

critique

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2013 Issue 6

**WHEN
CREATION
CRIES
OUT**

CRITIQUE



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

Except where noted, all articles are by Denis Haack.

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Experimentation, Failure, and Faith



When I was a boy I experimented with wood burning (an aunt gave me a set for my birthday), carpentry (I wanted to make a doll's bed for my sister's birthday), paint-by-numbers (another birthday present), and building model airplanes (another present—I had lots of aunts). I never pursued any of those activities beyond those initial attempts because I was convinced the finished products were flawed (which was true) and that this meant failure on my part (which wasn't true, but I believed it).

In a fallen world, finite creatures can imagine failure in places where it does not exist. It is because we are finite that experimentation and learning must occur. Being finite, we do not have all skills, nor can we see all possibilities or anticipate all the various permutations that can arise. So we try, and learn, and then try again. When our first efforts at some task are less than perfect, it is not because we have failed but because we are in the process of learning. Whether we like it or not, that process never allows anything close to perfection in the

early stages. (It doesn't allow perfection in later stages either, by the way, but that's another story.)

It's easy to believe this when it comes to wood burning and carpentry and paint-by-numbers and building model planes from kits supplied by aunts at one's birthday. It is harder to believe when the stakes are higher and we are grown up.

As adults, we assume that we should know where we are headed in life and what direction our work should take. And it's true that some people know the vocational direction of their lives almost from the beginning. They have always wanted to be a physician or an artist or a farmer and so they do. There are some hurdles, perhaps, and moments of indecision, but those are blips on the path, not a reason to question the path itself. Or they are on a career path they enjoy, so the issue seems settled unless some spasm in the economy messes up their plans.

But consider that assumption again: that as adults we should know where we are headed in life and what direction our vocation should take. I would argue that is unwarranted. We are finite creatures, and that means we can't know all there is to know even about ourselves. Many of us find our way into faithfulness not by having a master plan but simply by being faithful moment by moment. And that is our calling before God: to be faithful, here and now, in the ordinary of our lives, whatever that ordinary happens to look like. We

consider our options, seek to make the wisest choice possible, and proceed. Sometimes various options are possible and so experimentation is necessary. Which one will be most satisfying? How can we know until we try? And who says that, just because we got some degree, we now need to work in that sphere of life? Maybe graduate school was intended to teach us perseverance, and our true calling is something altogether different. Perhaps our gifts don't translate directly into a marketable skill, so we'll need to try some things before we find what we're meant to do now.

*Time is such a strange companion, you
never can predict
If days will drag as years fly by, yet the
minutes slowly tick
I stood on that platform waiting for a
train from a distant land
Didn't know where I was going just a
suitcase in my hand*

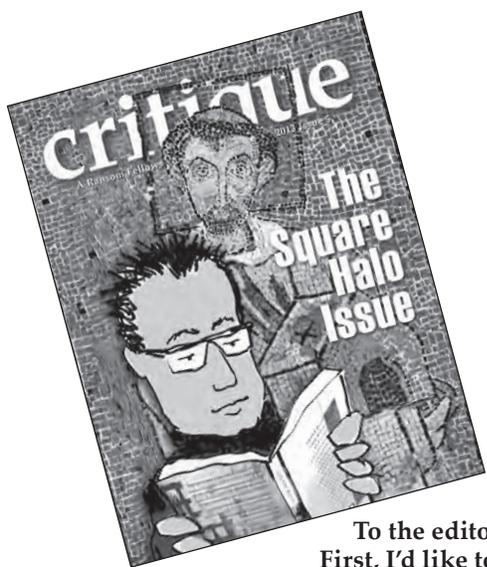
[From "Gone" on *Paper Birch* by
Karen Choi (2012)]

Failure for the Christian comes not from being finite but fallen. Failure comes not from experimentation but from disobedience—not from not knowing where we are headed but from refusing to pack a suitcase and catch the train. Let's help each other live as if we believed that to be true. ■

Nudity in Art



NED BUSTARD



To the editor:
First, I'd like to thank you for devoting so much ink and paper in your last issue to Square Halo Books [*Critique* 2013:5]. We love all the books we have published since we started, but often lament the fact that so few know that we exist. Your magazine certainly helped to address our anonymity.

In the interview with me in that issue, Denis asked me to "gauge the embrace of the arts by the evangelical Christian community." Thankfully, I work within the safety of obscurity and did not have a great deal of anecdotal data to really do the question justice. But coincidentally, just after the interview, I had an experience that may shed some more light on the question that was posed to me.

One of the blockprints featured in the interview in *Critique* 2013:5 is called *CFRC (Creation, Fall, Redemption, Consummation)*. At the urging of a friend, I submitted that piece into a juried show. I later heard back from the organization that was sponsoring the show that they would not be including my work in their show. When I read the reason for their turning my piece down, I laughed out loud. My friend, artist Edward Knippers has often been censured for making art that was "too nude for the Church and too Christian for the world" as he will often say. But this was the first time for me. The folks involved with the show were

very gracious when they broke the bad news to me. They wrote, "The linocut was superbly executed and fit beautifully with our chosen theme.... However... we need some fig leaves. The no nudity stipulation in the entry requirements is unavoidable. If we could break the rule on any, it would have been yours, it was truly a joy to look at your work. We sincerely hope you will continue to submit in the future."

I had not read their rules (since my friend had urged me to submit work to the show) and did not know about the prohibition of nudity.

I am not upset at all by their rejection. It was their party, and I have no complaints about them not bending the rules for me. I pass this story along to you now to help address the question of where the arts are in our corner of Christendom. I hope it helps to provide an answer.

Under the Mercy,
Ned Bustard, Square Halo Books
and World's End Images
Lancaster, Pa.

Denis Haack responds:

Ned, I was delighted to put together the Square Halo issue of Critique, and hope it does help call attention to the superb books you are publishing. And I was pleased you were willing to be interviewed so that our readers could have a bit of insight into the calling and vocation of a Christian in the arts.

The story you relate in this e-mail is fascinating, and raises an issue—nudity in art—worth thoughtful discussion and

reflection by Christians who desire to be discerning in their response to culture and life and the church. As with most things like this, we need to carefully bridge two divides. One is between the church and the watching world, and the other is within the church itself. In both cases, we need to listen with care, to reason appropriately, and to seek to persuade with civility. It's easy to react to such things, but that isn't sufficient. Your response to their rejection is admirable. We are called to live faithfully, intentionally under Christ's Lordship and that applies here as much as it applies to anything else.

Thanks for writing, my friend. ■

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION AND REFLECTION

1. List all the reasons a church or Christian organization might have for refusing to include nudity in an art show they are sponsoring. Prioritize the list of reasons you have developed from most to least important.
2. What passages of scripture might the leaders of this church or Christian organization appeal to in support of their standard?
3. List all the reasons a church or Christian organization might have for including nudity in an art show they are sponsoring. Prioritize the list of reasons you have developed from most to least important.
4. What passages of scripture might the leaders of this church or Christian organization appeal to in support of their standard?
5. What was your first impression of Ned's block print, *CFRC (Creation, Fall, Redemption, Consummation)*? Why do you think you responded as you did? How much of your first

- impression involved the nudity? What does this suggest about you? What is your considered reaction to the nudity included in the piece?
6. Would you be willing to hang a print of *CFRC* in your living room? Why or why not? (Copies are available at www.etsy.com/shop/WorldsEndImages)
 7. It is often assumed that when standards differ within a congregation or organization on such an issue, the most conservative position needs to be honored in order to be certain no one is offended. Is this assumption a good one? Why or why not?
 8. What cultural or familial influences might have caused your conscience to be shaped in unhealthy directions involving this issue? How can we distinguish healthy from unhealthy in this regard?
 9. In his book *Echoes of Eden: Reflections on Christianity, Literature, and the Arts* (Crossway; 2013; page 60) Jerram Barrs states that, "nudity and explicit sex" in art should not be taken by the Christian to be automatically illegitimate. "The presence of these in a work of literature, drama, film, painting, or sculpture," he argues, "is not by itself an indication of problems." One reason he gives is that both are included in the Song of Songs in the Bible. Instead, we have to be willing to ask a deeper question: "What is the moral impact of reading or viewing or listening to this piece of work?" Discuss.
 10. How would the Christian worldview distinguish art shown within the church or a Christian organization compared to the art that might be shown in the surrounding world?
 11. If the elders of your church or the leaders of a Christian organization with which you are associated wanted to hang Ned's piece in the lobby or an art show they were sponsoring, what would you advise them? Why?
 12. Is this the sort of topic that Christians easily discuss with civility? Why or why not? What does this suggest about the state of Christian faith in the church? Does the division of opinion in the church tend to fall along generational, or educational, or economic class lines, or between those who demonstrate spiritual maturity and those less mature in the faith?
 13. In *Arts Ministry: Nurturing the Creative Life of God's People* (Eerdmans; 2013), Michael J. Bauer identifies five options in which congregations can find themselves regarding the arts (p. 261). The five include:
 - Anaestheticism: restricting the use of beauty in the church.*
 - Aestheticism: employing only the most well-constructed art in the church.*
 - Cultural Relativism: choosing whatever art the people want.*
 - Critical Pluralism: providing a mixture of artistic styles.*
 - Developmentalism: assisting the congregation in the process of growth.*

Which describes you as a member of a congregation? Which describes your congregation? What plans might you need to make?

PAPER & CANVAS: POEMS BY SCOTT SCHULEIT



Train

In the dim, flat,
yellowish light of the cabin,
my brothers and the other passengers
sat almost motionless,
staring out through green-tinted windows,
each peering deep into a dream, a memory,
or at the cityscape flowing by,
which vanished now and then
behind the dark and silver blur of a train
moving down the parallel track.



Cigarette

A cigarette resting in the street,
its tip a tiny circular glow
burning away a small hole
in the night's thin partition,
releasing faint drifts of gray smoke.
It was flicked from a car
with violent headlights
flushing me with fire
like an interrogators lamp,
pushing me to the sidewalk
as it flashed past,
its smoldering red taillights
gazing back, accusing, accusing...
then lost around a corner.

*Shadowy world
which at any moment
could suddenly explode
into a shattering of bone,
a scattering of blood....*

The cigarette tip continued glowing orange,
slowly growing ash like a long, gray beard.
I walked backwards,
watching its fire slowly disappear
before turning towards home....

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MA in Christianity and
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arts, theology, good conversation, and
spending time with his dear wife Christina.



**WHEN
CREATION
CRIES
OUT**

READING THE WORD

Above me, in the boughs of a massive white pine, a blue jay is objecting to my presence. He screams, flies off to do whatever is on his list to accomplish today, but comes back regularly to hop along a branch, cock an eye in my direction and scream again. Autumn is just beginning, and a red squirrel and a chipmunk, both collecting seeds from fallen pinecones and running off to their hidden larders occasionally meet under the tree, dash off madly in opposite directions and scold each other. At night, loons call out on the lake, their eerie cries echoing off the woods on the far side. A bald eagle loops across the sky looking for prey, their fierce scream a warning they are at the top of the food chain here. A flock of ducks swim past the dock in the afternoon, scooping bits of food from the surface of the water, quiet quacks sounding full of contentment. Only at sundown does the wind die down enough that it does not rustle the leaves in the birches that surround the cabin. Then too, the lapping of little waves against the shore ceases. We have come here for the quiet, but it is not a silent place.

These noises, however, seem qualitatively different from the noises we have escaped by leaving the city. There the constant sounds blend into a backdrop of white noise until they are almost unnoticed. Almost is the crucial word here, since though we largely ignore it the noise of urban life, always in the background of our consciousness, subtly quickens the pace of our lives. So we have left the city and its noise and pace of life behind, because the quiet of the woods, with its different set of noises acts like a balm for our souls. Though not silent, the lake and woods and myriad creatures living there brings a welcome quiet, something we

need periodically so that creativity can be renewed and the life of the spirit deepened.

Perhaps because of their novelty to us, the sounds at the cabin all attract our attention. We notice the scream of the eagle, the shrill warning of the jay, even the gentle contented quacking of the mallards scooting past near the edge of the water. Still, we think of it as quiet.

Because the stories of J. R. R. Tolkien are indelibly imprinted on my imagination, as I sit under the white pine I wonder what that majestic, ancient tree would say if it could speak. For Tolkien the old trees were slow but steady and deeply rooted, never easily moved, and animated by a deep wisdom hardly ever found in the more flighty and transient creatures of the forest. In the biblical tradition, it is the Almighty himself that has taught them. "All the trees of the field shall know that I am the Lord," God says through the prophet Ezekiel. "I bring low the high tree, and make high the low tree, dry up the green tree, and make the dry tree flourishing. I am the Lord; I have spoken, and I will do it" (17:24).

There is a long tradition of belief that even the mute parts of nature speak, that things we experience as always silent sometimes are not. Isaiah, a poet and seer who began prophesying around 740 BC, would have understood what Tolkien imagined. When God's kingdom was consummated, Isaiah promised, "all the trees of the field shall clap their hands" (Isaiah 55:12). Three centuries before Isaiah, David, the second king of Israel, believed the

trees would do more than that. "Then shall the trees of the forest sing for joy before the Lord," he said, "for he comes to judge the earth" (1 Chronicles 16:33, Psalm 96:12). And a millennium or more before Isaiah, Jotham indicted his murderous brother Abimelech for his bloody grab for power by telling a story about trees. "The trees once went out to anoint a king over them," Jotham began, "and they said to the olive tree, 'Reign over us'" (Judges 9:8). The olive refused, Jotham said, as did the fig and the vine, so they were left with the bramble as a leader. It didn't turn out well.

Among the Lower Coast Salish tribe of Vancouver Island, there is a myth that explains why the Raven, which they believe is an important bridge to the spirit world, is so greedy. In it the Raven cheats his little sisters the Crows out of a day's collection of blackberries. He would have gotten away with it except for a tiny snail. "I saw what you did, and I'm telling," little Snail told Raven.... The crows mobbed Raven and boxed his ears, and for his punishment, made him row all the way back to the village to explain to everyone why there would be no blackberries for supper.¹ If snails are difficult to imagine as truth-tellers, Jesus pushes the envelope even further, claiming even rocks could fulfill the task. Criticized by religious leaders for allowing his followers to celebrate his entrance into Jerusalem in messianic or kingly terms, Jesus insisted the proclamation must be made. "I tell you," he replied, "if they keep quiet, the stones will cry out" (Luke 19:40). I remember hearing that story as a child and wishing the disciples had shut up. What sound, I wondered, would the stones have made?

An even older story is found in the opening pages of the Hebrew Torah, a story of the first murder of a human being. One brother, we are told, kills another, and then lies about it when confronted about what he's done. For viewers of *CSI* there is precious little data provided—no hint of whether a weapon was used, or if there was a struggle, or where the body was left—but that is not the purpose of the text. Here the dignity of persons is the emphasis. In the beginning normality was life in a world of abundance and significance. In this world, creatures made in God's image were free to create, explore, and learn, cultivating and caring for God's good world. This normality was shattered, however, when human beings granted real choice in a cosmos where choice really mattered decided their autonomy was to be preferred over trusting God's word to be true. We still live in the abnormal world that resulted, sensing the fragmentation within and without, and still find the siren call of autonomy to be seductive. Little surprise the killing of people, even their wholesale slaughter, continues as well.

This report of the Torah includes a detail seldom associated with killings today, but in terms of the wisdom taught in this ancient tradition, it is meant to shape all human understanding since that day. The murderer is confronted by God, as the Torah would insist all his creatures are. He not only denies the charge, he insists he has no responsibility for his brother. And then God speaks, introducing a fascinating idea into the proceedings. "Listen!" the Lord tells him. "Your brother's blood cries out to me from the ground" (Genesis 4:10).

The idea haunts me: If we were to be able to hear it, what would that cry be like?

Centuries prior to Moses (scholars are uncertain of the exact date) a fabled wise man of the east left an extended poetic meditation on the meaning of suffering. Job talks with three friends about the true source of his difficulties, but the result is unsatisfying. They argue that he must have sinned grievously since we get in life what we deserve. Job counters this is not true, and points to his land as a witness in his defense. It would cry out against him, Job insists, if he has treated it with less than careful stewardship (Job 31:38).

Millennia later the
Hebrew prophet
Habakkuk

warned that not just the ground but also the artifacts of human invention will bear testimony to human injustice—and not just murder, but economic injustice too. Habakkuk's focus is on the drive to gain so much wealth that the rich can withdraw beyond scrutiny or accountability and the petty troubles of ordinary existence. The decisions—perhaps legal but not compassionate—by which they profited so handsomely caused loss for some and collapse for many, but they have the power to safely enjoy the trappings of their success without being called to account. Here too, Habakkuk says, things we imagine to be mute will testify to the injustice that has been committed.

*Woe to him who builds his realm by
unjust gain
to set his nest on high,
to escape the clutches of ruin!
You have plotted the ruin of many peoples,
shaming your own house and
forfeiting your life.
The stones of the wall will cry out,
and the beams of the woodwork will
echo it (Habakkuk 2:9-11)*

I ask again: If we had ears to hear, what would these cries be like?

It is easy to dismiss such ideas and texts as "mere poetic expressions," though why poetry is so easily set aside as untrustworthy is unclear to me. If I had to judge by the psalms of David, the prophetic epic of Isaiah, the poems of Christina Rossetti, and the lyrics of Bob Dylan, I would conclude that good poetic expression is most likely a remarkably clear window into the deeper truth, beauty, and goodness of reality.

The Christian poet and hymn-writer William Cowper pointed out that in



Holy Scripture the speech of human beings before the Fall and after the final Consummation are all recorded as poetry. He said this suggests poetry is the primal, natural language of creatures created in God's image, but that in this fragmented world we are left

with mere prose as our ordinary mode of speech. Even if his theory turns out to be mistaken, Cowper's biblical insight suggests one more reason we dare not be dismissive of poetic expression.

All these voices from the past are speaking of some reality, I assume, even if the details are expressed in the language of metaphor. I do not have to believe that a snail spoke to a murder of crows—that's what a flock of crows is called—but I do believe that the evidence of history and revelation points to the fact that in the hearing of the Creator even mute artifacts of creation can cry out.

Implicit in these stories is the conviction that creation itself bears witness against all human injustice, not just injustice in general but each injustice in particular. If, as the Christian view of reality insists, injustice is abnormal, then it is contrary to the very nature of creation and leaves its dark stain even if we humans happen to be unable to spot the evidence. The ground into which innocent blood slowly soaks, the furrows of fields tilled in unsustainable ways, the beams of buildings erected by greed at the expense of others, all bear eloquent testimony to the injustice they have witnessed. And the Judge that



matters hears their cries.

Think for a moment of the thousands of young women who in recent years have been ruthlessly raped by the ragtag but murderous militias of competing warlords marauding across the countryside in the Congo. Scores of women have been rounded up under the forest canopy to be brutalized, and then left, perhaps to live and perhaps not, but with no hope that any magistrate will ever dignify their suffering by hearing their case and listening to the tale of their horror. Weeks and months pass, the conflict rages on, tropical rain drenches the blood and semen stained earth and the rapists feel confident no witness is available to testify against them. *Woe to you*, Habakkuk would say. *Woe. To. You.* The God who was and is and is to come hears the evidence against you and will most assuredly restore justice in the earth.

I do not think I could be an optimistic atheist. I must be careful here, because I have not been an atheist and so cannot speak of this with certainty. Things look very different, obviously,

when you actually inhabit a worldview rather than just examine it from the outside. I do not want to be presumptuous but believe it to be true: I think it would be hard to be an optimistic atheist. Most of the New Atheists are rather optimistic. Journalist Christopher Hitchens, scientist Richard Dawkins, musician and scientist Greg Graffin, and philosopher Alain de Botton all agree there is no God, and that existence is finally a matter of chance in an impersonal universe. Still they tend to be optimistic about human potential, arguing that human beings cannot only learn from the past to live virtuous lives and form good societies but even, with advances in science and technology, learn to guide the evolution of our species.

In this, the New Atheists represent a marked change from the atheists that preceded them, although none, to my mind at least, have produced a compelling reason for the assumption of optimism over pessimism. Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900) argued that if God is dead, so is morality and meaning. We are left, he said, with the raw will to power, an idea that helped lay the philosophical foundation for the brutal

tyrannies of the twentieth century.

Greg Graffin, scientist, lyricist, and vocalist for the punk group Bad Religion, is confident, for example, that, even without God, human beings can find meaning and the basis for a good life and harmonious society.

Can naturalism compete with religion in providing a basis for a meaningful life? I believe it can. Naturalism is not a religion. It does not presuppose a world beyond the world that we can witness empirically, as most religions do. But naturalism can offer a template for a meaningful, internally consistent worldview. At the very least, an understanding of evolution can offer a basis for coming together as rational beings to agree on the answers to difficult questions....

Humans impart meaning and purpose to almost all aspects of life. This sense of meaning and purpose gives us a road map for how to live a good life. This guidance emerges spontaneously from the interactions of human beings living in societies and thinking together about how best to get along. It doesn't require a god or a sacred text. Furthermore, from the naturalist perspective, the knowledge that is acquired in pursuit of a good life is subject to further observation and verification. Life is a work in progress, and recognizing errors can lead to correction. We should enjoy and make the most of life, not because we are in constant fear of what might happen to us in a mythical afterlife, but because we have only one opportunity to live.²

As I commented in my review of Alain de Botton's *Religion for Atheists* [Critique 2013:2], I do not believe secularists have convincingly demonstrated this claim in practice at any point in history, but I wish them the best in seeking to encourage a virtuous society. Nor is it clear to me why this vision of secularism, rather than Nietzsche's, is more compelling on secular terms, but that is not my problem and I look forward to reading their reasons.

Graffin concludes, correctly, that naturalism is unable to provide a basis for any meaning to human life and history in some ultimate sense. "If there is no destiny," he says, "there is no design. There's only life and death."³ Still, though there is no chance of absolute meaning to life and existence, he is content with a sense of proximate significance.

Even though I can't formulate any ultimate meaning for it all—I know I am just a small part of it and I will soon be dead and so will my offspring—I know that the studying, teaching and sharing of natural history provides a lifetime of meaningful enterprise for me. I don't feel empty or at any kind of loss from my conclusion that life has no ultimate purpose. Passing on proximately meaningful traditions and rituals is enough for me. It always has felt like enough for me. Maybe that will change, but I doubt it. As I have learned more I have felt an even greater pull toward my conclusion that there are no ultimates.⁴

And if there are no ultimates or afterlife or God, then the hope for some final reckoning, some ultimate fulfillment of justice is also impossible. For the naturalist, unanswered injustice and tragic suffering are merely facts of existence.

Suffering is an inevitable consequence of evolution. Naturalists see tragedy as an outgrowth of natural processes that have been occurring in multicellular organisms throughout history: bacterial parasitism, infant mortality, infection, starvation, catastrophe, species extinction. Does all this suffering serve any purpose other than reminding us to try to avoid suffering in the future? Perhaps it's too much to ask of any worldview—whether based on naturalism or religion—that it provide an ultimate answer to the question of tragedy....

Life is best seen as a series of tragedies marked by fitful progress and recurring setbacks. There is as much disappointment as joy. But tragedies need not cause despair. They can remind us about the realities of the natural world of which we are all a part.⁵

I do not mean to suggest in what I write here that Graffin is unconcerned for justice since I have listened to the music of Bad Religion enough to know the opposite is true. He is a man who feels passionately about life. But I doubt I would find his optimism, based on his own presuppositions about life and existence, compelling if I were not a Christian. To see the brutal treatment of Congolese women and be forced to conclude that such suffering is merely "an inevitable consequence of evolution" would drive me, at the very least, into the arms of Friedrich Nietzsche.

One possible alternative would be Buddhism. But even here, at least when I look into that worldview as a Christian, I find myself drawing back. Here too, the choice of optimism strikes me as unconvincing.

INJUSTICE GRACE

*Since everything is but an apparition, perfect in being what it is, having nothing to do with good or bad, acceptance or rejection, one may well burst out in laughter.*⁶

That is a saying attributed to Longchenpa (1308–64), who is revered as one of the premier teachers in the long tradition of Tibetan Buddhism. Perhaps things look different from the inside of the worldview of Buddhism, but I find myself wondering why the result is laughter. Why not rage? Doesn't injustice invite it?

I am philosophically astute enough to realize that my preference for the Christian answer to injustice does not provide a compelling or convincing reason to believe the Christian answer is true. That is a different discussion and a worthwhile one. Still, it is not insignificant to this Christian that the Christian answer to injustice is so profoundly satisfying.

It is too large a leap of faith for me to believe that suffering is simply a fact of nature, or an illusion. I cannot hear the news from the Congo and be satisfied with that. Nor would I be satisfied with the postmodern notion of a god who loves to the exclusion of wrath. I cannot and will not worship a god like that—I can only worship a God who sees the brutality against women in the Congo, summons the ground to testify, and is angry that such evil is perpetrated. And it is an even larger leap to imagine responding to these realities with laughter. It is asking me to believe too much that runs counter to my experience of life and the wisdom of the ancient Hebrew prophets that have proved themselves in so many ways. It is far easier, and far more satisfying, to believe, with Habakkuk and so many

others, that the mute parts of creation can cry out and will cry out when the Judge of all the earth requires an accounting for injustice. This accounting will not merely stop injustice in its tracks, though it will do that. Nor will it merely draw a line in the future so that further injustice never occurs, though it will do that as well. The biblical promise is that the Judge is also the Redeemer and the infinite One who is forever *I Am*, not limited by time, but for whom every moment simply is. His decree, Habakkuk stated, means injustice will be fully undone by grace.

*For the earth will be filled
with the knowledge of the glory of
the Lord
as the waters cover the sea.
(Habakkuk 2:14)*

I am glad I cannot hear the cries of the ground and the woodwork. I have no doubt that I could not bear it. But that the ground and the woodwork and the fields and the rain-washed earth under the forest canopy can and will cry out? This I can, and do believe. ■

Endnotes:

1. *Ravensong: A Natural and Fabulous History of Ravens and Crows* by Catherine Feher Elston (Flagstaff, AZ: Northland Publishing; 1991) p. 39.
2. *Anarchy Evolution: Faith, Science and Bad Religion in a World Without God* by Greg Graffin and Steve Olson (New York, NY: Harper Collins; 2010) p. 19, 206-207.
3. *Anarchy Evolution: Faith, Science and Bad Religion in a World Without God* by Greg Graffin and Steve Olson (New York, NY: Harper Collins; 2010) p. 214.
4. *Is Belief in God Good, Bad or Irrelevant? A Professor and a Punk Rocker Discuss Science, Religion, Naturalism & Christianity* edited by Preston Jones (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press; 2006) p. 139.
5. *Anarchy Evolution: Faith, Science and Bad Religion in a World Without God* by Greg Graffin and Steve Olson (New York, NY: Harper Collins; 2010) p. 128-139.
6. "Sunbeams" in *The Sun* (October 2013) p. 48.

Touching Time, Sensing Something More



Karen Choi has been on the move—Nebraska to Missouri to Minnesota to Missouri with a brief stop-over in Tennessee and back to Nebraska. I mention this not because the distances are so great or the time in each place so long but because she's paid attention to the details and they have found their way into her music. More than that, she's reflected on time and place, being and relationships, intentionally focused on the here and now and so has had the precious and rare opportunity to see beyond the shadows into what's really real.

*I tip back my chair stare to the sky
evening comes
Now it's laced with stars and my
questions
My simple mind, my simple thoughts
humbly
Bow down in surrender, bow to mystery
Will you not, will you not come to me
I whisper soft hosannas by the sycamore
tree
Will you not, will you not save me
Gather me up under your sheltering
wing*

[From "Hymn of the Sycamore"]

Paper Birch, Karen Choi's debut album, is a lovely selection of songs with lyrics that reflect a mind and imagination that is free enough to take the deeper questions of postmodern life seriously while remaining committed to a faith that is rooted in an ancient tradition of wisdom and revelation. "Over time, song-crafting became the intersection of daily living, relationships, faith, theology, philosophy, and beauty in Karen's life" (<http://karenchoimusic.com>). Choi sings with the same passionate and intense clarity I've always associated with Emmylou Harris and Karin Bergquist, with fine backup musicians filling out a blend of bluegrass and folk with a lilting alt country sound.

Both Karen and her husband graduated from Covenant Theological Seminary, my alma mater. The songs of *Paper Birch* are never religious in the narrow sense, but not because she does not take religion seriously. She insists that truth made comfortable ("you watered down the poetry / Well that's the difference between you and me") is not true truth.

*There was a time when you were burning
up
Just like that whisky in a silver cup
Filled with the spirit to the brink
Don't it all come down to what you drink
Baby, burn me like the whisky
that I love drinking down oh so slow
I want my truth rough and risky
Cause I'm a single malt soul*

[From "Single Malt Soul"]

Those are sentiments I share, completely.

From the time I first listened to *Paper Birch* I found Choi's music made me, somehow, more content to be finite, a creature limited in time and place. Human beings have always had a troubled relationship with time, though this was not meant to be. We know death waits nearby, and can appear suddenly, unexpectedly. So we think of saving time and wasting time and the shortness of time, and in an era of disbelief it all becomes magnified. If this is all there is, and then it just ends, then it isn't enough. As I say, this was not meant to be. Being finite is not a problem because being finite is how we were created to be, and God called it good. Being finite, born to live every moment within the flow of time, is not an enemy but a gift, a grace of God allowing us to trust him with all that we cannot manage.

*He made the moon to mark the seasons;
the sun knows its time for setting
You make darkness, and it is night,
when all the beasts of the forest
creep about.*

*The young lions roar for their prey,
seeking their food from God.
When the sun rises, they steal away
and lie down in their dens.*

*Man goes out to his work
and to his labor until the evening*

[Psalms 104:19-23]





So we are content to work until the evening, when we lie down and sleep, knowing that we are not needed because the God who loves his creation remains attentive. In her meditation on place and pilgrimage in time Choi is aware that things seem fleeting but never is this reason to despair, but instead to be faithful.

*A handsome man sat next to me, in a
downtown breakfast café
He asked to share my table; I said I guess
that'd be ok*

*He said his name was Thomas Raymond,
but I could call him Tommy Ray
just like his friends
He told me tales of freight train riding
and he wore a wandering grin*

*I said "if you want my sympathy, at best
I got a listening ear
You got a baby on the West Coast crying
now what the hell you doing way back
here?"*

*Hey, hey, hey Tommy Ray
That old freight train keeps pulling away
Hey, hey, hey Tommy Ray
Boy, you gonna have to settle down one
day...*

[From "Tommy Ray"]

The grace of God entered time in Jesus, who set aside the rightful claims of divinity to be a man who lived at a particular point in time. The omnipresent One took on finite form, and instead of railing against the limits of time embraced it so that he had a birth, a childhood, and a death, and then pressed through that curtain so that we too could know life and hope.

*Old river flow, old river roll, roll, roll
Roll sorrow and sighing away
Our hearts were made to yield your praise
Old river won't you roll away*

*And when your time comes and you
stand at those gates
There's no golden merit that will warrant
your way*

*On Jesus rely; all your debts have been
paid
The old river rolls on, poor sinners to save*

[From "Old River Roll"]

When the Almighty entered time, having first created it, it meant that all endings could be endured because they do not represent the end of the story.

*Feels like the passage, the passage of youth
Days make you older, honey, you know,
you know that's the truth
Calendar pages, they flip, flip through my
mind*

*Go easy on me, oh won't you Old Father
Time*

So I wait for go

*So make up your mind, you middle road
Can't straddle these lines, I can't ride the
unknown*

*My foot to the pedal, my hand on the
wheel*

A vertical pull and I want to be free

*Fly past my window, little bird
Sweep me up in your light-hearted world
My heart on the line, a road that meets
up with the sky*

[From "Feels Like an Ending"]

This is music that does not merely entertain me—it feeds my soul.

*One, two, three and four I've been
cutting ties, I'm closing doors
I'm moving, I'm moving on
I can't quite explain... horizons come
they pull me away
I'm moving, I'm moving on*

*Hey sweet Minnesota sky, teach me to
live before I die*

*Seduce me with rhyme and your loose
sense of time*

Sweet Minnesota sky

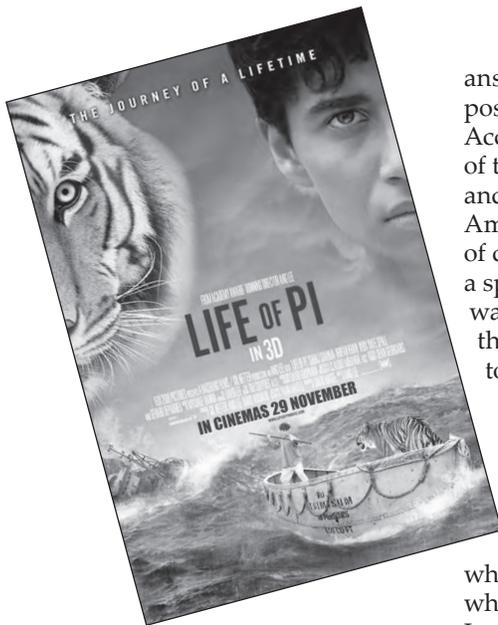
[From "Minnesota Sky"]

The places Karen Choi has been, the convictions she holds dear, the loves she wants to embrace, and the time she knows is passing all meet in the songs of *Paper Birch*. And so life moves, she seems to say, and the constant change can be endured because some things constantly endure. ■

Music recommended: *Paper Birch* by Karen Choi (2012)

A Theology of the Imagination

A film review by Greg Grooms



Who is God?

Ask a secular friend and his/her answers may surprise you. Yes, it is possible to be secular and a deist. According to Christian Smith, Director of the Center for the Study of Religion and Society at Notre Dame, most young Americans are. They see God as a mix of divine butler and cosmic therapist: a spirit who “grants you anything you want, but not anything bad” and “is there to guide us, for someone to talk to and help us through our problems.”

Ask the question, “How do you know who God is?” and the answers may be even more surprising. Most are qualified with an “I feel,” “I think,” or “I believe.” It seems we are as uncomfortable with a god who can be known as we are with a god who isn’t content to stay in the shadows. In the words of poet Wallace Stevens, “We say God and the Imagination are one...”

Ang Lee’s beautiful film, *Life of Pi*, is ostensibly a film about God. Early in the film, when Pi meets the writer who will chronicle his adventure, he says he wants to tell him a story that will “make you believe in God.” In the end we hear, not one, but two stories: one is a beautiful, imaginative adventure, the other a grim tale of survival.

The title of the film *Life of Pi* is a little misleading in that we are given only a brief introductory sketch of his life. We learn that Pi was named after an elegant French swimming pool—the Piscine Molitor in Paris, was raised in a zoo by a rationalistic father and Hindu

mother, and became a convert first to Catholicism and then to Islam without ceasing to be Hindu.

Then comes the adventure. While sailing with his family and their zoo animals from India to Canada, the ship sinks in a storm, and young Pi is left adrift in the Pacific in a lifeboat, with a zebra, a hyena, an orangutan, and a Bengal tiger, named Richard Parker. (Yes, there’s a story behind the name.) The other animals quickly become food for Richard Parker, leaving him and Pi as the two players in tense and beautiful drama.

Life of Pi won a much-deserved Oscar earlier this year for Claudio Miranda’s realization of Yann Martel’s novel. Through his visual magic we experience the fury of a storm at sea, the ghostly phosphorescence of sea creatures in a nighttime ballet, a swarm of flying fish pursued by tuna and an island more mysterious than anything Jules Verne ever dreamed of. But most of all we experience what it might feel like to be adrift in a tiny lifeboat with a large Bengal tiger. It’s this story—not the shipwreck, but Pi’s face to face struggle with Richard Parker—that is supposed to make us believe in God.

I’ve watched the film three times so far, and each time I’ve wrestled with what seems to me to be a very obvious question: how is this story supposed to make me believe in God? God makes no appearance in the tale. Although it is filled with wonders, nothing occurs that might be considered a miracle. Instead we witness Pi’s existential crisis, his journey with himself and within himself, and he offers this to inspire faith.

John Calvin begins his *Institutes of the Christian Religion* with a statement that both echoes and contradicts Pi’s story:



was joined in the lifeboat by his mother, an injured sailor and the ship's cook. After the sailor died due to his injuries, the cook—"a disgusting man"—used him first for fish bait, then for food. When Pi's mother

Our wisdom, insofar as it ought to be deemed true and solid wisdom, consists of two parts: the knowledge of God and of ourselves. But as these are connected together by many ties, it is not easy to determine which of the two precedes and gives birth to the other.

Should the knowledge of myself lead to a knowledge of God? Sure, but not in the way we often think of self-knowledge. The Pis of the world seek to discover who they are through their experiences and their responses to them. Having thus defined themselves, they then imagine a god who complements them, a god made in their image. Calvin's approach couldn't be more at odd with Pi's: I only understand myself truly as I understand myself as I stand before and in relation to God in whose image I am made.

Of course, there is another version of Pi's story. After drifting for months, Pi and Richard Parker make landfall in Mexico, the tiger disappears into the jungle, and Pi is rescued. But when he tells the story we've seen to the insurance agents investigating the shipwreck, they are incredulous, so he tells them another story. When the ship sank, Pi

objected, he killed her, and the next day Pi killed the cook.

After telling this story, Pi asks the most important question in the film: not "Which story is true?" but "Which do you prefer?"

Allow me to offer two postscripts to *Life of Pi*. In the last stanza of his poem "Creed," Steve Turner writes,

We believe that each man must find the truth that is right for him.

Reality will adapt accordingly.

The universe will readjust.

History will alter.

We believe that there is no absolute truth excepting the truth that there is no absolute truth.

Our imagination can produce very beautiful stories about gods. Through the years I've enjoyed many of them, especially in fantasy literature. Reading them can sometimes even be good preparation for getting to know God, sparking our divine curiosity as it were. But the God who is there is not the product of our imagination. He is who he is; the fear of the Lord begins with acknowledging this. And as C. S. Lewis noted, merely enjoying such tales isn't enough.

We want something else which can hardly be put into words—to be united with the beauty we see, to pass into it, to

receive it into ourselves, to bathe in it, to become part of it. That is why we have peopled air and earth and water with gods and goddesses, nymphs and elves.

Pi's quest for god is a beautiful tale, but like any story rooted only in imagination it fails to satisfy. Only a real God will do, one who speaks, acts and is willing and able to present us before His beauty without blemish and with great joy.

Please, watch *Life of Pi* with some friends, then talk about the film, about who God is, and see where the conversation takes you. ■

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

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

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION AND REFLECTION

1. What does this movie leave you thinking about? What images from the film linger most vividly in your mind?
2. Pi presents himself as a Hindu / Christian / Muslim. Despite the criticism he receives from his family for his "conversions" Pi himself is obviously delighted with all his religions and sees no problem in holding to all of them at the same time. What reasons does he offer in the film for doing so? He grew up Hindu; what attracts him to Christianity and to Islam?
3. Is it possible to be a Hindu / Christian / Muslim? If in your opinion it is impossible, what makes it so, other than the displeasure of people who practice only one of them?
4. One of the first conflicts in the film is between Pi and his father over Richard Parker. His father insists that the tiger is a wild animal that will kill him without remorse. But Pi insists that when he looked into the tiger's eyes, he saw "his soul." What, in your opinion, did Pi see? Is his response more than just a classic case of anthropomorphism?
5. There are clear parallels in the two stories Pi tells between animals and people. The zebra corresponds to the injured sailor, the hyena to the cook, the orangutan to his mother and Richard Parker to Pi himself. Discuss the significance of these ties, especially the tie between Pi and Richard Parker.
6. Which of Pi's stories do you prefer and why?
7. If a friend of yours were to ask you, "Who is God?" how might you answer? How might you answer his/her follow up question, "How do you know?" What are the concerns—theological and personal—that shape your answers?
8. In my review I state that fantasy tales can sometimes spark "divine curiosity." Have you ever found this to be true in your experience? If so, which stories were helpful in striking the spark?
9. If you were privileged enough to watch the film with Yann Martell, author of the novel on which the film is based, what questions would you have for him?



Film credits—*Life of Pi*

Director: Ang Lee

Writers: Yann Martel (novel), David Magee (screenplay)

Starring:

Suraj Sharma (Pi Patel)

Irrfan Khan (Adult Pi Patel)

Adil Hussain (Santosh Patel)

Tabu (Gita Patel)

G rard Depardieu (Cook)

James Saito (Older Insurance Investigator)

Jun Naito (Younger Insurance Investigator)

Music: Mychael Danna

Cinematography: Claudio Miranda

U.S.A.; 2012; 127 minutes

Rated PG (emotional thematic content)