

critique



A Ransom Fellowship Publication 2012 Issue 2

with lots inside, including a look at

BLASPHEMY AND FREE SPEECH

CRITIQUE



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Critique is part of the work of Ransom Fellowship founded by Denis and Margie Haack in 1982. Together, they have created a ministry that includes lecturing, mentoring, writing, teaching, hospitality, feeding, and encouraging those who want to know more about what it means to be a Christian in the everyday life of the twenty-first century.

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A Very Small Faithfulness

by Denis Haack



This week I've been writing a lecture on Bob Dylan, and so have been listening to a lot of his music. Though this hasn't come as a surprise to me, I've been impressed once again by the timelessness of his best songs.

Timelessness is true of all great poetry of course. Other poems can be lovely and beloved at the moment yet still grow so stale with the passage of years that they eventually are forgotten. To make matters even more tenuous, in thinking about Dylan I am speaking of popular music, where the life span of things tends to be short. I am no poet and so have no idea what causes a poem to be born. Whatever the stimulus, a few poets can give birth to lines that address the moment at hand with sudden clarity, yet not be limited to that moment. Somehow the words and metaphors reach deeply enough into the human condition to produce sparks of insight at later times, about very different moments in the lives of very different people. If you doubt that, watch *Shakespeare Behind Bars* (2005) in which a group of inmates in a maximum-security prison in Kentucky, all guilty of heinous crimes, perform "The Tempest" and wrestle with its timeless themes of guilt and humanity.

Dylan's 1964 classic, "It's Alright, Ma (I'm Only Bleeding)," does not follow the normal formula for a hit rock song. It's long—113 lines worth, with no repeated chorus—and is so dense as to demand concentrated listening. When it was released on the album *Bringing it all Back Home* (1965), it took up a full 7½ minutes. That was the year I graduated from high school, and the song felt like a sudden revelation. It went on and on and yet not a single line seemed superfluous. It spoke to the headlines of the day, full of an escalating war in Viet Nam and race riots in Watts. These were things that mattered, and that mattered to me, because I was eligible for the draft, and because talk of such things was everywhere. Somehow Dylan managed to merge concerns about war and the proliferation of idols in an increasingly pluralistic culture so our vision of the world was suddenly clarified.

*Disillusioned words like bullets bark
As human gods aim for their mark
Make everything from toy guns that
spark
To flesh-colored Christs that glow in*

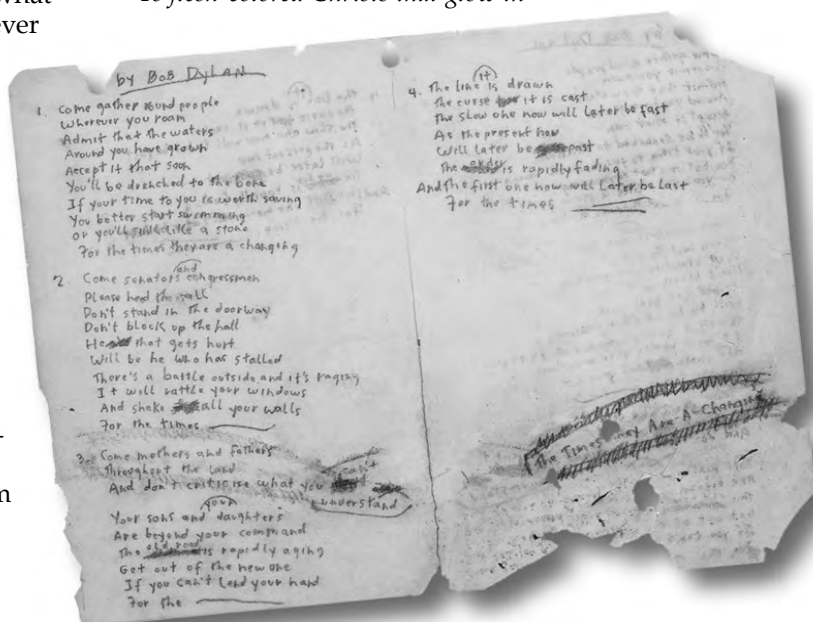
the dark

*It's easy to see without looking too far
That not much is really sacred*

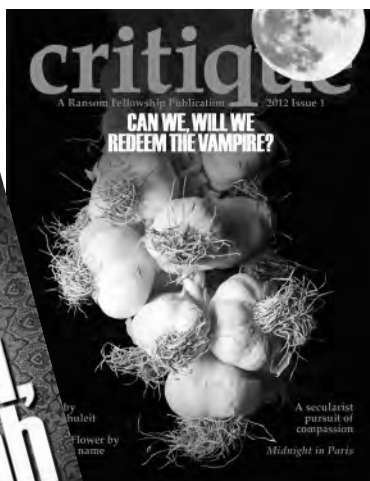
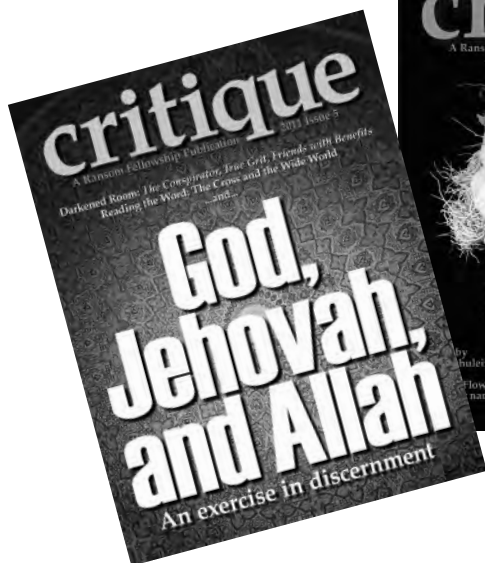
*Advertising signs they con
You into thinking you're the one
That can do what's never been done
That can win what's never been won
Meantime life outside goes on
All around you*

It seemed to be the song for the moment in 1967, and yet when I listened to it again this week, it seemed to have arisen from the headlines that stretched out before me as I read this morning's paper. Poets who can crystallize experience into words and phrases, metaphors and images, cadences and rhymes can sometimes speak beyond what they have experienced to name the bigger questions that lay below the surface of life.

We need such poets. And we need ears to hear. Life moves too quickly and is too crowded with busyness, too cacophonous, so that clarity in distinguishing the important from the merely urgent is a rare and precious gift. ■



DIALOGUE: READERS RESPOND



To the editor:

Let me do what it says—share a little critique or discernment. [Critique 2011:5]

First, the article on *Friends with Benefits* ["Sex Points the Way," pp. 9-11] accurately assesses our culture today. Films are both a reflection of the culture and makers of it. Two observations. One can easily understand the Hollywood sex as junk food phenomena but the article seems to contrast this with a "starvation diet" like the church does. Given that there seems to be no reference to the historic teaching that sex is intended for marriage, does this starvation idea suggest that the church is too severe in not approving at least a little recreational sex so as to avoid starvation?

One other thing, the feature article "God, Jehovah, and Allah" [pp. 12-15] seems to be very charitable with Islam, rewarding it with some positive recognition and "we can learn from their scripture." Of course we can and must learn the historic and religious nature of Islam but, given the fact that Islam's version of God comes from some pieces of the moon that fell in Mecca, it seems unlikely that "Allah" is in any way congruent with our Christian idea of God as revealed in the Scripture. In other words, one would probably not want to include writings of Mohammed in devotional reading. Our worship, prayer, and devotion to God comes from God leading us to worship, praise, and express gratitude to him exclusively.

These are my thoughts. Thank you for allowing me to express my thoughts.

Yours in Christ who is eternal truth,
Pastor Don Richman

John Seel responds:

Genuine communication is always a challenge in that more than words are always stated. They assume a frame of meaning through which they are rightly understood. Some topics lend themselves to easy misunderstanding: politics, religion, and sex are three common ones. Cognitive landmines abound.

So I was pleased that Don Richman took the time to respond to my review of the film, *Friends with Benefits*. The purpose of the article was narrowly to expose the inherent flaws in the concept of "hooking up," the premise behind the film. I wanted to do so without appealing specifically to special authority, namely biblical authority, but on its own terms. In effect, I was arguing that sex as a created reality only works well when used within its created design. Hooking up may work in theory, but not in reality—it was never intended to. Interestingly, this point was acknowledged by Mila Kunis, the lead in the film, "Having friends with benefits is a lot like communism. It works well in theory, but not so well in execution." Quoting the Bible to young people oriented to hooking up is not going to get much traction intellectually or practically. So my argument took sex and sexual experience on its own terms.

Under the assumption that "sex points the way," its power suggests that it needs to be protected by the bounds of monogamy (a historic acknowledgement), its design suggests its procreative intent, its spiritual nature suggests that it points to the love found uniquely within the Trinity, its

challenge requires a level of self-restraint and self-sacrifice that points to the love of Christ on the cross. We do well to remember that sex is always about more than sex, as it is designed to make visible the invisible. Or more simply, "the body's native language is to proclaim the mysteries of a spiritual and divine nature."

The metaphor of food, "junk food," "starvation diet," and "gourmet food" is borrowed from the writing of Christopher West, the most famous apostle of Pope John Paul II's work on the theology of the body. I owe a debt to Christopher and the theology of the body in my thinking. West's new book, *At the Heart of Gospel: Reclaiming the Body for the New Evangelization* (Image, 2012) is an important contribution to this discussion.

My goal is to see sex and to communicate about it neither through the lens of junk food nor a starvation diet, but as a gourmet banquet of God's largess of love. I don't follow Richman's logic that the church's tendency to suggest that sex be treated as a starvation diet justifies "approving at least a little recreational sex so as to avoid starvation." The world's response to the church's starvation attitude is understandable, but is also unfortunate. Far better to get it right from the outset as sex is the central metaphor of the gospel, the context in which men and women learn to love like Jesus, and points to the deepest spiritual realities of the universe. To this end, there is much work to be done to expose the lies and idolatries that dominate both the world and the church. Tim Keller's new book, *The Meaning of Marriage* (Dutton, 2011), is particularly helpful in exposing the assumed myths about romance, love, freedom, and marriage. Hopefully, this review and discussion lends more light than heat and moves both the church and our culture in that direction.

Denis Haack responds:

I am grateful, Don, that you both read our pieces and took the time to respond. And you are correct: the point is to be discerning. We have long published pieces under the column heading, *The Discerning Life*, not to espouse an idea or to argue some position but to encourage readers to think through issues that seem relevant to life in our pluralistic world. This article, subtitled, "An exercise in discernment," is one in that series.

Since the goal is to make readers think, let me continue that by raising some questions about your conclusion. If, as you argue, "Our worship, prayer, and devotion to God comes from God leading us to worship, praise, and express gratitude to Him exclusively," and if all truth is God's truth, should not truth from any source fill a Christian with thanksgiving? Or does the source alone determine what can lead a Christian to "worship, praise, and gratitude?" If that is the case, would not hymns be excluded from our devotional life, as well as call into question texts of Scripture that are from pagan sources, such as St. Paul's quotations in Acts 17?

Do remember the point of the exercise was not to replace the Bible with the Qur'an, but the possibility of including quotations from the Qur'an (and other extra-biblical sources) in the Christian's devotional life. Insisting on Scripture alone sounds spiritual, but can so narrow one's definition of truth that it becomes dismissive of much that glorifies God in Christ even though the source may have not realized that fact.

To the editor:

This past fall I taught on ecclesiology to middle and high school students. But in order to get their attention and awaken their imagination, these were the titles of the talks: How is the church like a brood of aliens? How is the church like a horde of zombies (baptism)? How is the church like a coven of vampires (communion)? How is the church like a haunted house? How is the church like a corpse bride?

Ideas from the horror genre can help us to communicate the reality of the spiritual and the monstrosity of evil. So I really appreciated your article on redeeming vampires [*Critique* 2012:1].

Nick Hathaway
Youth Pastor
Liberty Church PCA

Denis Haack responds:

My goodness, Nick, I can honestly say that, when I wrote that article, I never imagined such an approach to teaching about the church. I do agree, though, that the horror genre can express the nature of evil in ways that not only speaks to the mind but also awakens the imagination, thus making the truth that much more impressive. ■

WITH GODZILLA IN THE CITY

By Preston Jones

Driving through a section of Guatemala City for the five hundredth time, a strange tape played through my mind. Godzilla was trampling Tokyo, simultaneously oblivious and filled with fury, flinging harm on buildings, people, and dreams. From the soon-to-be rubble, I ran toward the monster and hurled a rock, which bounced off its toe. The beast noticed neither me nor the stone, and the rampage continued. My little act of bravery had accomplished nothing.

And yet that deed had not been all pointless. It was meaningful to me as an act of resistance that had required some courage. And it had meant something to the few who had seen me do it. They drew from it some valor—enough, I guess, to think that they too might be able to put

up a fight.

As I flew out of Guatemala City a few days later, considering the place's cramped vastness, the metaphor came again to mind. The previous week had been filled with the usual frustration and blessedness time in Guatemala always brings. I had spent some of my university's resources and, as usual, more of my own than I had planned. In the process, I had thought of something original: we bought 100 roses and gave them to the ladies living in a slum that is the ministry focus of a small church nearby. And we bought Christmas gifts for kids who otherwise would have none. We provided a meal of unusual richness for the people of the slum. And we hugged and said nice things

in Jesus' name. It was a full week.

But what real difference did it make? The rich meal was consumed and gone, the waste of which was deposited who-knows-where in a slum without plumbing. And the roses withered while drunken, violent men stole some of the courtesy we had tried to impart. And the new clothes were soon marked by the filth that traces everything in a community built on the edge of Central America's biggest trash dump.

It's no fun meeting Godzilla in the city. But I ask myself whether it's better to throw a rock or run. The answer seems obvious.



TY



Jesus said that if a person gives “even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones because he is my disciple...he will certainly not lose his reward” (Matthew 10:42). A cup of water is a small thing. A single cup of water cannot quench thirst and, even if it did, the thirst would soon return. And what if the little ones came to rely on you for water, and you found yourself creating dependence even as you addressed an immediate need? Complications.

But we Christians have to do something, and most of the daily things we can do are small and have to be looked for.

You became a pastor because you wanted to take a congregation to the heights, but you find yourself bogged down in so

much nonsense. But perhaps in the nonsense are decisions and words that can make a meaningful difference in someone’s life.

You became teacher because you love kids, but you find that the kids don’t love you. Still, you persist because you remember, or wish you had an occasion to remember, the fortifying recollection of an adult who persevered in something important.

When you married your prince, you never thought about the possibility of his snoring in your face at 3 a.m. And while losing sleep makes life difficult, the comedy of these night-time orations can spur tenderness.

Trash has collected somewhere in the neighborhood of houses and souls. There’s a parishioner who could use an encouraging note. Someone needs your prayers.

Godzilla’s in the city, and in your church, and in your house, and in your mind. Go get a rock. ■

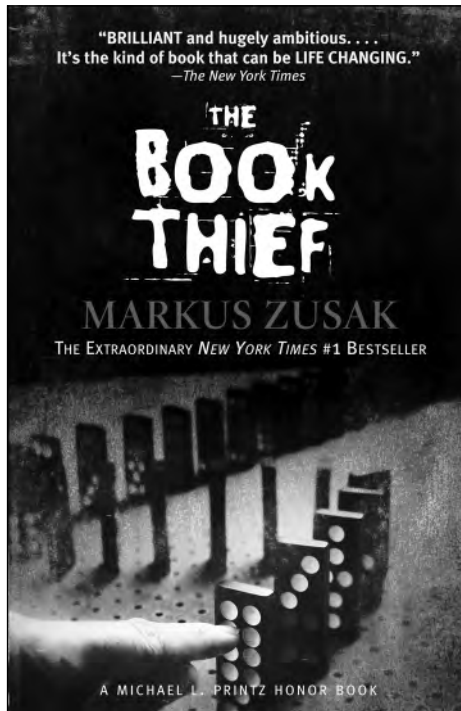
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Preston Jones teaches at John Brown University.

Death Tells a Story

by Denis Haack



In 2005 Markus Zusak published *The Book Thief*, a novel about a young orphan in Nazi Germany living in a small town near Dachau.

It is a remarkable book, one reason being that it joins so many others set during the time of the Holocaust without simply being a repetition of the horrible story we have heard before. Not that the story must not be repeated—our memories are short and appropriate repetition is something wise people cherish. Still, *The Book Thief* is a fresh story, with its own surprises and insights, with characters I grew to love as the plot unfolded. Another reason *The Book Thief* is remarkable is for the quality of

the prose. Zusak is masterful at crafting words and images in the telling of his story, so that settings seem vivid, characters seem deeply human, and events are plausible. I found myself rereading sections simply for the prose. And third, *The Book Thief* is remarkable for its narrator, which is Death itself. I must confess that when I first heard this fact about the novel, I was dubious. Could an author sustain such a voice? But Zusak does sustain it, to great effect. Following the tenuous yet precious life of Liesel Meminger

as it develops within a society that murders relentlessly as Allied bombing runs send them scurrying into basements for shelter, it seemed right that it be Death's perspective we adopt. After all, the reality of death is one thing all human beings share in common, regardless of their lot in life.

The Book Thief is a tiny slice of life, following the life of a young adolescent woman during a period of upheaval and loss, brutality and friendship. It helps us see that, even in the midst of intense societal decay, human beings remain human, yearning for meaning and dignity and the hope of a love that will not abandon them. Some reviewers have dismissed *The Book Thief* as sentimental, but I have trouble seeing that. As a novel marketed for a young adult audience, there is a stark reality in the story, of real people going through times that stretch them to make choices no person should have to make. There is a proper messiness in that even while children continue to play amongst the rubble, unable and unwilling to give in to the horror that stalks just outside the edges of their consciousness.

As of this writing (March 2012), *The Book Thief* has been on *The New York Times* Children's Best Seller Book List (rated for ages 14 and up) for 240 weeks. It's worth reading and discussing—both with the young people in our lives and with one another. It turns out that listening to Death tell a story is a bracing, life-affirming experience.



Death's Diary: The Parisians

Summer came.

For the book thief, everything was going nicely.

For me, the sky was the color of Jews.

When their bodies had finished scouring for gaps in the door, their souls rose up. When their fingernails had scratched at the wood and in some cases were nailed into it by the sheer force of desperation, their spirits came toward me, into my arms, and we climbed out of those shower facilities, onto the roof and up, into eternity's certain breadth. They just kept feeding me. Minute after minute. Shower after shower.

I'll never forget the day in Auschwitz, the first time in Mauthausen. At that second place, as time wore on, I also picked them up from the bottom of the great cliff, when their escapes fell awfully awry. There were broken bodies and dead, sweet hearts. Still, it was better than the gas. Some of them I caught when they were only halfway down. Saved you, I'd think, holding their souls in midair as the rest of their being—their physical shells—plummeted to the earth. All of them were light, like the cases of empty walnuts. Smoky sky in those places. The smell like a stove, but still so cold.

I shiver when I remember—as I try to de-realize it.

I blow warm air into my hands, to heat them up.

But it's hard to keep them warm when the souls still shiver.

God.

I always say that name when I think of it.

God.

Twice,

I say His name in a futile attempt to understand. "But it's not your job to understand." That's me who answers. God never says anything. You think you're the only one he never answers? "Your job is to...." And I stop listening to me, because to put it bluntly I tire me. When I start thinking like that, I become so exhausted, and I don't have the luxury of indulging fatigue. I'm compelled to continue on, because although it's not true for every person on earth, it's true for the vast majority—that death waits for no man—and if he does, he doesn't usually wait very long.

On June 23, 1942, there was a group of French Jews in a German prison, on Polish soil. The first person I took was close to the door, his mind racing, then reduced to pacing, then slowing down, slowing down....

Please believe me when I tell you that I picked up each soul that day as if it were newly born. I even kissed a few weary, poisoned cheeks. I listened to their last, gasping cries. Their vanishing words. I watched their love visions and freed them from their fear.

I took them all away, and if ever there was a time I needed distraction, this was it. In complete desolation, I looked at the world above. I watched the sky as it turned from silver to gray to the color of rain. Even the clouds were trying to get away.

Sometimes I imagine how everything looked above those clouds, knowing without question that the sun was blond, and the endless atmosphere was a giant blue eye.

They were French, they were Jews, and they were you. ■

Excerpt from The Book Thief, pages 349-350

Book recommended: by Markus Zusak (New York, NY: Alfred A. Knopf; 2005) 552 pages + author interview + discussion guide

RESOURCE

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READING THE WORLD

BLASPHEMY AND

A black and white photograph of a person's face, partially obscured by several layers of torn, crumpled paper. The person's eye and part of their nose are visible through the paper. The lighting is dramatic, with strong highlights and deep shadows.



ND FREE SPEECH

By Paul Marshall

[Editor's note: The following is adapted from a lecture delivered at Hillsdale College's Allan P. Kirby, Jr. Center for Constitutional Studies and Citizenship in Washington, D.C., on February 3, 2012.]

A growing threat to our freedom of speech is the attempt to stifle religious discussion in the name of preventing “defamation of” or “insults to” religion, especially Islam. Resulting restrictions represent, in effect, a revival of blasphemy laws.

Few in the West were concerned with such laws 20 years ago. Even if still on some statute books, they were only of historical interest. That began to change in 1989, when the late Ayatollah Khomeini, then Iran's Supreme Leader, declared it the duty of every Muslim to kill British-based writer Salman Rushdie on the grounds that his novel, *The Satanic Verses*, was blasphemous. Rushdie has survived by

living his life in hiding. Others connected with the book were not so fortunate: its Japanese translator was assassinated, its Italian translator was stabbed, its Norwegian publisher was shot, and 35 guests at a hotel hosting its Turkish publisher were burned to death in an arson attack.

More recently, we have seen eruptions of violence in reaction to Theo van Gogh's and Ayaan Hirsi Ali's film *Submission*; Danish and Swedish cartoons depicting Mohammed; the speech at Regensburg by Pope Benedict XVI on the topic of faith, reason, and religious violence; Geert Wilders' film *Fitna*; and a false *Newsweek* report that the U.S. military had desecrated Korans at Guantanamo. A declaration by Terry Jones—a deservedly obscure Florida pastor with a congregation of less than 50—that he would burn a Koran on September 11, 2010, achieved a perfect media storm, combining American publicity-seeking, Muslim outrage, and the demands of 24 hour news coverage. It even drew the attention of President Obama and senior U.S. military leaders. Dozens of people were murdered as a result.

Such violence in response to purported religious insults is not simply spontaneous. It is also stoked and channeled by governments for political purposes. And the objects and victims of accusations of religious insults are not usually Westerners, but minorities and dissidents in the Muslim world. As Nina Shea and I show in our recent book *Silenced*, accusations of blasphemy or insulting Islam are used systematically in much of that world to send individuals to jail or to bring about intimidation through threats, beatings, and killings.

The Danish cartoons of Mohammed were published in Denmark's largest newspaper, *Jyllands-Posten*, in September 2005. Some were reproduced by newspapers in Muslim countries in order to criticize them. There was no violent response. Violence only erupted after a December 2005 summit in Saudi Arabia of the Organization of the Islamic Conference—now the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC). The summit was convened to discuss sectarian violence and

terrorism, but seized on the cartoons and urged its member states to rouse opposition. It was only in February 2006—five months after the cartoons were published—that Muslims across Africa, Asia, and the Mideast set out from Friday prayers for often violent demonstrations, killing over 200 people.

WESTERN GOVERNMENTS HAVE BEGUN TO GIVE IN TO DEMANDS...FOR CONTROLS ON SPEECH.

The highly controlled media in Egypt and Jordan raised the cartoon issue so persistently that an astonishing 98 percent of Egyptians and 99 percent of Jordanians—knowing little else of Denmark—had heard of them. Saudi Arabia and Egypt urged boycotts of Danish products. Iran and Syria manipulated riots partly to deflect attention from their nuclear projects. Turkey used the cartoons as bargaining chips in negotiations with the U.S. over appointments to NATO. Editors in Algeria, Jordan, India, and Yemen were arrested—and in Syria, journalist Adel Mahfouz was charged with “insulting public religious sentiment”—for suggesting a peaceful response to the controversy. Lars Vilks' later and more offensive 2007 Swedish cartoons and Geert Wilders' 2008 film *Fitna* led to comparatively little outcry, demonstrating further that public reactions are government-driven.

Repression based on charges of blasphemy and apostasy, of course, goes far beyond the stories typically covered in our media. Currently, millions of Baha'is and Ahmadis—followers of religions or interpretations that arose after Islam—are condemned en masse as insulters of Islam, and are subject to discriminatory laws and attacks by mobs, vigilantes, and terrorists. The

Baha'i leadership in Iran is in prison, and there is no penalty in Iran for killing a Baha'i. In Somalia, al Shebaab, an Islamist group that controls much of that country, is systematically hunting down and killing Christians. In 2009, after allegations that a Koran had been torn, a 1,000-strong mob with Taliban links rampaged through Christian neighborhoods in Punjab, Pakistan's largest province, killing seven people, six of whom, including two children, were burned alive. Pakistani police did not intervene.

Throughout the Muslim world, Sunni, Shia, and Sufi Muslims may be persecuted for differing from the version of Islam promulgated by locally hegemonic religious authorities. Saudi Arabia represses Shiites, especially Ismailis. Iran represses Sunnis and Sufis. In Egypt, Shia leaders have been imprisoned and tortured.

In Afghanistan, Shia scholar Ali Mohaqeq Nasab, editor of *Haqqoqi-Zen* magazine, was imprisoned by the government for publishing “un-Islamic” articles that criticized stoning as a punishment for adultery. Saudi democracy activists Ali al-Demaini, Abdullah al-Hamed, and Matruk al-Faleh were imprisoned for using “un-Islamic terminology,” such as “democracy” and “human rights,” when calling for a written constitution. Saudi teacher Mohammed al-Harbi was sentenced to 40 months in jail and 750 lashes for “mocking religion” after discussing the Bible in class and making pro-Jewish remarks. Egyptian Nobel prize winner in literature Naguib Mahfouz reluctantly abandoned his lifelong resistance to censorship and sought permission from the clerics of Al-Azhar University to publish his novel *Children of Gebelawi*, hitherto banned for blasphemy. Mahfouz subsequently lived under constant protection after being stabbed by a young Islamist, leaving him partly paralyzed.

After Mohammed Younas Shaikh, a member of Pakistan's Human Rights Commission, raised questions about Pakistan's policies in Kashmir, he was charged with having blasphemed in one of his classes. In Bangladesh, Salahuddin Choudhury was imprisoned for hurting “religious feelings” by advocating peaceful relations with Israel. In Iran, Ayatollah Boroujerdi was imprisoned for arguing that

"political leadership by clergy" was contrary to Islam, and cleric Mohsen Kadivar was imprisoned for "publishing untruths and disturbing public minds" after writing *Theories of the State in Shiite Jurisprudence*, which questioned the legal basis of Ayatollah Khomeini's view of government. Other charges brought against Iranians include "fighting against God," "dissension from religious dogma," "insulting Islam," "propagation of spiritual liberalism," "promoting pluralism," and, my favorite, "creating anxiety in the minds of... Iranian officials."

Muslim reformers cannot escape being attacked even in the West. In 2006, a group called Al-Munasirun li Rasul al Allah e-mailed over 30 prominent reformers in the West, threatening to kill them unless they repented. Among its targets was Egyptian Saad Eddin Ibrahim, perhaps the best known human rights activist in the Arab world. Another was Ahmad Subhy Mansour, an imam who was imprisoned and had to flee Egypt, in part for his arguments against the death penalty for apostasy. The targets were pronounced "guilty of apostasy, unbelief, and denial of the Islamic established facts" and given three days to "announce their repentance." The message included their addresses and the names of their spouses and children.

Mimount Bousakla, a Belgian senator and daughter of Moroccan immigrants, was forced into hiding by threats of "ritual slaughter" for her criticism of the treatment of women in Muslim communities and of fundamentalist influences in Belgian mosques. Turkish-born Ekin Deligöz, the first Muslim member of Germany's Parliament, received death threats and was placed under police protection after she called for Muslim women to "take off the head scarf."

But the story gets worse. Western governments have begun to give in to demands from the Saudi-based OIC and others for controls on speech. In Austria, for instance, Elisabeth Sabbaditsch-Wolf has been convicted of "denigrating religious beliefs" for her comments about Mohammed during a seminar on radical Islam. Canada's grossly



misnamed “human rights commissions” have hauled writers—including Mark Steyn, who teaches as a distinguished fellow in journalism at Hillsdale College—before tribunals to interrogate them about their writings on Islam. And in Holland and Finland, respectively, politicians Geert Wilders and Jussi Halla-aho have been prosecuted for their comments on Islam in political speeches.

In America, the First Amendment still protects against the criminalization of criticizing Islam. But we face at least two threats still. The first is extra-legal intimidation of a kind already endemic in the Muslim world and increasing in Europe.

In 2009, Yale University Press, in consultation with Yale University, removed all illustrations of Mohammed from its book by Jytte Klausen on the Danish cartoon crisis. It also removed Gustave Doré’s 19th-century illustration of Mohammed in hell from Dante’s *Inferno*. Yale’s formal press statement stressed the earlier refusal by American media outlets to show the cartoons, and noted that their “republication...has repeatedly resulted in violence around the world.”

Another publisher, Random House, rejected at the last minute a historical romance novel about Mohammed’s wife, *Jewel of Medina*, by American writer Sherry Jones. They did so to protect “the safety of the author, employees of Random House, book-sellers, and anyone else who would be involved in distribution and sale of the novel.”

IN FREE SOCIETIES, ALL VIEWS AND ALL RELIGIONS ARE SUBJECT TO CRITICISM AND CONTRADICTION.

The comedy show *South Park* refused to show an image of Mohammed in a bear suit, although it mocked figures from other religions. In response, Molly Norris, a cartoonist for the *Seattle Weekly*, suggested an

“Everybody Draw Mohammed Day.” She quickly withdrew the suggestion and implied that she had been joking. But after several death threats, including from Al-Qaeda, the FBI advised her that she should go into hiding—which she has now done under a new name.

In 2010, Zachary Chesser, a young convert to Islam, pleaded guilty to threatening the creators of *South Park*. And on October 3, 2011, approximately 800 newspapers refused to run a “Non Sequitur” cartoon drawn by Wiley Miller that merely contained a bucolic scene with the caption “Where’s Muhammad?”

Many in our media claim to be self-censoring out of sensitivity to religious feelings, but that claim is repeatedly undercut by their willingness to mock and criticize religions other than Islam. As British comedian Ben Elton observed: “The BBC will let vicar gags pass, but they would not let imam gags pass. They might pretend that it’s, you know, something to do with their moral sensibilities, but it isn’t. It’s because they’re scared.”

The second threat we face is the specter of cooperation between our government and the OIC to shape speech about Islam. A first indication of this came in President Obama’s Cairo speech in 2009, when he declared that he has a responsibility to “fight against negative stereotypes of Islam whenever they appear.” Then in July of last year in Istanbul, Secretary of State Clinton co-chaired—with the OIC—a “High-Level Meeting on Combating Religious Intolerance.” There, Clinton announced another conference with the OIC, this one in Washington, to “exchange ideas” and discuss “implementation” measures our government might take to combat negative stereotyping of Islam. This would not restrict free speech, she said. But the mere fact of U.S. government partnership with the OIC is troublesome. Certainly it sends a dangerous signal, as suggested by the OIC’s Secretary-General Ekmeleddin Ihsanoglu, when he commented in Istanbul that the Obama administration stands “united” with the OIC on speech issues.

The OIC’s charter commits it “to combat defamation of Islam.”

Its current action plan calls for “deterrent punishments” to counter “Islamophobia.” In 2009, an official OIC organ, the “International Islamic Fiqh [Jurisprudence] Academy,” issued *fatwas* calling for speech bans, including “international legislation,” to protect “the interests and values of [Islamic] society.” The OIC does not define what speech should be outlawed, but the repressive practices of its leading member states speak for themselves.

The conference Secretary Clinton announced in Istanbul was held in Washington on December 12–14, 2011, and was closed to the public, with the “Chatham House Rule” restricting the participants (this rule prohibits the identification of who says what, although general content is not confidential). Presentations reportedly focused on America’s deficiencies in its treatment of Muslims and stressed that the U.S. has something to learn in this regard from the other delegations—including Saudi Arabia, despite its ban on Christian churches, its repression of its Shiite population, its textbooks teaching that Jews should be killed, and the fact that it beheaded a woman for sorcery on the opening day of the conference.

The encroachment of *de facto* blasphemy restrictions in the West threatens free speech and the free exchange of ideas. Nor will it bring social peace and harmony. As comedian Rowan Atkinson warns, such laws produce “a veneer of tolerance concealing a snake pit of unaired and unchallenged views.” Norway’s far-reaching restrictions on “hate speech” did not prevent Anders Behring Breivik from slaughtering over 70 people because of his antipathy to Islam: indeed, his writings suggest that he engaged in violence because he believed that he could not otherwise be heard.

In the Muslim world, such restrictions enable Islamists to crush debate. After Salman Taseer, the governor of Punjab, was murdered early last year by his bodyguards for opposing blasphemy laws, his daughter Sara observed: “This is a message to every liberal to shut up or be shot.” Or in the words of Nasr Abu-Zayd, a Muslim

scholar driven out of Egypt: "Charges of apostasy and blasphemy are key weapons in the fundamentalists' arsenal, strategically employed to prevent reform of Muslim societies, and instead confine the world's Muslim population to a bleak, colourless prison of socio-cultural and political conformity."

President Obama should put an end to discussion of speech with the OIC. He should declare clearly that in free societies, all views and all religions are subject to criticism and contradiction. As the late Abdurrahman Wahid, former president of Indonesia, the world's largest Muslim country, and head of Nahdlatul Ulama, the world's largest Muslim organization, wrote in his foreword to *Silenced*, blasphemy laws

...narrow the bounds of acceptable discourse...not only about religion, but also about vast spheres of life, literature, science, and culture in general.... Rather than legally stifle criticism and debate—which will only encourage Muslim fundamentalists in their efforts to impose a spiritually void, harsh, and monolithic understanding of Islam upon all the world—Western authorities should instead firmly defend freedom of expression....

America's founders, who had broken with an old order that was rife with religious persecution and warfare, forbade laws impeding free exercise of religion, abridging freedom of speech, or infringing freedom of the press. We today must do likewise. ■

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Paul Marshall is a senior fellow at the Hudson Institute's Center for Religious Freedom. He has published widely in newspapers and magazines,

including the New York Times, the Wall Street Journal, the Washington Post, First Things, The New Republic, and The Weekly Standard. He is the author or editor of more than 20 books on religion and politics, including *Their Blood Cries Out*, *Religious Freedom in the World*, and *Blind Spot: When Journalists Don't Get Religion*. Most recently, he is the co-author, with Nina Shea, of *Silenced: How Apostasy and Blasphemy Codes are Choking Freedom Worldwide*.



Begging the Question: A Rev

by R. Greg Grooms



"To be, or not to be, that is the question...." Hamlet, Act 3, Scene 1

I admit it: Cormac McCarthy fascinates me. In the seven years since I stumbled across *No Country For Old Men* in an airport bookstore, I've savored every morsel of his writing, including his ten novels, two plays, and one screenplay. Three of his novels—*All the Pretty Horses*, *No Country*, and *The Road*—have made it to the screen so far, and both of his plays, albeit only on TV. Last year's HBO production of his play *The Sunset Limited* is the subject of this review.

There are but two characters in *TSL*: Black, a poorly educated ex-con, played by Samuel L. Jackson, and White, a university professor played by Tommy Lee Jones. The play begins just after Black rescued White, who tried to commit suicide by throwing himself in front of a commuter train. Black takes White home to his shabby apartment, and the two spend the next hour and a half debating the meaning of life.

Black is a believer and argues simply but eloquently for the gospel. His approach to evangelism is the one I was taught years ago in the First Baptist Church of my home town: start by telling what Jesus has done for you. I'm sad to say it's an approach that never worked well for me. At the time, I felt this was due to the fact

that my testimony is boring; there simply isn't much drama in growing up white, middle-class, and Baptist. Black's story, in contrast, packs all the pop mine lacked. When White learns that Black has spent time in prison, he asks him to tell him a story about his time in the Big House. Black responds with a tale that my evangelism teachers would have been proud of: one day in the prison cafeteria he got into a fight with another inmate that produced two results—his salvation and permanent brain damage for his assailant. There are, of course, more details to the story than this, but trust me...you need to hear Samuel L. Jackson tell it, not me.

Unfortunately Black's testimony isn't any more persuasive than mine used to be. White just isn't interested in what Jesus can do to improve his quality of life. Offers of eternal life make him shudder. You see, existence itself is *The Problem* in his eyes. Is he an atheist? Sure, but that's not why he tried to commit suicide. White's dilemma is the Dilemma of the Secular Existentialist. On one hand, life is whatever you make of it, and you are free to do with it as you will. On the other, life is whatever you make of it, and if despite your best efforts, it doesn't turn out well, why not end it all? Indeed, in his opinion this is the only honest choice available to anyone. In his words, *"If people could see the world for what it truly is, see their lives for what they truly are without dreams and illusions, I don't believe they could offer*

Review of *The Sunset Limited*

the first reason why they should not elect to die as soon as possible."

Cormac McCarthy is a master at writing dialogue, and it is the richness of his dialogue even more than the strength of his characters that carries *TSL*. If the idea of listening to an hour and a half of conversation sounds boring to you, think again. Conversation this good is rare, and if I had McCarthy writing my dialogues for me, I'd never tire of talking to anyone. Still, like good food, dialogue this rich should be digested slowly if at all possible. So if you have the time and the inclination, please get a copy of the play and read it before watching the movie. It'll set the stage (no pun intended) for what follows. And if you've already read the play, please watch the film, too. Remember what it was like to read Shakespeare the first time? The beauty of the words, getting to know the characters, the delight of the story? It was good, wasn't it? And then remember what it was like to see *Much Ado About Nothing* performed well, by real artists. If nothing else, it brought home the simple fact that plays were meant to be performed, not just read. *TSL* is at its heart a play about whether or not life is worth living, and while you can learn a lot about Cormac McCarthy's answers to that question by reading it, you'll learn even more by watching.

The tagline on *The Sunset Limited* DVD reads, "Nothing is ever black or white." I imagine it's the product of an ad exec's imagination rather than McCarthy's, for the predominant shades in all his work are black and white. He sees the world, rightly, as

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION/DISCUSSION

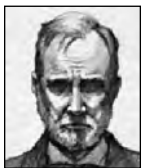
1. What are you thinking about as *The Sunset Limited* ends? First impressions are what we're after here, not considered opinions. Spit out what's on your mind without pausing too long to consider why it's there.
2. One of the first images in *TSL* is the locked door of Black's apartment. It's an image that the director returns to more than once during the play. Why? What idea or feeling is reinforced by its repetition?
3. Early in their discussion, Black tells White, "Belief ain't like unbelief. If you're a believer and you finally got to come to the well of belief itself, then you ain't got to look no further. There ain't no further. But the unbeliever's got a problem. He's set out to unravel the world. For everything he can point to that ain't true, he leaves two false things laying there." Discuss this quote. What is Black arguing here? Do you agree with him?
4. White saves one of his best points for late in the play, when he tells Black, "And brotherhood, justice, eternal life? Good God man.... Show me a religion that prepares one for nothingness, for death. That's a church I might enter. Yours prepares one only for more life, for dreams and illusions and lies. Banish the fear of death from men's hearts and they wouldn't live a day. Who would want this nightmare but for fear of the next. The shadow of the axe hangs over every joy. Every road ends in death, every friendship, every love. Torment, loss, betrayal, pain, suffering, age, indignity, hideous lingering illness...and all of it with a single conclusion. For you and everyone and everything you have ever chosen to care for." Discuss this quote. What makes this perspective attractive? In your opinion why does White want to persuade Black that this is so?
5. If you were in Black's position, how might you have handled the encounter with White differently? At what points in the conversation would you have tried to take it in a different direction than Black did? Why?
6. Same questions as above, but from White's perspective. How might you have argued his case better than he did?
7. In several recent interviews, Tommy Lee Jones said that *The Sunset Limited* reminds him of a Flannery O'Connor quote: "Faith is what someone knows to be true whether they believe it or not." Discuss this quote and why, in your opinion, Jones ties it to *The Sunset Limited*.
8. In your opinion, who wins the argument between Black and White? Justify your answer.
9. The last image in *TSL* is, conspicuously and deliberately, a sunrise. What did it signify to you? Why do you think the director calls our attention to it?

a world of sharp contrasts. Either we make choices and are responsible or our lives are ruled by fate. Either evil is real or all our tragedies are pointless. Either life is worth living or it isn't. What's hard to find amidst his blacks and whites is a clue to which he thinks is so.

I've read lots of reviews of the play and the movie. I've read the play out loud with friends, watched the film with them, and spent hours discussing both...and in our discussions I've noticed a consistent pattern. Believers think, "Our guy won. His arguments were better. He carried the day." Secularists think the same things, but about White, not Black. I think that *The Sunset Limited* is a carefully balanced presentation of what McCarthy considers some of the best arguments each side has to offer. If so, in his mind it's a tossup in the end. You make your choice and you place your bets. Everything is riding on your bet, but you can't know if your bet was a good one until it's too late. If I'm right, then *The Sunset Limited* begs an important question: not the one I started this review with—"To be or not to be"—but rather Pontius Pilate's question to Jesus in John 18, "What is truth?"

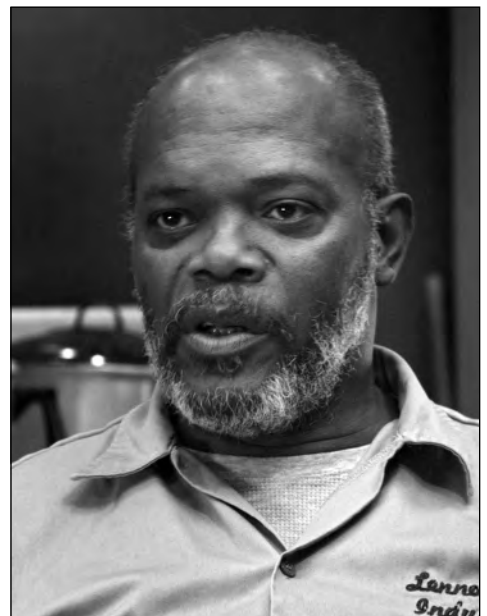
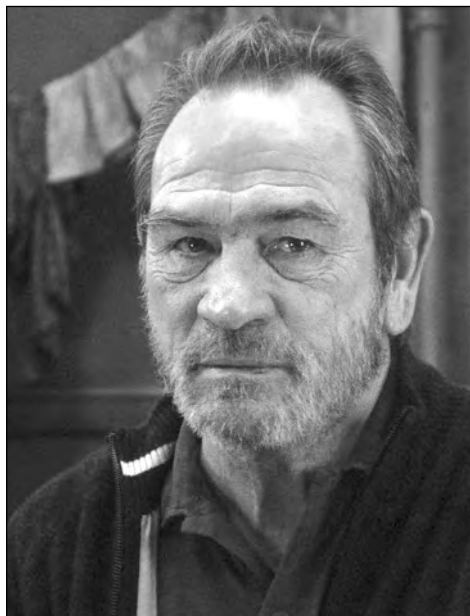
And as Hamlet also said, "There's the rub." Living well without answers—the American Way—is a comfortable make-believe. As Dick Keyes once memorably put it, it's like sailing first class on the Titanic: we go out in style. But having good answers that can't be lived is no better. A belief in God that doesn't translate into hope that existence has not always been and will not always be hell just isn't attractive to White or anyone else I know. Fortunately the gospel according to Jesus does just that, even if the gospel according to Cormac McCarthy does not. ■

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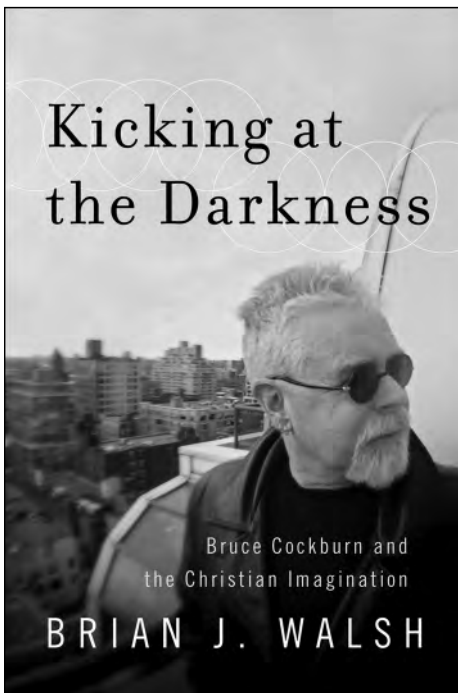
Greg Grooms, a contributing editor for *Critique*, lives with his wife Mary Jane in Hill House, a large home across the street from the University of Texas in

Austin, where they regularly welcome students to meals, to warm hospitality, to ask questions, and to seriously wrestle with the proposition that Jesus is actually Lord of all.



A Psalmist for Our Day

By Denis Haack



Bruce Cockburn is a superb guitarist, a fact evident on his albums and especially in his live performances, and a fine lyricist. He has honed his musical gift since childhood, and is one of those musicians who always aims for the heart rather than the Top 40. U2's Bono refers to Cockburn as a "psalmist," which is a good term for an artist whose faith has always shaped and informed his work without sliding into religiosity.

Everybody's too damn busy these days...

*My so-called buddy never called me back
called me back, called me back
my so-called buddy never called me back
I don't know what to think about that*

*I coulda been croaking on the floor of my flat
floor of my flat, floor of my flat
I coulda been croaking on the floor of my flat
the bugger never called me back*

*Then again he could have troubles himself
troubles himself, troubles himself
then again he could have troubles himself
I better try him once more*

*He could be going through a bitter divorce
bitter divorce, bitter divorce
he could be going through a bitter divorce
or quadruple bypass*

*[From "Called Me Back" on
Small Source of Comfort]*

Cockburn recognizes how exquisite life truly is as we journey from birth to death, and how we leave, as individuals and a species an indelible mark on our planet and in history. Cockburn has not shied away from political themes, losing him fans who are so caught in some political ideology that his questions seem impudent. Once while visiting a Canadian base in the Middle East, Cockburn witnessed the bodies of dead soldiers being loaded on a transport for the long trip home.

*Here come the dead boys
moving slowly past
the pipes and prayers and strained
commanding voices
and the tears in our hearts
make an ocean we're all in
all in this together don't you know*

*You can die on your sofa
safe inside your home
or die in a mess of flame and shrapnel
we all in our time go
you know you're not alone
you're in the hearts of everybody here*

*[From "Each One Lost" on
Small Source of Comfort]*

Fans of Bruce Cockburn and those who want to think seriously about popular music will be interested in *Kicking at the Darkness*, a book in which Brian Walsh walks us through Cockburn's music with loving attention to detail. "I'm not trying to put any worldview in a book," Walsh says. "Rather, I am offering an exploratory, suggestive, and hopefully creative appreciation of a biblically rooted worldview that is in playful dialogue with Cockburn's body of work." You may not always agree with Walsh at each point, but you'll find his musings both meditative and thoughtful, one model for responding Christianly to the music that resonates so deeply in the hearts of so many.

Source: Lyrics from liner notes, *Small Source of Comfort*; Walsh from *Kicking at the Darkness*, p. 18.

Book recommended: *Kicking at the Darkness: Bruce Cockburn and the Christian Imagination* by Brian J. Walsh (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press; 2011) 190 pp. + discography + indices.

Album recommended: *Small Source of Comfort* by Bruce Cockburn (True North Records; 2011).

BACK PAGE (DARKENED ROOM: *THE SUNSET LIMITED*, CONTINUED)



Credits for *The Sunset Limited*

Starring

Tommy Lee Jones (White)

Samuel L. Jackson (Black)

Director: Tommy Lee Jones

Writer: Cormac McCarthy

Producer: Tommy Lee Jones and others

Cinematography: Paul Elliott

USA 2011; 91 min; Unrated