

InterVarsity Press; 1974) p. 27; Lindbeck quoted in *Context: Martin Marty on Religion & Culture* (July 15, 2002) by Martin Marty.

### Numbers worth noting

Statistics must be treated with discernment, because numbers can be manipulated to prove the fanciful. Like in the “fact” (making the rounds on the Internet) that since there were 37 Elvis impersonators in 1977, and 48,000 in 1993, by 2010 one of every three people will be an Elvis impersonator. Still, some numbers are worth noting:

54% of Americans report that “vacationing leaves them tired.”

68 of the 123 Starbucks in Manhattan are within two blocks of one another.

An estimated 49 million gallons of oil would be saved daily if SUV’s average fuel efficiency increased by 3 mpg.

The 10th century emir of Cordova, who was reported to have 6,300 women in his harem, claimed to have known only 14 days of peace in his entire life.

And since most of the news we hear about the environment seems grim, here

are wildlife numbers that are encouraging. Number of whitetail deer in the U.S. in 1900: 500,000; in 1999: 19 million. Trumpeter swans: 73 in 1935; 16,000 in 1999. Pronghorn antelope: 12,000 in 1900; 1 million in 1999. Elk: 41,000 in 1907; 800,000 in 1999. Number of wild turkeys in New Hampshire in 1968: 0; in 1998: 10,000.

**Sources:** “Harper’s Index” in *Harper’s Magazine* (October 2002, p. 11; May 2002, p. 11; April 2001, p. 15; January 2000, p. 13; November 1998, p.15. *Outdoor Life* (February 1999) p. 22.

### A noisy world

It is often assumed that the rise of technology produced the problem of noise, a uniquely modern phenomenon. Not so—at least, apparently noise was a problem in Mesopotamia as long ago as the 3rd millennium B.C. Witness this excerpt from *The Epic of Gilgamesh*:

“In those days the world teemed, the people multiplied, the world bellowed like a wild bull, and the great god was aroused by the clamor. Enlil heard the clamor and he said to the gods in council, ‘The uproar of mankind is intolerable and sleep is no longer possible by reason of the babel.’ So the gods agreed to exterminate mankind.”

Something to remember the next time a boom-car drives by in the middle of the night. ■

~Denis Haack

**Source:** Quoted in “Sound and Fury: The Politics of Noise in a Loud Society” by Garret Keizer in *Harper’s Magazine* (March 2001) p. 39.

## Some Friends of Russ

David Wilcox, *Live Songs & Stories*

Sometimes you come across an artist who just seems to be a “complete package.” While I generally resist such platitudes, Wilcox seems to me to be just this. Annie Dillard says of writing that if there is something that needs to be written and you know it, then you are the only one who can write it. Wilcox illustrates her point well. He effortlessly owns and weaves together songs and stories and takes you on a journey where you are tested and often busted on charges of relational frailty. But he is also kind, and I, for one, am glad.



Bruce Cockburn, *Dart to the Heart*

Bruce is known for his ability to weave beautiful poetry into complex musical composition while telling you about things like minefields in Mozambique. *Dart to the Heart* stands out as a different kind of record. Produced by T-Bone Burnett (*Oh Brother, Where Art Thou* and *Counting Crows*), this album is a collection of introspective songs about love and grief. I rarely go three months without this CD making its way to my player. Sometimes I need to hear, “When thoughts you’ve tried to leave behind keep sniping from the dark; when the fire burns inside you but you jump from every spark...lie down. Take your rest with me.”



Ellis Paul, *Stories*

Ellis Paul made me mad. I went to see Pierce Pettis after a long day of landscaping, only to discover that there was an opening act—some joker called Ellis Paul. By the third song, Ellis had won me over to the point that I was content to leave just three songs into Pierce’s set. He is a tremendously gifted

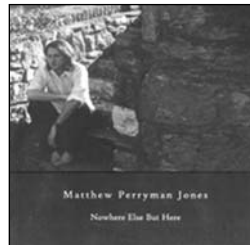
poet and songwriter, blending together both in his live shows. All his records after *Stories* are great, but I’ve always regarded this one as a “favorite” for its earthy and under-produced feel. His melodies are epiphanies and his ability to paint pictures with words is hard to beat.

—Russ Ramsey

*Russ Ramsey is living the dream in St. Louis with his wife Lisa and their two little people, Chris and Maggie. He graduated from Covenant Seminary... twice... with little concern for spreading out his academic accomplishments. He is a singer/songwriter and college minister with a love for art and the creative process.*

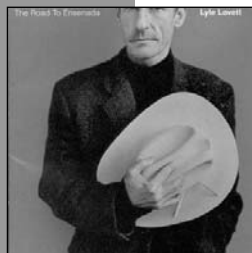
Lyle Lovett, *Road to Ensenada*

“I love him...he’s so...asymmetrical.” This was perhaps one of the most accurate descriptions of Lyle Lovett I’ve heard. He has unfairly been labeled a country music singer. Fact is, he is to country music what Sting is to pop music—technically and creatively head and shoulders above the mainstream. Lovett floats between country, folk, gospel, and big-band music. If you have put off getting to know Lyle because he looks so...asymmetrical, know that this works much to his favor. *Road to Ensenada* is, in my estimation, the best place to start in developing a regard for this artist. It showcases his smooth wit and haunting phrases and leaves you wanting more—which there is plenty of.

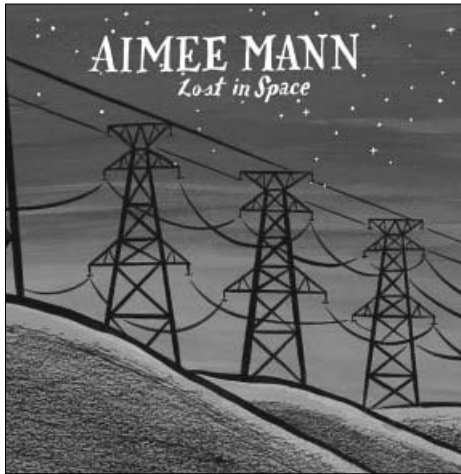


Matthew Perryman Jones, *Nowhere Else But Here*

This is the first CD by MPJ, and I am hooked by it. Matthew is a gifted young songwriter who is about as unpretentious as they come. He assures us that both struggle and healing are true aspects of life in Christ without coming off as detached or preachy. In a world where Christian music often offers CDs that employ a “Ready, Fire, Aim” approach to production, MJJ has taken his time, has worked with close friends and has offered us something deliberate. For those who like to support grassroots musicians and prefer high quality songs, MPJ kills two birds with one stone.



## Lost in



the  
honest  
vision  
of  
Aimee  
Mann

**A**imee Mann does not try to produce singles that will become hits; she writes and sings songs that are meant to get under your skin. Her clear voice, enunciating every word with bell-like clarity, uncovers the fragmentation every fallen person carries within themselves, though few of us have the courage to look it squarely in the face as honestly as she does. As one critic has noted, usually when “an album is over, it’s over. Mann’s

can haunt you for years.” The opening cut, “Humpty Dumpty,” from her latest CD, *Lost in Space*, reminds us that try as we might, we simply can’t get ourselves together again:

*Say you were split, you were split in fragments  
And none of the pieces would talk to you*

*So better take the keys  
And drive forever  
Staying put won't put these  
Futures back together  
All the perfect drugs  
And superheros  
Wouldn't be enough  
To bring me up to zero*

The eleven melodic and moody songs on *Lost in Space* are united by a common theme which Mann summarizes as “obsession, compulsion, depression and addiction.” But don’t imagine they apply merely to those on the fringe of society, the drugies hooked on crack or pop musicians shooting heroin. “I think everybody has that kind of behavior, everybody has that tendency at various times” she says in *Rolling Stone*. “They have this compulsive behavior where they’re trying to alter their mood by whatever means necessary. It’s really interesting too, because people have a direction that seems healthy, like they exercise all the time or

work constantly and it’s hard to call ‘em on it, although it’s really clear it comes from this really obsessive place.”

For the past decade or so, Aimee Mann’s music has been languishing in the throes of a rapidly changing music industry. Caught in contracts with labels that were bought up and then forgotten, she achieved national attention when her music was featured in Paul Thomas Anderson’s hard-hitting film, *Magnolia*, earning her an Academy Award nomination. Now she has begun her own label, SuperEgo Records, the name reflecting her abiding interest in psychology and the dysfunctions that afflict us and fragment relationships in this sad world.

*Critics at their worst  
could never criticize  
the way that you do  
no, there's no one else, I find  
to undermine or dash a hope  
quite like you  
and you do it so causally, too.*

Aimee Mann’s is a voice of yearning and honesty which slips occasionally into a cynicism born, I think, of seeing no clear way out of the alienation that afflicts us. She does not celebrate the brokenness, nor is she impressed with the sentimental hope that the next relationship will magically sweep all the problems away. “You paint a lovely picture,” Mann sings, “but reality intrudes.” Sometimes our seeking for love merely inflames the difficulties. “Now that I’ve met you,” she asks in “Deathly,” “would you object to / never seeing each other again?” Yet the search continues, that someone will, in the words of the song that forms the heart of the film, *Magnolia*, “Save Me.”

*You know what it's like  
The long goodbye  
Of the hunger strike  
But can you save me  
Come on and save me  
If you could save me*

# the Cosmos

*From the ranks  
Of the freaks  
Who suspect  
They could never love anyone.*

It is uncomfortable to have to face the reality of a fallen world. I prefer to keep things from getting too messy, and don't like it when conversations and needs spiral out of my control. We say our busyness as Christians is in response to the great need around us, but I wonder if that is the entire truth. Isn't it possible that the ever-expanding swirl of activities are also a distraction from the hard brutal edges of life in a fallen world? Since time is in such short supply we even imagine we can engage in evangelism without first being engaged in the lives and needs of people.

*We have crossed the Rubicon  
Our ships awash, our rudder gone  
The rats have fled but I'm hanging on  
Let me try, Baby, try.*

Aimee Mann is correct... and yet... The solution does lie in relationship and love, but trying is not enough. There's only one relationship large enough to embrace—and save—a world on which the dust of death lies like a shroud. Only a personal relationship with God through Christ can get to the heart of the problem. The people of God are called to exhibit that relationship before a watching world. How we love one another, and the reality of our walk with

God—neither can be faked, and neither are optional.

In the liner notes to *Lost in Space*, Aimee Mann commissioned the graphic novelist Seth to write a story. A man walks through empty streets at night at the onset of winter, in wonder at the beauty of the stars. He hears music, “an almost imperceptible tinny sound,” and discovers it is coming from a garbage bag on the curb, where someone tossed a greeting card which contained a music chip. “Alone in the darkness,” the man reflects, it “seemed deeply funny... and profoundly sad.”

Aimee Mann looks unflinchingly at the sadness of this alienated world, and concludes not that nothing matters, but that something is horribly wrong. May our gaze be as honest, so that our message will sound like the good news it truly is. ■

~Denis Haack

#### Sources:

“How Many Copies will I Sell in Wal-Mart?” by Ken Foster on [www.salon.com](http://www.salon.com) (September 10, 2002). “Aimee Mann Sets Fall Tour” by Colin Devenish on [www.RollingStone.com](http://www.RollingStone.com) (October 2, 2002).

#### Diskography:

*Bachelor No. 2 or, the last remains of the dodo* (SuperEgo Records, #SE-002; 1999).

*Magnolia soundtrack*: songs by Aimee Mann (Reprise Records, #47583-2; 1999).

*Lost in Space* (SuperEgo Records, #SE-007; 2002).



by  
Denis  
D.  
Haack



Aimee Mann and director Anderson  
on the set of *Magnolia*.

## On Art & Culture

<http://www.artsjournal.com>

### The Daily Digest of Arts & Cultural Journalism

*Arts Journal* is an online “weekday digest of some of the best arts and cultural journalism” that appears in English language publications (magazines, newspapers, and journals) from around the world. Scanning over 200 publications on a daily basis, the editors summarize news and review articles touching on art and culture, providing direct links to many of the most significant pieces. Every Monday, a weekly “Arts Beat” column summarizes the previous week’s findings, and is available free by email subscription. *Arts Journal’s* editors include Douglas McLennan, formerly arts columnist for the Seattle *Post-Intelligencer*, and Jack Miles, author and former book editor at the Los Angeles *Times*—two individuals who know their way around the media.

### Ransom Ratings

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**Content:** The *Arts Journal* is divided into eight primary categories: Dance, Media, Music, Publishing, Theater, Visual Arts, Arts Issues, and People. Archives of past postings are available for searches. Though the material is far more detailed and comprehensive than most people will be interested in or can use, *Arts Journal* is a site worth book-marking and visiting, at least occasionally. Since the arts continue to be such a crucial aspect of society, both molding and reflecting intellectual and cultural trends, Christians intent on engaging our world with the gospel should consider making use of this data-rich web site.

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Denis Haack

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2. To model Christian discernment.
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