

Critique

Helping Christians Develop Skill in Discernment

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Editor's Note



Hearing is not knowing

I suspect that many of us grew up hearing, from an exasperated parent or teacher, "Just how many times do I have to tell you?" Always spoken with an air of impatience, the idea was

that since we've heard something we should know it. They told us something, and so we should be different. I remember saying it to my own children and now regret it.

The reality of learning is that coming to know something, in the sense of being able to both state it and integrate it into our lives, is a process. It takes time. The more important the topic or issue the longer it may take. More is at stake, and more may have to be unlearned before we are ready to fully adopt the new knowledge. Even if the moment of hearing seems like an epiphany, a delightfully sudden revelation, it may still take time to work out the details, reflect on various implications, process the new information, and figure out how to translate what we now know into how we live.

John Newton, former slave ship captain and author of "Amazing Grace", knew this truth well enough to exercise admirable patience as a pastor. "I have been thirty years forming my own views," Newton wrote in his memoirs, "and, in the course of this time, some of my hills have sunk, and some of my valleys have risen: but, how unreasonable within me to expect all this should take place in another person; and that, in a year or two."

I confess a lack of patience with slow learners. They've heard it, they should know it. Since the truth has been explained clearly to them, since their questions have been

addressed, since it all makes so much sense, since they can not propose a viable alternative, what's the problem?

The problem is my impatience.

Read the biblical Gospels again and notice how long it took the disciples to catch on to things. Jesus was a master teacher, but that didn't ensure that when his disciples heard something from him they knew it. During his public ministry, for example, Jesus taught his disciples that personal defilement is not a matter of eating certain foods: "He declared," Mark records, "all foods clean" (Mark 7:19). Peter heard that, but didn't learn it until years later, after his apostolic ministry had begun, and his learning required a vision from God (Acts 10: 1-48).

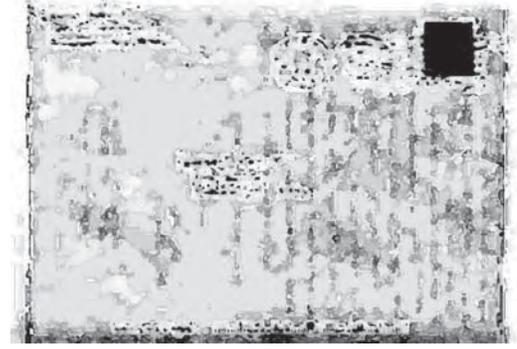
Hearing is not knowing. Moving from hearing to knowing is a process that takes time. A very simple fact that I often forget. If I love someone, my concern will be not simply to tell them what they need to learn, but to walk alongside them as they process it. Loving them enough to give them the gift of unhurried time. Being willing to find honest answers to honest questions. It's taken me thirty years to learn this, and I'm glad to have this chance to pass it on to you.

I'll check back in a hour or so to see if you've gotten it. ■

~Denis Haack

Source: *The Roots of Endurance: Invincible Perseverance in the Lives of John Newton, Charles Simeon, and William Wilberforce* by John Piper (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books; 2002) pp. 60-61.

Dialogue



Re: Whedon, relationships, smoking, art & life

Send e-mail to:

letters@ransomfellowship.org

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

Ransom Fellowship
1150 West Center Street
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or e-mail:
letters@ransomfellowship.org

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.

To the editor:

Firstly, Denis, you picked out the same defining moment in *Closer* [*Critique* #8-2006, The Darkened Room] that I did. That was one of those films that I thought was really good, glad I saw it, but I hope I don't have to see it again. *Brokeback Mountain* I think is overrated, but that's neither here nor there.

The quote in the "Questions for Reflection and Discussion" attributed to Joss Whedon is the final voice-over from the *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* episode, "Passion" (Season 2, episode 17), which was actually written by Ty King. Or, he carries the writing credit for it. Whedon did have a hand in all the scripts, so I wouldn't put it out of the realm of possibility that he wrote it. But anyway. That's where it comes from. Which you probably know by now, since I get my *Critiques* after my dad reads them, and I'm not sure how old this one is.

I'm really glad you're tackling films like *Brokeback* and *Closer*. It's really helpful.

Jandy Stone
via email

Denis Haack responds:

I didn't know that, Jandy, and so am very glad you took the time to write. Whedon is an amazingly creative and thoughtful artist—I hope he continues to produce more series like *Firefly* and *Buffy*. Thanks too, for your encouraging words about *Critique*. That's the sort of feedback that keeps us (as our mentor Francis Schaeffer used to say) keeping on.

To the Editor:

Thanks so much for your article ("Preconditions of Cultural Influence") in *Critique* #5-2006 on the film, *Inherit the Wind*. You greatly encouraged me to continue on with some relationships I am developing and to

move towards being released from so many of the evangelical "oughts" and "shoulds" that I've been trapped in for so many years! I so want to live my faith out attractively.

I moved back into the "real" world about 5 years ago after spending more than 30 years as a member of a world-wide, very large mission organization. Now I am part of a community and church which are so very different from that rarified atmosphere! And I have struggled to know how to relate and how to live. Actually, I've done that all my life! But even more so now. I have made friends with lesbians at church, while struggling inside with condemnation and judgement. As I have made these friends, I have come to enjoy them—real people with real problems... problems like mine! I am exploring alternative worldviews and my faith is certainly challenged. So thanks for your thoughtful and stimulating article. We plan to see the movie soon!

Diane Montague
via email

John Seel responds:

Thank you for your note. I applaud your desire and effort to be a winsome witness of the love of Jesus in your community. May he bless you greatly.

To the Editor:

Thank you for Jeremy Huggins article, "Did Jesus Smoke?" (http://www.ransomfellowship.org/D_Smoke.html). As a musician who is a Christian, who works in what might be called dens of sin often (bars) and who has lost much business because of these smoking bans taking effect, I applaud you for taking this stand.

I see the smoking bans like a wolves-in-sheep's-clothing-for-the-greater-good a scary collective mindset. A false savior, in other

Dialogue cont.

words.

I smoke and have been feeling this leper type of banishment, mostly from self righteous folks who could stand to get their own houses in order; many are largely agnostic/atheistic.

May we not be led around by the nose of the world. The scary thing to me is this kind of collective mindset seems like such a good thing on the surface, but in the research I have done concerning organizations such as ash.org, I see that the motives of the people who started this current wave of bans are anything BUT altruistic people looking out for people's health.

God Bless You.

Linda Dachtyl
via email

Denis Haack responds:

Thanks for taking the time to write. I hesitate to guess people's motives, since my heart is deceitful enough that I know my own are never fully pure. Still, motives aside, there are significant ironies in the movement to ban smoking. One is the support given to the movement by those who are political conservatives and so are supposed to favor limited governmental power. Defined politically, the smoking ban involves one section of the population using the power of the state to dictate what is best for another section of the population against their wishes. The ban has proven so lucrative for lawyers and politicians that it will surely be used as a precedent, especially since it is popularly defined not in terms of state power but as a moral campaign—health being one of the major idols of an aging Boomer population. Supporters of the ban need to ask themselves whether they will be content when some group bans some activity of theirs on similar grounds. This should be of particular concern in an increasingly pluralistic and fragmented society when politics is less concerned about the greater good and more a fight by different tribes to impose their particular preferences on the public square—which is then defined as the greater good.

Blessings on your pursuit of music.

To the editor:

Thanks!

I have been reading *Critique* for a couple of years now and it has been a great encouragement to me. However, these last few months I have even more deeply appreciated it. Having just started my MFA in acting this fall and constantly faced with how to view my faith in the light of the arts I have been encouraged by your words and love of the arts—especially your article on H. R. Rookmaaker [*Critique* #5-2006].

I am often surrounded by very talented artists whose vision of the arts is far from what scripture presents. Thus the reminder that there are others out there who care about an integration of the Christian faith into the arts (and who seek excellence in the arts) keeps me steady and gives me the courage and strength to keep on this path.

Know that your work is important and meaningful!
Thank you!

Sincerely,
Sarah Carleton
via email

To the editor:

Hello Ransom Fellowship.

My husband and I teach homeschoolers and are always looking for movies we can show them which will open up discussions about the world we live in. Our nephew told us about your site and it has been a great resource. We also listened to Denis Haack's talk on movies from the L'Abri conference last year (on CD) and have been further encouraged.

We showed *Wit*, *Chocolat*, *Heaven*, and *Magnolia* to our students over the summer. Predictably, we got some flack for showing *Magnolia* and there was a small turn out for it, but we are so glad we did it. It is helpful to know of other Christian groups who do not shy away from the ugliness of life when the bigger purpose reveals God's truth.

Thank you for putting the guides together.

Christy Hinrichs
via email

Glimpses of Bombay

Bombay population

Greater Bombay's population, currently 19 million, is bigger than that of 173 countries in the world. If it were a country by itself in 2004, it would rank at number 54. Cities should be examined like countries. Each has a city culture, as countries possess a national culture. There is something peculiarly Bombayite about Bombayites and likewise about Delhiites or New Yorkers or Parisians—the way the women walk, what their young people like to do in the evenings, what their definitions of fun and horror are. The growth of the megacity is an Asian phenomenon: Asia has eleven of the world's fifteen biggest. Why do Asians like to live in cities? Maybe we like people more.

India is not an overpopulated country. Its population density is lower than that of many other countries not thought of as overpopulated. In 1999, Belgium had a population density of 130 people per square mile; the Netherlands, 150; India, under 120. It is the cities of India that are overpopulated. Singapore has a density of 2,535 people per square mile; Berlin, the most crowded European city, has 1,130 people per square mile. The island city of Bombay in 1990 had a density of 17,550 people per square mile. Some parts of central Bombay have a population density of 1 million people per square mile. This is the highest number of individuals massed together at any spot in the world. They are not equally dispersed across the island. Two-thirds of the city's residents are crowded into just 5 percent of the total area, while the richer or more rent-protected one-third monopolize the remaining 95 percent. [p. 16]

Bombay trains

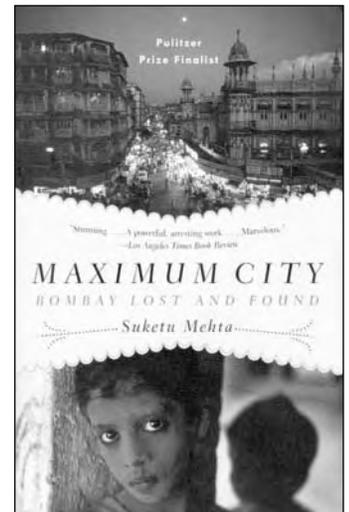
The western branch of the train terminates in beauty, the eastern branch in horror. On the Churchgate train, past Charni Road station as it sees the sea, past the gymkhanas—Islam, Catholic, Hindu, Parsi—as the shacks fade away, Bombay becomes a different city, an earlier city, a beautiful city. All of a sudden there is the blue sky and the clear water of Marine Drive, and everybody looks toward the bay and starts breathing.

The eastern branch, the Harbour Line, toward its end passes slowly through people's bedrooms: in stretches the shacks of the

poor are less than a yard away from the tracks. They can roll out of bed and into the path of the train. Their little children come out and go wandering over the tracks. Trains kill more than a thousand slum dwellers a year. Others, who are on the train, are killed by electricity poles placed too close to the tracks, as they hang on to the train from the outside by the windows. One such pole kills about ten commuters a month as the train comes rushing around a curve. One of Girish's friends on the 9:05 from Jogeshwari was killed when he was hanging from the window and a pole loomed up, too close, too fast. Just the previous year another of that group, playing the daredevil by riding on top of the moving train, was hit by an arch and survived. Girish muses on the injustice of the two accidents. The showoff survived and the shy window hanger, to whom Girish had only minutes before offered a place inside the train, died.

Paresh Nathvani, a kite dealer from Kandivili, performs a singular social service: He provides free shrouds for those killed by train accidents. About a decade ago, the kite merchant saw a man run over by a train at Grant Road. The railway workers tore down an advertising banner to cover the body. "Every religion dictates that the dead be covered with a piece of fresh white cloth," he realized. So every Thursday, Nathvani visits four railway stations and supplies them with fresh shrouds, two yards each. The biggest station, Andheri, gets ten shrouds a week. The stationmaster initials a ledger that Nathvani maintains and stamps it with his seal. He runs through 650 yards of cloth a year. But it's not enough; it's a long way from enough. The trains of Bombay kill four thousand people yearly. [p. 494-495] ■

Excerpted from *Maximum City: Bombay Lost and Found* by Suketu Mehta (New York, NY: Vintage Books; 2004) p. 16, 494-495



Why bother

You've heard the criticism. Perhaps you've been a critic yourself. The disapproval often goes something like this: "Why do you bother messing around with novels, film, popular music, poetry, sculpture, dance... when what people need most is Jesus? With

the limited amount of time we have in life, why not devote our energies to teaching people the Bible?" A deceptive logic underlies the criticism because, of course, there is nothing in the universe greater, grander, and more needed than Jesus, and there is nothing more essential to life than knowing him as he is revealed in the Scriptures. If that premise about Jesus and the Bible is true (and it is true), then why do we... no, why *should* we bother messing around with the stuff of culture, the so-called lesser things that so often take people on a path of idolatry away from Jesus?

This year, I'm preaching through the book of Acts, and in my study I came across an answer to that question from a source that surprised me: the magisterial Welsh preacher and churchman from the mid-20th century, D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones (1899-1981). In 1927 Lloyd-Jones entered pastoral ministry, leaving behind a promising career in medicine. However, his years of medical training, in addition to sharpening his skills of inquiry, observation, and analysis, softened his heart as he confronted the sorrow and suffering of those who had come to him for help. Known

affectionately throughout his life as "The Doctor," Lloyd-Jones' prowess as an expositional preacher was matched by a deep passion for holiness. Os Guinness, who was

under Lloyd-Jones' preaching and pastoral ministry for a time, once said that like no one else he knew, Lloyd-Jones preached as if he had just come from the presence of God. So, why bother messing

around with lesser things? Here is Lloyd-Jones' answer from his sermon on Acts 3:12-18, Peter's sermonic explanation of the healing of the lame man at the Temple (not exactly the text I would have thought of to call the Church to cultural engagement):

To me this is in many ways the most astonishing thing of all. Peter's sermon did not even start with the Lord Jesus Christ. Have you ever been struck by that? Peter had healed the man "in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth;" yet when the people said, "What is this?" Peter's answer was: "The God of Abraham, and of Isaac, and of Jacob." I speak carefully because I know I am liable to be misunderstood at this point, but this to me is a very vital part of Christian teaching and of the Christian message. You do not start with the Lord Jesus Christ. I wonder if perhaps most of our troubles in the Christian church today are due to just that. We must start with God. We start with the whole message of the Bible.

When Lloyd-Jones says that we

must start with God, note that he equates this starting point with the over-arching message of God's Word. To start with God means to know him first as he has made himself known. To start with God means to view the Creation and especially God's image-bearers through the eyes of the Creator. All hope of truth, beauty, goodness, and justice must be brought before the Lord God Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, with the question, "How can these things be?" Lloyd-Jones continues.

There is a modern conception of evangelism that regards it as simply saying to people, "Come to Jesus." This view says you do not need to talk about repentance; rather, if they are in trouble or are unhappy, you just tell them to come to Him. You start with Him and end with Him. But that is not Christian preaching....

The first step in Christian preaching is to tell men and women that they and all their problems must always be considered in connection with God. That is the whole message of the Bible. You do not start with particular problems, but with men and women as they are in this world. How are they to be understood? It is in their relationship to God... Men and women in their folly have rebelled against Him and brought chaos down upon themselves, but Christianity brings the message that God is concerned and is determined to do something about it. So we do not start with Jesus Christ but with God, who thought out a plan of redemption before the foundation of the world.

with culture?

It is the most comforting and consoling fact that though statesmen fail, having done their best, though clever men propound their theories but do not help us, and through civilization advances but immorality increases, in spite of that, all is not lost and all is not hopeless because the everlasting God is concerned.

“Men and women as they are in this world.” There it is, the first step in Christian living, and Lloyd-Jones’ answer to why we bother with the stuff of culture. With his surgical incisiveness, he exposes the hastiness of our hearts to treat people as objects, things to be fixed. Not so with Jesus. His critics said

As followers of Jesus, we step into a world that does not know him, but that yearns deeply, so that we may say with honest understanding and conviction, “My heart longs for the same things, too.”

derisively, “Look at him. He’s eating and drinking, a glutton, a drunkard, and a friend of sinners” (Luke 7:33). Of course they were wrong about his behaving sinfully, but all the rest is completely true.

“Men and women as they are in this world.” The clamorous conversations and creative quests that produce the mosaic of culture reveal the deep human struggle to make sense of life as it really is—the longing to be accepted and loved, to be forgiven and vindicated, to discover and hope, to feel and understand, to be known and to matter. With that shared, irrepressible human heart-longing, we gesture with a half eaten bagel over a cup of mocha latte, we sit in a darkened theatre drawn into the story playing out before us, we huddle in recessed pools of gallery light remembering to keep our voices down, we pace with moody irritation

scribbling figures under fluorescent laboratory lights. As followers of Jesus, we step into a world that does not know him, but that yearns deeply, so that we may say with honest understanding and conviction, “My heart longs for the same things, too.” We mingle our lives with “men and women as they are in this world” sometimes glorious in creativity, sometimes derelict with despair, and we listen for the “hope of all the earth,” the “dear desire of every nation,” the “joy of every longing heart” (Charles Wesley). This is the way the world is, and this is where we begin to love the world

into which our Great God has stooped low to whisper in his most comforting and eloquent Word, “I have heard your cry, and I have come.” Jesus has

come, eating and drinking, a friend of sinners.

Lloyd-Jones rebukes me for those times when I have been driven by my spiritual agenda to start with Jesus as “the answer”—too often I have not listened and I have failed to love. Yet, I believe Lloyd-Jones is affirming that the truly God-focused Christian life never detaches from the human encounter with life—our life in Christ is inextricably fused with the stuff of culture. His words bring me great encouragement to continue reading, listening, playing, creating, because (frankly) I am often wearied by the criticism of those who belittle our bothering to attend to “men and women as they are in the world.” ■

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Steve Froelich is Pastor of New Life Presbyterian Church in Ithaca, NY. In his prior position, he served as Executive Vice President of Reformed Theological Seminary. An ordained minister in the Presbyterian Church in America, Froelich completed undergraduate studies in theatre, and graduate studies in theology and pastoral ministry. His interests include the intersection of Christianity and the arts, especially literature and film.

The Darkened Room

Stylized dreams



A review of *300*

by Denis Haack

Don't all young adults dream of heroism? Of finding themselves at some point of destiny and responding with a courage they hoped they had within them, but could never be sure until such a moment? Perhaps a rescue, snatching someone from danger like the fire personnel who walked into the Twin Towers that fateful day in 2001. Perhaps of being like Liviu Librescu, the Virginia Tech engineering professor who blocked the door of his classroom with his body, giving his life so his students could live.

As an adolescent I dreamed of heroism in war (as did all my male friends). We dreamed of being in battle and finding at the crucial moment a sudden surge of courage that made all the difference. It's not that I wanted to go to war, exactly—I dodged the draft for Viet Nam. But war still held an attraction in my youthful fantasies—dreams that embodied something of my deepest hopes and fears about myself. In a comfortable consumer existence you can't really tell what you are made of. You can hope you have the stuff of heroism in your soul, but there's no certainty. In war it is different. Battle takes you to the edge, where the deeper, hidden, true things of the soul are revealed. Isn't this why that picture of the six American soldiers raising the flag on Iwo Jima electrified an entire nation? As the tag line for Clint Eastwood's film, *Flags of our Fathers* put it, "Every soldier

stands beside a hero." That's what I dreamed about.

The stories of the Hebrew Scriptures were fodder for my dreams. One I loved involved Jonathan, the son of Israel's first king, Saul. Warfare with the neighboring Philistines broke out (1 Samuel 13-14). The Philistines mustered a much larger force, intimidating the Israelites. "The people," the Bible record, "hid themselves in caves and in holes and in rocks and in tombs and in cisterns." One day, without telling his father, Jonathan and his armor bearer crawled across the rocky cliff that separated them from the Philistine garrison. The Philistine soldiers taunted them, and in the process confirmed that what they were doing would be honored by God. Scrambling up the rocks to the Philistines, they cut down 20 of the enemy soldiers—which took the superstitious Philistines so much by surprise that it turned the course of the entire war. I thought a lot about that story when I was young, dreaming of being there with Jonathan that day. What a feeling it would be to help cut a swath through the ranks of the pagan enemy.

This is what came to mind as I watched *300*.

Most critics don't see it this way. "In time," the *New York Times* said, "*300* may find its cultural niche as an object of camp derision, like the sword-and-sandals epics of an earlier, pre-computer-generated-imagery age. At present, though, its muscle-bound, grunting self-seriousness is more tiresome than entertaining. Go tell

the Spartans, whoever they are, to stay home and watch wrestling."

Young men dreaming about war in a world in which there are precious



Credits:

300

Starring:

Gerard Butler (King Leonidas)
Lena Headey (Queen Gorgo)
Dominic West (Theron)
David Wenham (Dilios)
Rodrigo Santoro (Xerxes)
Kelly Craig (Oracle girl)
Vincent Regan (Captain)
Michael Fassbender (Stelios)

Director:

Zack Snyder

Writers:

Zack Snyder, Kurt Johnstad &
Michael Gordon (screenplay);
Frank Miller & Lynn Varley
(graphic novel)

Producers:

Zack Snyder & Frank Miller

Original music:

Tyler Bates

Cinematographer:

Larry Fong

Runtime: 117 minutes

Release: USA; 2006

Rated R (for graphic battle sequences throughout, some nudity and sexuality)

of heroism

few heros. This is what *300* is about. It's why a film—with over the top, stylized violence, two utterly predictable, gratuitous nude scenes, and buff warriors—which cost an estimated \$60 million to make, brought in \$70.9 million the weekend it opened. *300* then grossed \$206.9 million in its first seven weeks. All this in the U.S. alone; worldwide it has raked in far more. “*300* is about heroism,” James Berardinelli says, correctly, “in the face of insurmountable odds.” *300* will not be remembered in the annals of cinema as a great movie, but I would hazard the guess it will remain popular as a film with a massive cult following.

The back story is found in the world of comics. In 1998, Frank Miller published the first of a series of five comic books (later collected into book form) based on a famous battle between Greek and Persian forces in 480 BC. Xerxes, the king of Persia, brought his massive army in a fleet of ships which landed on the eastern coast of the Greek peninsula. Leonidas, king of Sparta and general of the Greek troops, decided to make his stand at Thermopylae, a narrow pass in the mountains. When a traitor showed the

Persians a route by which they could outflank the Greeks, Leonidas sent home all the Greek troops except the 300 warriors who had accompanied him from Sparta. They slowed the Persian advance, saving the Greek fleet and allowing the Greeks to prepare for the invasion, but in the process all the Spartans were killed, hailed as heros for their brave, selfless sacrifice. A Persian emissary had asked for their surrender. “A thousand nations of the Persian empire descend upon you,” the emissary said. “Our arrows will blot out the sun!” A Spartan immediately replied, “Then we will fight in the shade.”

The movie is based on Miller's novel, and director Zach Snyder does a good job of infusing the film with the sensibilities and design of a graphic novel. Action scenes, for example, slow down to simulate the image of the comic book and then move forward in real time, then pause again to frame the next image. The enormous popularity of graphic novels and comics is an important aspect of popular culture—forming something akin to a subculture—which helps shape the imagination of the postmodern generation.

Like the graphic novel on which it is

based, *300* is a very stylized film. *Rolling Stone* told its readers to “prepare your eyes for popping... in the face of such turbocharged visuals.” It isn't meant to be realistic, it's meant to spark dreams, fantasies of heroism. The Spartan warriors are so buff they must have each had a personal trainer. The battle scenes, all extremely violent, are freely splattered with blood which looks less like blood than red ink splattered with care for the artistic effect. The women are strong, beautiful and sexy, the politicians untrustworthy, the religious oracles corrupt and deformed. Every fantasy fulfilled.

Many young adults, studies tell us, are bored. Many doubt whether true significance is even possible. Few heroic figures withstand the unrelenting scrutiny of a cynical society. So, it doesn't take a prophet to point out an obvious fact. Any world and life view that is unable to capture the imagination of a generation with true heroism should not be surprised to find itself cast aside as unworthy of serious consideration. ■

~Denis Haack



QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION



1. What have you heard from young adults about *300*?
2. What was your initial or immediate reaction to the film? Why do you think you reacted that way?
3. What dreams of heroism have you had about yourself? What influenced them? Were any of your fantasies set in warfare?
4. To what extent are dreams about heroism in war healthy? Is it possible to influence how the next generation dreams about heroism?
5. In what ways were the techniques of film-making (casting, direction, lighting, script, music, color, sets, action, cinematography, editing, etc.) used to get *300*'s message(s) across, or to make the message plausible or compelling? In what ways were they ineffective or misused?
6. With whom did you identify in the film? Why? With whom were we meant to identify?
7. When some Christian young adults were asked which scenes in *300* they had “a problem with,” they mentioned the nude scenes, but not the violence. How do you respond?
8. One friend suggests that though the Spartans are made the film's heros, Christians should find the Persians closer to the biblical world view. The Persians believed in the supernatural, and accepted the outcast who was rejected by the Spartans. The Spartans practiced infanticide and built their entire culture around a glorification of violence. How would you respond?
9. What is the historic biblical take on heroism? On the imagination?

Seeing to the rich

Imagine this. God's people are camped in a wilderness, led out of the land of their slavery by the same God who now manifests his presence in a great cloud which descends to the entrance to a special tent. There, at the "tent of meeting," the Almighty communicates with Moses "face to face, as a man speaks to a friend" (Exodus 33:11). The scene is enough to take your breath away, if you think about it deeply enough. So, Moses makes a request. "Please," he says to God, "show me your glory" (Exodus 33:18).

Is that what you would have requested had you been given the chance?

What Moses was requesting was to be allowed a deeper revelation into reality and life. To experience some tiny, non-lethal glimpse of God's infinite weightiness, splendor, goodness, and ineffable beauty. Asaph, the ancient Hebrew poet, never had Moses' experience as far as we know, but he celebrated the reality:

*The Mighty One, God, the LORD,
speaks and summons the earth
from the rising of the sun to the place where it sets.
From Zion, perfect in beauty,
God shines forth.
Our God comes and will not be silent.
[Psalm 50:1-3]*

The infinite personal God of Scripture is the final reality behind all of existence. This is why all truth is his truth, as all beauty is a fractured shimmer of his glory. One of the grave dangers we face in our busy lives in a fallen world is missing God's reality in life. His glory can be glimpsed, but most of



the glimpses we are granted can be missed if we fail to ask and wait, look, and look again.

Creation is one window into which we can look, and Scripture is another. Another is art, because creatures who bear the image of God tend to reflect something of the glory of the Creator when they create. Creativity partakes of truth and issues in beauty—even if its theme at the moment happens to be the ugly brokenness of this bent world.

Creation, Scripture, the arts. I may be mistaken, but I think that the arts are by and large poorly understood by most of the church. Which wouldn't matter if the arts were value-neutral and unessential, but they aren't. Glory is at stake.

In 2000, Square Halo Press published *It Was Good: Making Art to the Glory of God*. In 2006 a revised and expanded (from 286 to 355 pages, 13 chapters to 19) version was released. I reviewed it positively when it first appeared, and I am even more enthusiastic about the new version. Illustrated throughout, with many of the illustrations in color, *It Was Good* is a chance to look more deeply into the richness that God has built into the fabric of his glorious but now ruined world. Since each chapter stands on its own (and is by a different author), the book can be absorbed over time, with chances to pause between chapters to reflect and think and look.

"Wrought from years of reflection and practice," my dear friend Steve Garber says, "this is a wonderful book whose pages are graced with an ancient wisdom. We are invited in to ponder the deepest and richest truths from a remarkably gifted faculty of visionaries whose vocations range across the *divers arts*, each one offering a window into what the arts mean and why they matter. For anyone anywhere who cares about beauty and



One of the grave dangers we face in our busy lives in a fallen world is missing God's reality in life.

depths of glory



truth and goodness, but who also feels the aches and sorrows and pains in contemporary culture, *It Was Good* is very good.”

I am not an artist but I covet every glimpse of glory afforded me. Thus, reading *It Was Good* is for me similar to being helped to see, so that my sight, still through a glass darkly, is able to better see past the surface of life into the deeper reality that stands behind it. Here for example, is graphic designer Kimberly Garza reflecting on color and the creation narrative in a way that deepens my appreciation of both:

Light is paradoxically both particle and wave. Light is life-giving energy. And of particular interest to artists, light contains all colors. Sir Isaac Newton first made this observation in 1666: sunlight, when refracted through a prism, displays all of the colors of the spectrum; the colors, when refracted through a second prism, merge back into white light. With four simple words [“let there be light”], God uttered the brilliant potential of color into being.

The creation story in Genesis can read like a daily roll call of created matter collected into physical categories. But why not meditate on creation with a different system of classification? Imagine that God created with the expression of color as a purpose:

Day 1: white, black (heavens, earth; light, dark)

Day 2: blues; transparency (expanses of water, sky)

Day 3: earthtones, greens, violets; iridescence (seas, land, vegetation)

Day 4: yellows, oranges; luminosity (sun, moon, stars)

Day 5: florescents, reds, yellows, oranges, greens, blues, violets (fishes, birds)

Day 6: neutrals (animals, humans)

Day 7: all of the colors mingle together (rest)

The Creator of the universe could have made any kind of universe, but He chose this universe, one full of the diversity of color. After creating the physical fact of light, God set about exploring the infinite combinations and uses of colors in nature. Over 28,900 species of fish sport different color markings, color combinations, or color nuances.

It Was Good is a chance to look more deeply into the richness that God has built into the fabric of his glorious but now ruined world.

to predators or the ultraviolet markings of flowers that draw bees to pollinate them. And if it were not enough that the sun's energy,

From the simple palette of the red-winged blackbird to the extravagant color combinations of the parrot, nature inspires artists with harmonious and exciting color choices. God also considered practical things like survival: think about the shifting color of the chameleon that makes it invisible

nature's beauty,

and practicality were part of light, God threw color into the very chemistry of nature. The green chloroplast plant cell takes energy from sunlight and turns carbon dioxide into oxygen in photosynthesis; the energy transfer makes sugars and carbohydrates that provide food for our bodies and, over time, fossil fuels for our machines. Then when the chloroplast cells die, leaves turn from green to the blazing colors of autumn. [p. 188]

And here is William Edgar, apologetics professor at Westminster Seminary and jazz pianist in his conclusion in a chapter on how music can depict evil and darkness to God's glory. He challenges us as to whether we see deeply enough into life and what it might mean if we don't.

Perhaps because there is so much confusion and hostility in the surrounding culture, followers of Christ have been tempted either to retreat into tribal safety, or, worse, to lash-out in a winner-takes-all fundamentalist assault on the enemy. The reason for this is simple. We don't quite dare walk between the flames trusting that God can guide us and deliver us. We refuse to admit of tension and ambiguity. Because of that we can't honestly ask with the Psalmist, “Why, O Lord?” Our artistic production is not surprisingly one-dimensional. Being real in art is only possible when we can be real with God. Brahms was. The slaves in the antebellum South were. Arvo Pärt is. They are among the many in “misery” to whom the light has been given. And so they have asked, why? When we have recovered their candor we may be able to say it in our artworks. [p. 238]



Paper and Canvas cont.



And one last excerpt, out of many I wish I could print here in the hope that I could whet your appetite for reading *It Was Good*. This is by Tim Keller, pastor of Redeemer Presbyterian in Manhattan, from his chapter on “Why We Need Artists”:

Think about the significance of a funeral. Animals don't have funerals. If we consider a funeral as an objective event, it involves the disposal of a decomposing organism. It would be wise to avoid the decomposing body to prevent the spread of disease. But that is not how we behave. People gather around the body. They sometimes hug or kiss the dead person. A funeral has more meaning than the disposal of a body. A funeral is art in and of itself and it is filled with art. Why? Because we deny that when a person dies it is no more important than a stone falling to the bottom of a pool. In an artificially objective way a funeral would be something we do to handle a particular type of inanimate matter. In reality, a funeral is a ceremony filled with meaning, so we must have art.

What this shows us is that art is always involved in events and circumstances that have significance and meaning. Arthur C. Danto, from Columbia University (by no means either a conservative or a Christian) said, “Art is getting across indefinable, but inescapable meaning.” This is a helpful definition, because he is saying that if in your art you are getting your meaning across in a way that is too

definable, it is really preaching rather than art. Of course preaching itself can be an art form, but it is an art form that is and should remain distinct from the other arts. Art has to have a place for the observer to explore and wrestle with the message. If the meaning of a work is apparent, allowing the audience with little effort to say, “of course, that is what it means” and if the message can be simply stated in one sentence, the work is not art. You may have heard the famous statement by a dancer who was asked, “What did the dance mean?” She responded, “If I could have said it, I wouldn't have had to dance it.” According to Danto, if an artist can enunciate the message in his work, perhaps saying, “Oh, that is Mary rocking the baby and putting him in the manger,” then the work is not good art. Art has to be, in some sense, indefinable—but in another sense absolutely inescapable. What we say and do means something. We are not just chemicals. That is why we must have artists. Artists are people who know that, in spite of what we are told by our culture, everything is part of some bigger reality. [p. 118]



It Was Good is like having a chance to hang with a group of thoughtful Christians who care deeply about both art and faith. Who are willing to help us grow so that we are better able to see something of the richness of life and reality, all the way past the surface to the glimpses of God's glory that are there, if only we have eyes to see. ■

—Denis Haack

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Recommended: *It Was Good: Making Art to the Glory of God*, revised & expanded, edited by Ned Bustard (Baltimore, MD: Square Halo Press; 2006) 355 pp

True Pluralism

There are, to over-generalize only slightly, three basic ways of understanding the relationship of religion to public life. First, there are those who believe their particular worldview is true and should therefore be established in schools and government agencies. Second, there are those who believe that religions and worldviews are a matter of personal preference, and that there exists some sort of viewpoint-neutral public reason that transcends and rightly relegates religion to a private sphere of life. Third, there are those who believe that there is no such thing as “a view from nowhere,” that secularism is no less neutral a perspective than other “traditions of inquiry,” and that true neutrality consists of equal accommodation of all particular viewpoints, including both the religious and the secular.

The secular university is increasingly marginal to American society and this is a result of its secularism.

Whereas the first view was dominant in the pre-modern West for a millennia or so, and the second, modernist view has been dominant in courts, media, and universities through the twentieth century, the third view has been gaining more—and more articulate—voices in recent years. With the publication of *The Decline of the Secular University*, C. John Sommerville joins these voices.

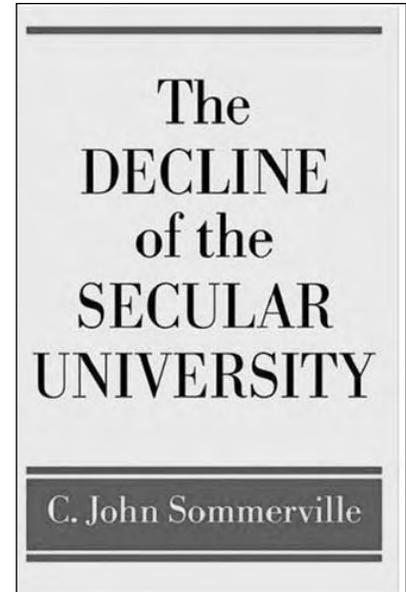
According to Sommerville, “the secular university is increasingly marginal to American society and this is a result of its secularism.” Laments over the secularization of the modern research university are nothing new. Sommerville, however, is saying something different, something much more interesting. His argument is that the modern research university’s marginalization of religion has been bad for the university. He is

“more interested in the university’s loss than in any loss that religion has sustained.”

The book is concise yet wide-ranging. Twelve short chapters are focused around a series of big—very big—questions. What is the status of the human today? Don’t all professional programs serve some idea of human optimality? Is there really a philosophical justification for the fact/value dichotomy? How does the university justify the moralizing that still dominates the humanities? Isn’t it time to start studying *about* secularism, instead of just indoctrinating students in it? Why is intellectual fashion replacing seasoned argument in the university itself?

Although some will criticize Sommerville for taking on so much in such a small book, they will have missed his point. We should not shy away from the big questions, he is saying, simply because they cannot be dealt with comprehensively. Indeed, the groundwork for this volume lays elsewhere—in the scholarship of Stanley Hauerwas, George Marsden, John Milbank, Alisdair MacIntyre, Warren Nord, Alvin Plantinga, Christian Smith, Charles Taylor, and in Sommerville’s own work on secularization. The present volume may be described as a readable and forceful distillation and application of this larger body of literature.

Sommerville makes good (and entertaining) use of a variety of sources, quoting Will Willimon that the “vision of higher education as a place where the young are initiated into the wisdom of the past has turned into a place where the old abandon the young to their own meager resources because the old have nothing of value to say to them,” David Kirp to the effect that the



“incoherence about what knowledge matters most has become pervasive in higher education,” Clark Kerr on his assessment that universities have “no great visions to lure them on, only the need for survival,” and Neil Postman who once quipped that “without a purpose, schools are houses of detention.”

The author is able to turn a phrase or two himself. Departments of religion that aspire merely to teach about religion in general have failed, he writes, because there is no such thing as religion-in-general. “It is rather like learning Language without learning any particular language.” Many academics, he says, treat religion “like a birthmark we all try to ignore.” Elsewhere he suggests that what is needed is not merely more tolerance between religious and secular viewpoints, but more interpenetration. “If our universities are to become more than professional schools, their rationalism needs to be in dialogue with other ‘traditions of inquiry.’ For the most important matters in life include such matters as hope, depression,

Resources cont.

trust, purpose, and wisdom. If secularism purges such concerns from the curriculum for lack of a way to address them, the public may conclude that the football team really is the most important part of the university.”

Thoughtful Christians need not agree with everything Sommerville says. For a very different perspective, for example, see D.G. Hart’s *The University Gets Religion*. And specialists will have their quibbles. Historians will want more footnotes, philosophers more precision, and sociologists more jargon. But never mind. Sommerville is intentionally resisting the temptation to write only for his colleagues, and the book is better for not having catered to these criteria.

My own quibbles include the following. First, although Sommerville helpfully distinguishes between secularization (“the separation of religion from various aspects of life and of thought”) and secularism (“an ideology that seeks to complete and enforce secularization”), I would have liked to see a comparative distinction between the “soft secularism” of the United States and the “strong secularism” of say France. Second, although Sommerville lays some of the groundwork to argue that the sexual carnival depicted in Tom Wolfe’s *I am Charlotte Simmons* is a logical extension of secularism, he never connects the dots. Third, Sommerville speaks of “the university”

as if it were a personal, moral agent. But just as there is no such thing as religion-in-general, there is no such thing as the university-in-general.

The vision of higher education as a place where the young are initiated into the wisdom of the past has turned into a place where the old abandon the young to their own meager resources because the old have nothing of value to say to them.

Decisions are ultimately made by persons, and it is not entirely clear how administrators who agree with his critique should begin swimming upstream against the current of campus culture. Finally, I fear Sommerville will lose some readers and end up preaching only to the choir for having thrown in the kitchen sink. In commenting that “most students’ last brush with history was a course taught by a coach,” Sommerville fails to avoid the sarcasm that plagues so many critiques of secular liberalism.

Quibbles aside, this is a very good—and very important—book. To those of us involved in the Christian Study Center movement, he is singing our song that the marginalization of religion impoverishes campus discourse, and that one key to reinvigorating campus discourse is acknowledging particular traditions

of inquiry. This is not a coincidence, as Sommerville himself is an active member of the community of Christian scholars at the Christian Study Center of Gainesville. Noting that the anti-religiosity of universities too often has been answered by anti-intellectualism in churches, he puts in a word for study centers more generally. “Healing might begin in the Christian study centers formed at several universities, where faculty and students sharpen their sense of what religious perspectives have to offer to the stalled debates on their campuses. They might foster the virtues of humility and respect that could be recommended to the university generally.”

If Sommerville is right, and I think he is, then there are not really three distinct views of relating religion to public life after all. The view that there exists some neutral perspective that transcends religiously grounded reasoning is really a variation of the view that one worldview is self-evidently superior to all others and therefore worthy of establishment. It is what Marsden has called established non-belief. “We can’t even discuss the concepts of wealth, justice, sanity, truth, the human, and the humane,” Sommerville writes, “without finding their irreducibly religious dimensions. For all of these involve the question of what human life is all

A century ago it seemed reasonable to restrict the university to questions we could answer definitively, to everyone's satisfaction. We are now finding that this leaves out too much.

about, of what would be optimal for humanity. Naturalism is silent on these subjects. A century ago it seemed reasonable to restrict the university to questions we could answer definitively, to everyone's satisfaction. We are now finding that this leaves out too much."

At a time when there is a lot of talk about theocracy, one might point out that theocracy can be understood not only as a religious, but also as a secular phenomenon. And what is needed is disestablishment of the secular theocracy in our public universities.

As Robert Wuthnow put it: "John Sommerville has written a valuable book that calls universities to task for their narrowness in addressing the big questions of what it means to be human, how

to understand history, and what to think about difficult moral issues. He suggests as one possibility that academics reconsider the role of religion. This will strike many as a novel idea. They are the ones who especially need to read this book." Indeed. ■

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Briefly Noted: The band talks from then 'til now



This large format book is full of pictures and commentary in which the band members tell the story of U2, remember highs and lows, and reflect on their remarkable music stretching over the years from 1960 through 2006.

Bono: "I always thought the job was to be as great as you could be."

The Edge: "We wore it as a stubborn badge of pride that we weren't prepared to fall into line with every other group and take the fashionable stance of the day. We were uncool because we were hot, we just erupted as a live band."

Adam Clayton: "We are trying to pin down something elusive, something that represents where we are, emotionally, physically, spiritually, but is also fresh and exciting. If it is not the absolutely best it can be, then why bother?"

Larry Mullen Jr: "I have read a lot of rubbish about U2. Sometimes when I see us described in some mythic sense or called corporate masters of our own destiny, I have to laugh out loud. Being in U2 is more riding a runaway train, hanging on to it for dear life."

Those who have appreciated this remarkable group of artists and their creative music will probably already know of this book. Those who aren't aware of *U2 by U2* but who want to more deeply understand our culture and the role popular music plays in it should consider reading it. And all of us can use it as an excuse to listen again to their music as we allow the band members to reflect on each tour and album, in light of their lives and world.

Book recommended: *U2 by U2* by Bono, the Edge, Adam Clayton, and Larry Mullen, Jr. (New York, NY: HarperCollins; 2006) 347 pp. + index.

Paper and Canvas cont.



Taken from *It Was Good*
(see review on page 10)

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