

# Critique

Helping Christians Develop Skill in Discernment

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# Editor's Note



## Neo-pagan sexuality.

The sex scene in *The Matrix: Reloaded* is lengthy, its impact increased by the pulsating drum score which accompanies it. It was not created to be missed. Some viewers are surprised by it, though Larry and

Andy Wachowski's earlier (1996) film, *Bound* should have prepared us for it. It is easy to dismiss it as gratuitous, insignificant to the meaning of the film and included merely to pander to the tastes of a movie-going adolescent audience. That strikes me as dubious, however, since surely the Wachowskis knew the film was so highly anticipated that it did not need sex to entice people to see it. The scene went on far longer than necessary (not the only scene with that flaw), and though we can't know for sure until *Matrix: Revolutions*, I suggest that perhaps it has significance for the message of the films.

The *Matrix* films are religiously postmodern, borrowing elements from Eastern religion, pop spirituality, and Christianity. In *The Matrix: Reloaded*, the Wachowskis provide us a glimpse of Zion, the last refuge of the human race in the war with the machines. The temple/sex scene is crucial because it is not only in the heart of Zion, it has religious meaning as a final assembly to prepare for the last desperate battle for survival. And notice how it is depicted. The temple gathering begins with a "prayer" followed by a message of hope from Morpheus. Then what begins like a rock concert slowly becomes orgiastic. The film cuts back and forth between the massive crowd gyrating together and Neo and Trinity's love-making off by themselves. This is Zion's preparation for war, their ritual of worship and unity. I can't imagine a more powerfully seductive cinematic image of neo-paganism.

Neo-paganism as a world view involves a reverence for nature, an intimate expression of our connections with nature and with the divinity (male and female) which is immanent within it. Thus neo-pagans desire to be in tune with the seasons, the cycles of life and death within nature. Fertility rites and sacred prostitution were part of pagan worship in the ancient world because it was believed that such rituals made them one with one another and with nature, which aligned human life with the ongoing cycles of the universe and the fertility of the land. Seen in this light, the orgy in the temple in Zion shows the human race doing the one thing that machines can not do, the people celebrating as their savior, Neo, is united to his consort.

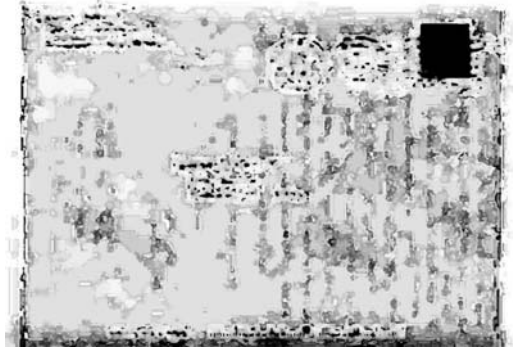
As I watched the film, I thought of *The Wickerman* which depicts the conflict between the paganism of the Druids and Christianity. Here too, sexuality plays an important role.

I am not suggesting that people who see *Reloaded* will seek to frolic with neo-pagans around bonfires in the woods. I would suggest, however, that for every neo-pagan we meet, many more of our neighbors are increasingly seduced by ideas and values that are compatible with a neo-pagan perspective.

The true people of Zion must winsomely counter the misunderstanding that all we believe about sex is "Thou shalt not." To do that we will have to first regain a biblical view of human sexuality and of its mysterious relationship to the believer's "union with Christ," a reality which will be consummated when our divine Bridegroom returns. ■

~Denis Haack

# Dialogue



## Re: ritual

Note our new Dialogue e-mail:  
[letters@ransomfellowship.org](mailto:letters@ransomfellowship.org)

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

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

**W**hen discussing ritual ["The Value of Ritual," *Critique* #3 - 2003], meaning and culture need their place. The meaning of a ritual is of primary importance; when Jones mentions returning to faith or comfort while dying, it is not ritual but meaning that brings repentance and hope. When we forget a ritual's meaning, we may retain the ritual but invent a new meaning that fits current belief and culture (hence such Christian "urban legends" as the catechetical properties of "The Twelve Days of Christmas"). Ritual powerfully reminds us of truth; novel meanings attached to rituals, or subtle shifts of meaning, can emasculate a ritual or make it dangerous. 19th century revivalists used the altar call mentioned to communicate the fact that those who seek God now can find salvation instantly. In churches where the same 25 people have gathered for the last 25 years, the altar call can wear away at faith. If the preacher, who has known these congregants for decades, is still uncertain of their place before God, how can anyone be sure of his own standing? Doubt about my own standing before God plagued me for years, until someone pointed out that God can be trusted to keep his promises, and he says those who seek him will find him. This 19th-century meaning of the altar call was not communicated to me in the 20th, and I say it was a terrible loss.

Ritual does not communicate truth automatically. It is a difficult matter to discern when a culture has changed enough that familiar rituals need change to accurately reflect truth—not merely to our neighbors but even to ourselves. The language of our culture should be carefully reexamined. Otherwise we run the risk of subtly shifting our beliefs over time, and anointing novel theologies as "apostolic" because, after all, don't our ancient rituals so clearly express those ideas?

Ritual is not valuable apart from meaning, and meaning is communicated through

the language and symbolism of a culture. As a Protestant married to a Roman Catholic, I have constant opportunities to compare Christian rituals and find deep meanings. I have been delightfully enriched, but those rituals would be mere habits without time spent considering their meaning. To twist a famous quote, *the unexamined ritual is not worth repeating*. And parents should consider what their church's rituals say to their children, not just themselves. Please ask! You might be surprised why they think you do what you do.

**Erik Powers**  
Nunn, CO

### **P**reston Jones responds:

Thanks to Mr. Powers for writing such a thoughtful letter. The points he makes are good. He is of course correct when he says that it's "not ritual but meaning that brings repentance and hope," though I don't fully agree that the "unexamined ritual" is necessarily "not worth repeating." It seems to me that the value of even an unexamined ritual lies in a person's suddenly finding meaning in an act that had been rote for so long. I think of Evelyn Waugh's gorgeous novel *Brideshead Revisited*, where we see apparently empty rituals setting down roots in people's lives and, in time, helping to bring them back to faith. Another novel I've read, *Thinks* by David Lodge, describes a similar phenomenon. In any event, I think that Mr. Powers' letter is well worth readers' consideration.

## Questions Since 9/11

**A**fter the attack on the World Trade Center, Philip Yancey, a contributor to *Christianity Today* published a column of “20 questions that nag me after September 11.” He is a thoughtful author so his questions warrant some thoughtful reflection by believers seeking to be discerning. None of the questions have simple answers, and each question prompts

follow-up questions that are also worth discussion.

Our conversation about these issues will be enriched if the group is not limited to those who hold identical political convictions and commitments. If possible, invite people who are willing to listen with care and speak in love but who don’t necessarily always agree—for example, our discussion of question #1 will be

more lively if the group includes both pacifists and just war proponents. (Mr. Yancey’s questions are noted here by quotation marks.) ■

~Denis Haack

**Source:** “I Was Just Wondering...” by Philip Yancey in *Christianity Today* (February 4, 2002) p. 136. The question about Bono and Africa was posed by Ransom Board member Steve Garber.

### QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. “Would a doctrinaire pacifist have participated in the attempt to retake the cockpit of United Airlines Flight 93 by force, in order to save the lives targeted by the hijackers?”
2. “How do you demolish an ideology of fanaticism when, by killing those who preach it, you attract even more converts to their fanaticism?”
3. “During the war with the Soviet Union, Afghans lost one-third of their dwelling places. Yet, thanks to their tradition of hospitality, not a single person went homeless. Why does the richest nation in the world have so many homeless people while one of the poorest nations has none?”
4. “Could someone explain to me why the U.S. threatened to break the patent on Cipro after three anthrax deaths, yet vigorously resists ‘tampering with intellectual property rights’ when someone suggests breaking the patent on AIDS drugs for the sake of 25 million infected Africans?”
5. “What do Christians who advocate a simple lifestyle think about our leaders urging us to spend money as an act of patriotism? What do they think about all the people who lose their jobs when we stop spending money? Would Jesus help his neighbor by spending money, or by maintaining his ascetic lifestyle?”
6. “Why do we Americans think of ourselves as such generous people when we allocate a smaller percentage of our Gross Domestic Product to foreign aid than does any other industrialized nation?”
7. “Why do the people who quote statistics about foreign aid fail to note that Americans prefer to give, not through government grants, but through private organizations such as the Red Cross and the Salvation Army?”
8. What question(s) would you add to this list? How would you say life has “changed” since 9/11?
9. Since Islam is clearly growing in the U.S., gaining adherents both via immigration and conversion, what is the church doing to prepare Christians to understand their Muslim neighbors and reach them with the gospel?
10. If a war appears to be both just and guaranteed to close opportunities for Christian outreach, what stance is required by Christians who hold to the just-war tradition?
11. If no weapons of mass destruction are found in Iraq, what does this suggest about the war, especially since there are many other countries ruled by cruel dictators whose people need to be liberated from their oppression?
12. What does it say about American society and American foreign policy when it takes Bono, a rock star, to focus U.S. attention on the overwhelming needs of Africa?

## Recapturing the Imagination

### An excerpt from *Scribbling in the Sand* by Michael Card.

The imagination is the bridge between the heart and the mind, integrating both, allowing us to think/understand with our hearts and feel/emote with our minds. It is a vehicle for truth. Through the use of images, metaphors, stories and paradoxes that demand our attention, it calls for our interaction. God shows an awesome regard for the imagination in his Word. I believe the human imagination is the door at which Jesus says he stands and knocks in Revelation 3:20.

Only a few verses later, as John's awesome vision begins in Revelation 4:1, his comment is especially meaningful: "After this I looked and there before me was a door standing open." Jesus knocked on the door of

John's heart and mind. John opened the door of his imagination and received one of the most stunning revelations in Scripture.

Another way to grasp the power of the imagination is to realize that the sins that exercise the most control over us take place in the imagination. Jesus defined lust as taking place not primarily in dark alleys but in dark imaginations. Greed happens not when I make off with my neighbor's goods but when I imagine that they are mine.

To harness the imagination, or better yet, to bring it under submission to Christ is something about which we don't talk or pray or do enough. But before it can be redemptively used, it must be reclaimed.

"What is the experience of song writing like for you?" people often ask. The only experience the writing of every song has in common is what I would call a sense of being burdened. What I am to say is not in the least clear to me. There is just the burden to say

something. One of the Hebrew words for prophecy literally means "burden."

The narratives of the Pentateuch are not all that difficult to understand. The poetry of the Wisdom writings, the songs and the sonnets still resonate in our ears much as they did in David's day. But the prophets—they are another matter entirely.

The prophets' burden was to call God's people to repent. When the prophet spoke of fire from heaven coming to consume the unrepentant, the idea was not to sit looking toward the sky to see if the prediction would come true. No, the point was and still is, "Change your life now!"

***This is the heart of prophecy: God speaking to us in such a way as to recapture our imaginations.***

But if the purpose is that simple, then why all the indirect communication, mysterious visions and metaphors? Why didn't God simply state his case before Israel and us? A simple demonstration of his power, followed by the choice of bowing the knee or burning, would seem much more to the point than all the bizarre activity and ravings of the prophets.

Doesn't the Pentateuch give numerous examples of this kind of communication and how it ultimately failed to capture the hearts of men and women? Taking captive the human mind and heart involves more than fear or facts, emotion or knowledge.

Being the Creator-Artist that he is, the great Romancer, the perfectly loving Father, God calls out to us, sings to us, paints images in our minds through the prophets' visions. These sounds and songs stand at the door of our own imaginations and knock. Through them God opens the door of his own inner life to us. This is the heart of prophecy: God

speaking to us in such a way as to recapture our imaginations.

The prophets teach us to learn from, to hunger for, to listen to God's voice. They open our eyes to a vision as grand as the greatest of their own visions, to a world alive with God's speaking at every turn, in every moment, no matter how mundane it may seem. Through the prophets we begin to glimpse a God who loves us so much that he calls himself our Husband, who longs to embrace us as Father, who ultimately comes to us as Son.

The prophets use as their tools rich language and marvelous metaphors, the language of the imagination. Isaiah speaks of the sun and moon being ashamed; the trees clap their hands. God is seen as a Rock. Jeremiah hides his linen belt (Jeremiah 13). Ezekiel constructs a toy town in the dust (Ezekiel 4).

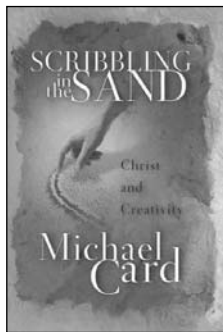
Hosea knowingly marries a prostitute (Hosea 1:2).

We learn from the prophets that the tools best suited for communicating to the imagination are images, parables and sometimes even bizarre activity! At a deeper level, we learn that if we are to effect a permanent change in people's hearts, we must do more than simply teach them facts or reduce them to some emotional experience. Like the prophets, we must learn to reach out to the heart as well as the mind by speaking to the imagination. We must allow our audience the freedom to make realizations on their own, as with the parables of the prophets, particularly the prophet Jesus! ■

~excerpted, Michael Card

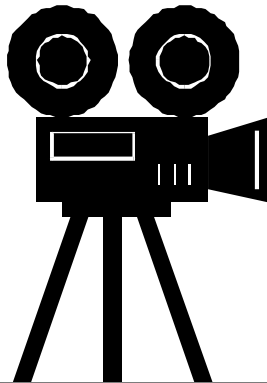
#### Excerpted from:

*Scribbling in the Sand: Christ & Creativity* by Michael Card (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press; 2002) pp. 55-61. Copyright © 2002 by Michael Card.



# The Darkened Room

## Is it Real or Is it Memorex?



### A review of **The Matrix: Reloaded**

by Drew Trotter

This review assumes knowledge of *The Matrix*, the first movie in the trilogy: *The Matrix*, *The Matrix: Reloaded*, and *The Matrix: Revolutions* (due out in November). If you have not yet seen *The Matrix*, you should rent the video or DVD before reading on.

In reflecting once more on what the *Matrix* movies are all about, I can't help but remember an old television ad that showed an opera singer hitting a high note that burst a wine glass. The voice-over then asked, "Is it real, or is it Memorex?" The point was to convince the audience that so little difference existed between the quality of the live voice and that of the taped voice that either might have broken the glass.

So seems the motive of the *Matrix* movies, at least as far along as the story has taken us. *The Matrix: Reloaded* opened in May to an expected thunderous box office take, and it continues the theme of perception versus reality dominant in the first movie. Andy and Larry Wachowski, the brothers who created the whole fiction and also direct the films, seem bent on making us question whether we are in a waking or a dream world. As Morpheus, one of the main characters of both movies so far, says in *The Matrix*, "If you were in a world of your own choosing, how would you know the dream world from the real one?" Moving back and forth between the machine-created Matrix and the human world of existence, the line between the two is constantly questioned and sometimes blurred. In the first film, Morpheus

and Neo regularly doubted whether what we perceive is the world of human reality or a computer program. In this film, the doubt is extended and subtly deepened.

One of the central questions in the first film was whether or not staying in the real world of, for example, goopy mush for food was worth it since, in the Matrix world of illusion, one could enjoy steak that, though virtual, nevertheless tasted delicious. Similarly, the Matrix world has "all the comforts of home" while the real world is one of constant war with the machines who control the Matrix, a world of few comforts and many dangers. Cypher, the traitorous villain of *The Matrix*, decided for the Matrix world, and attempted to subvert the human project by killing Neo and giving the machines access to Zion.

This question returns in *Reloaded* and in many ways becomes a stronger question for the main characters. Neo encounters temptations that make him more and more deeply question his commitment to the human world. In addition, other options present themselves than simply the two of *The Matrix*: side with humans or with the machines? In *Reloaded*, Agent Smith, ironically freed from the Matrix by Neo's having killed him, and seeking to grab power for himself, is joined by a new character, the Merovingian, who, though within the Matrix, has a measure of freedom from the control of the machines, and seeks power to control his destiny.

Both these characters are entirely within the Matrix but do not obey its rules. They are rogue computer programs who work against the machines. So are they "real" or illusory? The Merovingian's pompous monologue about cause and effect versus free choice highlights the problem: "Choice," he says, "is created by those with power," telling Neo, Morpheus

#### Film Credits

##### Starring:

Laurence Fishburne  
(Morpheus)  
Randall Duk Kim  
(The Keymaker)  
Carrie-Anne Moss  
(Trinity)  
Adrian & Neil Rayment  
(Twin #2 and #1)  
Keanu Reeves  
(Neo)  
Hugo Weaving  
(Agent Smith)  
Lambert Wilson  
(Merovingian)

##### Directors:

Wachowski Brothers

##### Screenwriters:

Wachowski Brothers

##### Producers:

Bruce Berman  
Grant Hill  
and others

##### Original Music:

P.O.D.  
Rob Zombie  
and others

##### Cinematographer:

Bill Pope

##### Costumes:

Kym Barrett

Runtime: 138 minutes

Rated R for sci-fi violence  
and some sexuality.

and Trinity that they do not really choose anything, but only experience the illusion of choice, pre-figuring the discussion Neo has later in the movie with The Architect (who has some important revelations of his own to add to this debate). The Merovingian attempts to convince the three main characters to give up their battle, as does The Architect in a different, more subtle way. Add to this further disclosures about the Oracle that complicate the questions of reality and illusion, and by the end of *Reloaded*, anyone familiar with the *Matrix* world is completely unsure of what is real and what is not, or at least of what the Wachowski brothers desire you to think about reality. After *Reloaded*, one really wonders whether the red or the blue pill is better.

Lest one think all this discussion of philosophy is unfair—that this is just an action movie after all—we are only scratching the surface of themes that derive from Plato to Baudrillard (the Wachowskis reportedly made several cast members read his book of essays entitled *Simulacra and Simulation*, the book that Neo used to hide his illegal computer discs in the first movie). *Reloaded* even has as a cast member Princeton philosopher and social critic Cornel West, who as Councillor West offers the advice, “Comprehension is not requisite for cooperation,” a saying apparently popping up on t-shirts in California nowadays. West was quoted in *The New York Times* as saying that he and the Wachowski brothers “had bonded over



‘wrestling with the meaning of life and the purpose of human existence.’ They share an affinity for plucking ideas from religion, philosophy, pop music, television and

movies, and synthesizing them into a prophetic, liberating message. They want to make the world a more philosophical place.”



***Andy and Larry Wachowski, the brothers who created The Matrix, seem bent on making us question whether we are in a waking or a dream world.***

There are continuations of other ideas, introduced in the first film, too. The religious syncretism, particularly of Christianity, Gnosticism and Zen Buddhism, so rampant in *The Matrix* comes to the fore as speeches at the community gathering in Zion are called “prayers,” and offerings and oblations are presented to Neo as the savior of his people. The major conflict in Zion is between a new character, Commander Lock, head of the city’s security forces, and Morpheus over whether to treat the conflict with the machines on the basis of prophecies or rational, military decision. Questions of choice vs. destiny, love vs. its power, science vs. religion (or seemingly reason vs. religion), human dependence on machines vs. who is actually dependent on whom—all these are taken a step or two further, or merely repackaged, but almost none are resolved.

Two important differences from the first film should be noted. First, while *The Matrix* was almost completely devoid of sex and nudity, *Reloaded* has an extended, explicit sex scene between Neo and Trinity; even worse it occurs in the context of a grotesquely orgiastic dance scene in Zion, replete with the sexually charged drums that Allan Bloom claimed fifteen years ago were the center of the sexual license of the music of our age. The scene is an idiotic one, and has been much panned (Frank Rich: “...the movie’s multicultural orgy scene looks like a

Club Med luau run amok, but maybe the inspiration for that was Kahlil Gibran.”), but it is something parents should be well aware of before allowing their children to watch the movie. The scene was largely the reason for the movie’s R rating.

The second difference to note is more positive. For the first time I can ever remember in watching a film, characters seem to be cast without any reference to their race, and this feels entirely natural. So an action sequence with Jada Pinkett or Laurence Fishburne seems just as “right” as does one starring Carrie-Anne Moss or Keanu Reeves, and intimate discussions of love and loss occur just as often with as much feeling between people of color as between whites. Hopefully, this indicates a real advancement in social consciousness, as many critics have mentioned this fact.

*Reloaded* was not intended to stand by itself as a film in any sense, as, for instance, *The Empire Strikes Back* or *The Two Towers* were within their respective series. Both those movies, while clearly ending with more of the story to be told, had satisfying conclusions in which events were finalized, and the arc of the story would begin in whole new places in the next episode. *Reloaded*, on the other hand, ends in the middle of the last day of mankind’s history unless something happens fast, and so questions are in no way

**continued on the next page...**

# The Darkened Room cont.

resolved, tensions in no way relieved. This gives a “stay tuned” feel to the film, and so we must. ■

~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 © 2003 by Andrew H. Trotter, Jr.

#### Further Reading:

Edward Rothstein, “Philosophers Draw on the Film *Matrix*,” *The New York Times*, May 24, 2003.

“God-Talk After the *Matrix*, Parts I & II” *Terry Mattingly’s Religion Column*, 5/14 & 21/2003.

“And the Oscar for Best Scholar...”, Michael Agger, *The New York Times*, May 18, 2003.

## QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. What character did you most identify with in *The Matrix: Reloaded*? Why? What character traits attracted you to them?
2. What do you think will be the resolution of the problems of perspective and reality raised by the two movies so far? How does your answer square with the Bible’s understanding of reality? To what passages would you point in order to discover what it teaches about the objectivity of reality?
3. Do you like discussing philosophy? Why do you think that is?
4. What do you make of the names and themes, obviously drawn from the Bible, that the movie uses for some of its main characters? How “Christian” are they in your opinion?
5. Neo and Trinity’s love for each other is obviously a central factor in the film. How is their relationship like that of a Christian couple? How is it not?
6. In *The Matrix*, Neo was clearly the disciple of Morpheus, learning new things from him at almost every point. How is their relationship different in *The Matrix: Reloaded*?
7. If the temple/sex scene is viewed as a cinematic image of neo-paganism, how does this change the message of the film? How might this scene make neo-paganism as a world view more attractive in our post-Christian world? What plans should you make to learn more about neo-paganism? (You might begin with John Seel’s “Meet Your Neighborhood Neo-Pagan” available on the Resources section of Ransom’s website, [www.ransomfellowship.org](http://www.ransomfellowship.org)).
8. To what extent are you comfortable discussing issues like the ones raised by *Reloaded* with people who do not share your deepest convictions and values?
9. If you met someone who told you, quite seriously, that they had become convinced that human beings ultimately could not prove a difference between reality and illusion, how would you react? What would you say?
10. Compare and contrast the technical aspects of *The Matrix* and *The Matrix: Reloaded*.
11. Imagine that you asked ten non-Christians to summarize the evangelical Christian view of sexuality. What do you think they would say? Where did they learn this view? To what extent does it summarize the biblical perspective?
12. What are your thoughtful non-Christian friends taking from *Reloaded*? What issues are they most interested in discussing? Why is that? Your Christian friends? Why the difference or similarities?





## The Lament of Hope in Grief

In 1998 Albert Hsu's father had a stroke. One side effect was clinical depression, and three months later he committed suicide. In 1681 Richard Baxter's wife descended into eleven days of delirium and died at the age of 45, weakened by the blood-letting her physicians had prescribed. Both Terry Hsu and Margaret Baxter were believers, both left behind a family who loved them deeply, and both deaths prompted their survivors to reflect on their grief in the light of God's grace in Christ.

In *Grieving a Suicide*, Albert Hsu, an editor at InterVarsity Press reflects on the hard issues which accompany his father's suicide: Why did it happen? What does his suicide say about his faith in Christ? Where is the comfort of the Holy Spirit in the midst of grief? Could I have stopped it?

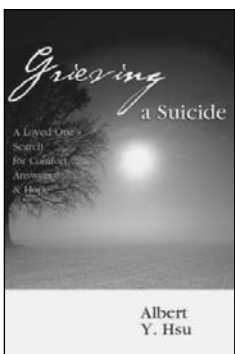
"Suicide teaches us that life is uncertain," Hsu writes. "A personal tragedy such as suicide challenges our presumptions about the nature of life. Before the suicide, we may have lived with an unconscious expectation that we are generally in control of our lives. Western society encourages me to believe that I am the master of my fate, the captain of my soul. But this is not true. In a cosmic sense, what certainty do we have that life will be rosy? What reasonable expectation do we have that a life of ease, comfort and lack of disturbance should be normative? After a suicide, we realize that life is not so definite. On the contrary, life is uncertain. We have no guarantee that our lives will be as we envision them. We are subject to tragedy, reversals of fortune, loss of lives. Life is uncertain, for we are ultimately not in control."

Hsu doesn't flinch from the difficult questions, and knows when to speak and

when to be silent—he is wise enough to be content with the difference between real answers and the need to walk by faith in the midst of uncertainty and mystery. *Grieving a Suicide* is not always a pleasant book, but it is a hopeful one. Suicide is so common that

Christians would be advised to read this book; it is so grace-full that the reading is worth while.

In *A Grief Sanctified*, theologian J. I. Packer introduces us to one of his beloved Puritans who reflected deeply on grief from the perspective of biblical faith. Packer



***“Believers no less than others regularly find that the trauma of living through grief is profound and prolonged.”***

is convinced that our call to faithfulness as Christians embraces not only all of our life, but our dying as well. Without for a moment minimizing or (worse), sentimentalizing the horror of death and the pain of grief, we can actually prepare for it so that in our dying as well as in our living, Christ is glorified.

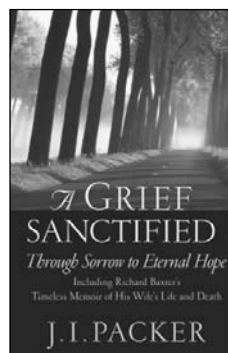
"Bereavement," Dr. Packer writes, "meaning the loss through death of someone we loved—brings grief in its most acute and most disabling form, and coping with such grief is always a struggle. Bereavement becomes a supreme test of the quality of our faith. Faith, as the divine gift of trust in the triune Creator-Redeemer, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, and so as a habit implanted in the Christian heart, is meant to act as our gyroscopic compass throughout

life's voyage and our stabilizer in life's storms. However, bereavement shakes unbelievers and believers alike to the foundations of their being, and believers no less than others regularly find that the trauma of living through grief is profound and prolonged. The idea, sometimes voiced, that because Christians know death to be for believers the gate of glory, they will therefore not grieve at times of bereavement is inhuman nonsense."

This brief and thoughtful book is a theology of death and grief, and as we read we are sitting at the feet of two of the best Puritan divines. Baxter and Packer share a common faith, and by God's grace have been given to Christ's church so that we might better hear God's word of hope when it matters most. ■

~Denis Haack

**Books recommended:** *Grieving a Suicide: A Loved One's Search for Comfort, Answers & Hope* by Albert Y. Hsu (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press; 2002) 161 pp. + appendix of resources + notes + index. *A Grief Sanctified: Through Sorrow to Eternal Hope* (including Richard Baxter's Timeless Memoir of His Wife's Life & Death) by J. I. Packer (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books; 2002) 173 pp. + notes.



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## Meticulous Renderings

*Glory be to God for dappled things—  
For skies of couple-color as a brindled cow;  
For rose-moles all in stiple upon trout that swims  
Fresh-firecoal chestnut-falls; finches' wings;  
Landscape plotted and pierced—fold, fallow,  
and plough...*

—Gerard Manley Hopkins

**G**od's glory is indeed revealed in dappled things, but it is a hidden glory, tucked away inside that which for all the world looks ordinary, unless you have eyes to see. It is glimpsed only by those who have both eyes wide open and unhurried time to look. So, when poet and painter use their gifts to help me see what I usually miss, I am grateful for that grace. Which is why I am grateful for Bruce Bezaire, whose paintings are meticulous expositions of God's glory hidden in the ordinary things of creation. I had a chance recently to talk to him.

**DH:** How would you describe your art?

**BB:** My fine art images are observations through redeemed eyes of the tension between the beauty of the Creation and the deleterious effects of sin on the Creation. The content is realistic—landscape, still life, portraits—with an emphasis on technical and formal excellence. Sometimes my choice of imagery is intended to embody my response to God in a kind of homage that is the visual equivalent of someone else singing a hymn. Often, there is what I refer to as a fractal aspect to the content of my work. That is, I see in some very mundane subject matter shards of profound spiritual realities. A biblical example would be the story of Elisha and the floating axe head. What was that all about? Taken at face value, the prophet was expressing God's care for us in the

smallest details of life. On a more profound level it speaks of redemption through the exchange of natures—the wood's ability to float is exchanged for the



"Creek Bed," etching on paper

**"I see in some very mundane subject matter shards of profound spiritual realities."**

iron's natural tendency to sink and the axe head is thereby 'saved.' In a way I'm about the business of painting floating axe heads, without further explanation. This is not 'symbolism'—the fractal concept is key. In a fractal image, the smallest component has the same form as the largest view of the overall reality. So too, in observations from our everyday world we can recognize the big pattern of transcendent truth. This aspect of a given painting is somewhat fugitive and requires either explanation or unusual insight on the part of the viewer. It is always sublimated in the image which is first and foremost to function as a good landscape, still life or portrait.

**A** Canadian by birth, Bezaire freelanced as an artist and worked as an illustrator for the Canadian Museum of Nature's Botany Hall after earning an M.F.A. from Southern Illinois University. In 1992 he joined the faculty of Belhaven College in Jackson, MS, where he taught for ten years, the last six of which he served as art department chair. In 2002 he moved with his family to Smyrna, TN, where he has once again launched out as a freelance painter. Along the way, he has maintained an interest in narrative art (comic books), serving as an illustrator for a publisher of Christian literature for Native Americans.

Bezaire was raised in a nominally Christian home, but it wasn't until he was diagnosed with cancer at the age of 25 that he took Christianity seriously. After a long absence he attended church before his surgery. The sermon was unhelpful, "a humanistic deconstruction of some of the miracles of Christ," but the Scriptures spoke of a God who redeems and can heal. The surgery was successful, and his life was indelibly marked by grace.

**DH:** How did you arrive at your particular style?

**BB:** My style is meticulous, realistic. I find this both constantly demanding and personally satisfying. I don't hold this approach to be either artistically or morally superior to others—some Christians, perhaps out of a general conservatism, tend to think of abstraction or expressionism as suspect on both counts. I have identified my strengths and weaknesses as a painter and practice my craft according to the way my Maker wired me. I used to scoff at the idea of doing landscapes, but when I got out of the hospital I got a job painting murals in another hospital and from my own experience had a sense of

# of Glory

what the patients would appreciate—scenes of the world they were temporarily denied rendered in a way that consciously attempted to be beautiful. From that time my approach has evolved to take

on more layers of meaning but has not abandoned the desire to be beautiful and edifying.

**DH:** How do people respond to your work? What do you most want to hear them say? Dread hearing them say?

**BB:** The only people I've run across, Christian or otherwise, who don't express some level of appreciation of my work are artistic ideologues who despise realism, or even painting itself, on theoretical grounds. Not everyone appreciates what I do for all of the reasons I'd like them to, but that is to be expected. I derive most satisfaction from a response to my work that in one way or another indicates the viewer has been blessed, pleased, edified. And although I understand it to be a compliment, I quail at the frequent comment that 'it looks just like a photograph' because it indicates the viewer has a fundamental misconception about the art. Painting and photography are distinct disciplines with distinct formal languages and aesthetic aims. If I could accomplish what I wanted to by taking a photograph, then I would be a photographer and not a painter.

The first time I saw some of Bezaire's paintings they were hanging in a small gallery in the library on the campus of Belhaven College. My first impression was that of being enabled to see. To see not just



"Gardeners," acrylic half tone drawing on board

*Here was a work of art that made the ordinary extraordinary.*

details, but beyond the details to meaning. One painting in particular so captured my attention that I found it difficult to turn away. Titled "Dawncatchers," the perspective was ground-level on the edge of a frozen lake in the spring thaw, at dawn. In northern regions, when the lengthening days bring warmth in the spring, the thick ice (often 6 inches to several feet in depth) begins to crack and heave. Near the shoreline it piles up in tumbling ridges, slabs jutting up into the air under the force of wind and waves. Bezaire had taken the quiet beauty of that moment, capturing the bright rays of sunlight through the translucence of the ice, the broken surface of the ice-covered lake stretching out beyond it. The technique was stunning, but what impressed me most was not simply the formal excellence involved, but the fact that before me was a work of art that made the ordinary extraordinary.

Bezaire's work is time-consuming and labor-intensive; he uses a brush with only a few hairs to make the final touches. His

etchings are intricate and finely crafted. It is work of great beauty, but a real beauty which honors what the creation is like in a fallen world. The beauty comes not by giving the image a saccharin quality by removing any hint of the fall, but by revealing a hint of

the glory that God implanted in his creation.



"Gardeners" Detail

**Q:** What is the relationship between your art and evangelism?

**BB:** When I discuss the 'fractal' aspect of my work, I refer to something that is very important to me but which I realize will be fully comprehended by the viewing public only rarely. And that's okay. If the painted images were such that the layers of meaning became very overt and did not remain allusive, the work would take on a polemic nature that could in fact weaken it. The question is whether the truth, when it is presented like propaganda can ever rise above the perception that it is propaganda. At the time I became a Christian, I was writing comic book scripts for a publishing house that spe-

# Paper and Canvas cont.

cialized in horror titles. I soon gave that up as incompatible with my new faith. I often wonder if I should not have set about seeking to redeem a mode of artistic expression almost totally hijacked by the world. It was not until 1990 that I had the opportunity to return to narra-

graphics, and I did so partly because I had become frustrated with the perceived lack of spiritual fruit issuing from my fine art activities. I'm sure now that my assessment of the value of my painting at the time was off track, but I continue to this day to be fascinated by the narragraphic medium. I do not feel evangelism is a desired end of my painting. The paintings are an end in themselves—they are the fruit of the redeemed life that produced them by God's grace. However, I remain very curious concerning the degree to which the narragraphic medium can successfully serve a high calling like evangelism and remain aesthetically viable in so doing.

**Q: Judging by the “art” displayed in religious bookstores, your work will not achieve much popularity among Christians. Care to comment?**

**BB:** Not wanting to ascribe to all Christians the homogenized corporate aesthetic embodied in most commercial “Christian art” I would generalize my assessment of the work to which I believe



*I do not feel evangelism is a desired end of my painting. [They] are an end in themselves—the fruit of the redeemed life that produced them by God's grace.*

scenes of little fieldstone villages with a lighthouse on every corner, where the sun sets twenty-four hours a day over azalea-lined streets, where it never rains but has always just rained, is that if they tell the truth at all, they tell only part of the truth. The world is left to conclude that the average Christian, to judge by his choice of art, harbors a theme-park view of the world which has very little to do with the reality the non-Christian tries to cope with daily. My work consciously seeks to be beautiful in form, technique, and often in choice of subject matter. But I never edit observations of corruption out of my imagery since I believe that one of the first things grace does is make us aware of what we need rescuing from. Most Christians seem receptive to my work, but usually not enough to invest in an original.

**B**ezaire's perspective of creativity, faithfulness, and biblical piety has been nurtured by thinkers like

you're referring as the substitution of the Beautiful, the Sentimental for the True, and the Nice for the Good. The problem with paintings of angels who haven't had a make-over since the seventies, or

Francis Schaeffer, Hans Rookmaaker, John Stott, Hudson Taylor, and E. M. Bounds. When I asked him about the artists that have shaped him, his answer was exactly what I expected from someone who taught studio art and art history in a private college for a decade: “Durer (engravings), Vermeer (light), Dutch still life (obsessive-compulsive detail), Alex Colville (Canadian surrealist), Arthur Rackham, Charles Dana Gibson, and Alphonse Mucha (illustrators), Edward Hopper (composition, subject matter), Al

Capp, Carmine Infantino, Murphy Anderson, Hal Foster, Burne Hogarth, Joe Kubert, Carl Barks (cartoonists), Michelangelo (work ethic), Bernini (denial of the medium—

incomprehensible facility), Monet (color), Cezanne (over-achievement), Kandinsky (quirky formalism), Whistler and Rembrandt (etchings), Sargent and Mark Tobey (brushwork), Andy Goldsworthy (virtuoso ephemeral constructs), M. C. Escher (visual imagination, relief printing), Mark Tansey (esoteric humor). I could go on.”

The postmodern generation doubts that Truth can be found, but is convinced that Beauty can be glimpsed even in our fragmented and broken world. And though art should always be of importance to Christians because it is such a good gift of God in a fallen world, this openness to Beauty means that it is all the more important for believers to demonstrate the glory of the God who redeems. We need to bless, as families and as churches, those who are called to the arts, and support them in ways that are appropriate to their calling. I remember a time when Margie and I were young parents with three children, but

we carefully saved our pennies over numerous years until we could afford a bronze sculpture by an artist friend. I have never regretted our decision, nor felt guilt over not adding those pennies to the check we sent each month to support an orphan in India.

**Q: What can discerning Christians do to nurture a Christian imagination?**

**BB:** My concern is that Christians cultivate a mature sense of Beauty—the aspect of the aesthetic trinity of Goodness, Truth, and Beauty that is most routinely neglected or misunderstood amongst evangelicals. Each aspect of this aesthetic trinity is necessary to a full comprehension of the others. And each has its source in the Godhead—they are not higher abstract principles to which he must answer. God is Truth itself, Goodness itself, and Beauty itself. We do not have the luxury of saying as a church that we will focus on Truth and Goodness, but not Beauty. And it is just as dysfunctional, if not more so, to focus on Beauty at the expense of Truth and Goodness. While visiting places of worship after relocating, we were at a church that is meeting in a public space and considering the purchase of property for their own building. The brochure outlining the church's plans promised 'no stained glass, only functional utility' as an architectural vision. While we might legitimately contemplate the degradation of a culture's sense of Beauty when it has turned away from God, I'm concerned about the church's understanding of God when it has turned away from Beauty. What does stepping into a gray drywall box contribute to our experience of reverence, joy, exaltation, worship? I believe there is in the church sympathy for the concept of redeeming creative expression in its various forms—music, drama, dance, film, visual arts. However, too often support for this high goal is prioritized (music is more significant than visual art),

very selective (only certain art forms appear to be regarded as having Christian potential, for limited applications, primarily liturgical), or theoretical. Pertaining to this last point, we feel we have accomplished something if we've read a book on the issue and had a healthy discussion about sanctifying the arts. However, practically speaking for artists trying to do the job, moral and verbal support approaches being told to depart in peace, be warmed and filled, notwithstanding those things which are needful are not given. To agree together that the arts are largely in the hands of the adversary and that it is our corporate responsibility to redress that situation, and then to

***“I never edit observations of corruption out of my imagery since I believe that one of the first things grace does is make us aware of what we need rescuing from.”***

fail to act is reminiscent of the son in the parable who told his father that he would go to work in the fields and then didn't go. During the Renaissance, Florence, a city of not many more than 100,000 souls, supported upwards of 40 thriving art studios, most of which were kept busy beautifying churches and private and public spaces—because it was a priority. In our culture, it is athletes who are known by their first names: Michael, Kobe, Sammy. Then, it was Michelangelo, Leonardo, Donatello, Raphael: names that have survived the centuries only to be appropriated in our enlightened times by Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles. In the mid-eighties my agent introduced me to a Toronto business-

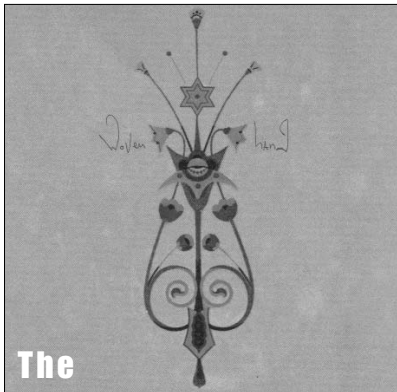


man who was interested in supporting the arts. For 6 1/2 years this gentleman averaged my income by providing a check for living expenses every month. During that period I mounted three one-man shows and the first proceeds from the sale of the paintings went to repay my patron. For each show, he then received a painting worth ten percent of the gross value of the show. Everybody benefited. It was a creative solution to a problem nearly every artist faces: cash flow. He gave me complete freedom to paint whatever I wanted, knowing I was working from a Christian perspective. I was given to understand, however, that he himself was Jewish. If we are to nurture anything, a Christian imagination or sense of Beauty, we must invest in it, in the form of time, effort (study and/or practice) and resources.

**W**estern society has long been enthralled by the spectacular. And truth be told, there is something exciting in an epic production that is somehow bigger than life. The trouble is that such moments are fleeting, and life quickly reverts to the ordinary. More spectacular than the occasional epic, however, is catching a glimpse of infinite glory hidden in very ordinary things. The wonder is that it was there all along, but invisible until someone with clearer sight graced me with their ability

**continued on page 16...**

## A Melodious



### The Lament of David Eugene Edwards

*I am nothing without  
his ghost within  
and all your wooden eyes cannot see  
the good hand upon me*

~David Eugene Edwards

**O**ut of the many CDs that enter my life, a few so resonate with my soul and delight me musically that I put them on repeat, sometimes for days. Even more occasionally does my wife have the identical response, because though we often like the same things, we don't always like the same things to the same degree. In the case of *Woven Hand*, the remarkable first solo album by David Eugene Edwards of 16 Horsepower, we were both equally entranced. If it had been a record on a turn-table, we'd have worn it out in a week. The CD has made me a bit irritating to friends, I'm afraid, because I've tried to introduce *Woven Hand* to everyone I meet.

Trying to find a label to describe Edwards' music is difficult, because the sound is his own. As lyricist and lead vocalist for 16 Horsepower and as a soloist he blends a traditional, deep-rooted folk and blues sensibility with a modern rock feel, coupled with lyrics that force us to stop and wonder. His music is a cry of lament, a deep, heart-rending grief over the bent condition of the world which blinds the very ones who most need grace to the grace they need most. A lament always colored with hope, because the good hand of which he sings is his by grace.

*who is who was who is to come  
given to other lips  
spoken on other tongues  
where are you and where have you been  
hold fast hold fast  
till he come again*

16 Horsepower is based in Denver, CO, but is better known in Europe than in the U.S. David Eugene Edwards, the grandson of an itinerant

Nazarene preacher, is an outspoken believer whose arresting lyrics are perhaps best described as a cascading series of images shaped by the truth of the gospel. In 1992 Edwards met drummer Jean-Yves Tola and guitarist Pascal Humbert from the French band Passion Fodder, and 16 Horsepower was born. Fiddler Gordon Gano of the Violent Femmes, double-bass player Keven Soll, and guitarist Steve Taylor join them on some pieces. More recently Edwards wrote and recorded the music for *Blush* (available on CD), a composition of Dutch choreographer Wim Vanderkeybus for his dance company, Ultima Vez. "*Blush* examines the liberation from physical and mental isolation through communication," *Paste* magazine notes. "The performance is driven by emotion and intuition, and the narrative is secondary. Edwards, whose music lately draws as much from centuries of European folk music as from American country, plans on accompanying the piece live."

In concert Edwards is like a coiled spring, intense and vivid, commanding attention not with stage tricks, but with the quality of his music. "The world is the world," he said in his workshop at the Festival of Faith & Music at Calvin College, "and we should never be surprised by it." This realism of vision underlines the truthfulness of his music, so that the images his lyrics evoke are multilayered with meaning.

*Self righteous self pity  
this I do not doubt  
bind and turn the strong man out  
for you know my frame  
the sound of my new name  
as I hold forth nothing worth saving  
for I am everything  
I am everything  
I am everything that he is not*

His fellow band-members do not share Edwards' faith, but the respect they have for one another as persons and musicians is a clear demonstration of what it means to live in a fallen world as if we real-

# Cry of Grace

ly believed that our neighbors, friends, and colleagues are made in the image of God.

*Folklore* is a CD that reveals the deep rootedness of 16 Horsepower's music, with several of Edwards' compositions along with covers of "Outlaw," an old Hungarian song, "Alone and Forsaken" by Hank Williams, "Single Girl" from the Carter family, and several other traditional pieces, including a French Mazurka. The American traditional "Sinnerman," in 16 Horsepower's arrangement is fiercely passionate, an echo, it would seem, of Edward's own heart and soul.

*Secret South*, released in 2000, includes the traditional "Wayfaring Stranger," and Bob Dylan's "Nobody 'Cept You." One song by Edwards on this CD, "Burning Bush" takes us into the imagination, struck with wonder, of the woman who washed Jesus' feet with her tears. "Cinder Alley" is a searing ballad of violence and healing:

*Lovely lovely Carol Sue  
I see the heel of the father  
Crush the head of the serpent for you  
And that beast who found  
His way up to your room  
You know the one the one  
Who's colors are never true*

*Sorrow stands near and close at hand  
Sorrow stands and in sorrow's hand  
The burning ember*

*And the good shepherd  
Lo he left all the others  
An went to look for you  
Yes and he did find thee  
An with bruised hands  
He did unbind thee  
Brought you out  
Into the light of day*

One of the complaints often heard from Christians today is that Western society is not a level playing field. That Christianity is at a disadvantage in the public square, given less freedom than its rivals. And

perhaps there is truth in that, though the fact we complain about it makes one wonder if we have read the Sermon on the Mount where Jesus tells us to expect such inequities as normative in a fallen world. One thing is certain, however: if the music of David Eugene Edwards proves anything, it is that Christians are at no disadvantage if their proclamation is deeply rooted, creatively pre-evangelistic, and superbly crafted. This is music that goes to the heart with the truth, prompting conviction and evoking questions about the things that matter most.

*Let us not mince our words  
let's say it true this time  
I need your forgiveness  
Just like you need mine  
Tell me how it is that  
You don't want what He's given  
It ain't no sin, son  
To be forgiven ■*

~Denis Haack

#### Sources:

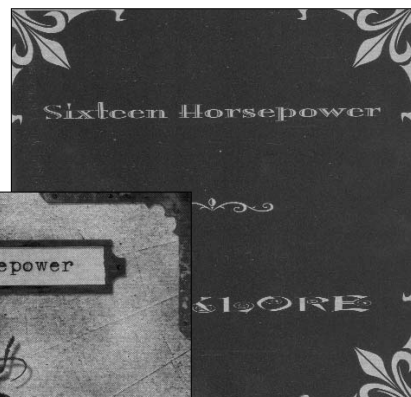
"The Sixteen Horsepower Dance Show" by Josh Jackson in *Paste Magazine* (Q4 2002) p. 23.

#### CDs recommended:

*Secret South*, 16 Horsepower (Razor & Tie Entertainment CD#7930182857-2; 2000).

*Folklore*, 16 Horsepower (Jetset Records CD#TWA049CD; 2002).

*Woven Hand*, David Eugene Edwards (Soundsfamilyre CD# S009F; 2003).



by  
**Denis  
Haack**

...continued from page 13.

to see. And the hope is that now that I've caught a glimpse of a deeper reality in ordinary things, I might be less blind to the glory that shouts God's existence and goodness in every single thing he has made.

That is one thing the art of Bruce Bezaire does in my life, and I am grateful for the chance to thank him for it here. ■

~Denis Haack

**Editor's note:**

The reproductions of Bruce Bezaire's works accompanying this piece were chosen because they would not suffer too much from being seen in black & white. To



"Ecclesiastes Highway," acrylic on canvas

see these and about 20 more of his paintings in color, visit Ransom's website ([www.ransomfellowship.org](http://www.ransomfellowship.org)). Those interested in his work can contact Mr. Bezaire by email ([brucebezaire@yahoo.com](mailto:brucebezaire@yahoo.com) or [tnbezaires@earthlink.net](mailto:tnbezaires@earthlink.net)) or by phone (615.220.6171). Please mention *Critique*.

**Sources:**

Hopkins, "Pied Beauty" from *An Introduction to Literature: Poetry* edited by Edmond L. Volpe & Marvin Magalaner (New York, NY: Random House; 1967) p. 311-312.

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

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

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