

critique

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2015 Issue 3

FAITH IN AN EVOLVING WORLD



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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2015:3 CONTENTS

1 EDITOR'S NOTE

The Appearance of Virtue

2

IALOGUE



POETRY

"Phantom's Fist"

by Mariah Gordon

4

DISCERNING LIFE

Is Everything Political?



7 TUNED IN

When Loss and Love Linger

a review of Sufjan Stevens' *Carrie & Lowell*

8

READING THE WORD

The Life of Faith in an Evolving World: A Sketch

by Preston Jones



13

READING THE WORLD

The Power of Ideas

14

PAPER & CANVAS

Beauty Alters the Grain of Reality

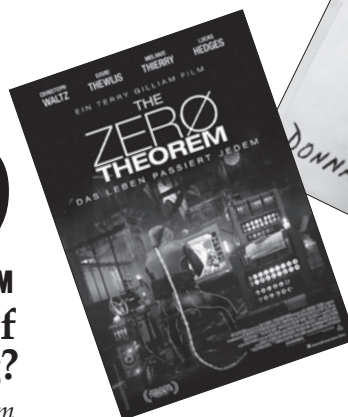
a review of *The Goldfinch*

16

DARKENED ROOM

What's the Point of Anything?

a review of *The Zero Theorem*



The Appearance of Virtue



*I set out one night
When the tide was low
There were signs in the sky
But I did not know
I'd be caught in the grip
Of the undertow*

[“Undertow” on *Dear Heather*
(2004) by Leonard Cohen]

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie introduces a character in her novel, *Americanah* with a simple—and simply devastating—comment. “He looked people in the eye,” she writes, “not because he was interested in them but because he knew it made them feel that he was interested in them” (p. 184).

I realize a case can be made for the proposition that it is better to act like I care about someone when I don’t than to be dismissive. I know a case can be made because I’ve made it to convince myself that I’m not as bad as I could be. I also realize that occasionally our capacity to care has been so badly depleted that all we can muster is an appearance of caring. That too has happened to me, though the argument can be made—and has been—that my capacity to care is far too easily depleted because there isn’t much of it to deplete. Which is why, although I found Adichie’s character to be despicable, I could also identify with him. Not a lot, mind you, but a little. And also I realize that, in the process of repenting for being uncaring and seeking to grow in graciousness, I might need to practice something like making eye contact if the skill doesn’t come naturally to me. It is possible to defend this as virtuous even while acknowledging that something better is hopefully yet to come.

None of these possibilities are true of Adichie’s character. In his case being careful to make eye contact with people, a powerful expression of caring, has been perverted into a tool of manipulation. He does not care but wants everyone to believe he does. In a world much given to appearance, that is not as difficult as it might seem.

I’d like everyone to believe that in every area of life I live with full authenticity, seeking with all that is within me

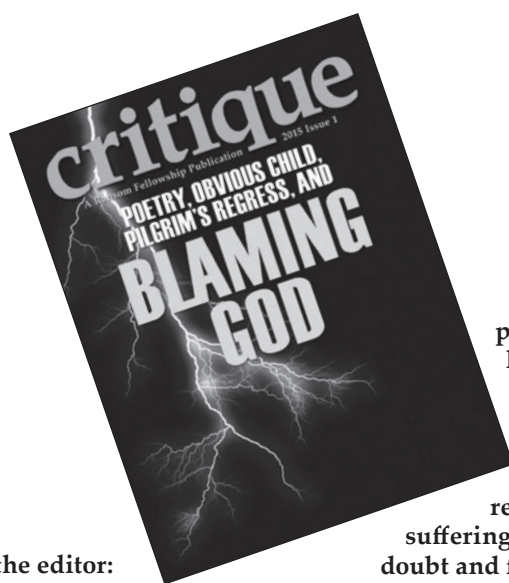
to be virtuous in all I do and think and feel. But that’s my prayer, not my reality. Like all fallen people, I hide uncomfortable truths and adopt techniques that stand me in good stead in the eyes of those I deem important.

When we come across evidence of such duplicity in the people close to us, it is easy to be disdainful. We feel the wound of the duplicity, the cover up and enabling and making due with whatever shortcuts and lies were used. The wounds are likely far deeper and hurtful than we imagine.

It’s what happens next that is crucial. We can adopt some method by which we hide our disdain as it smolders into bitterness, or we can set off on the far harder journey towards maturity by stumbling into grace. The first option is easy, is satisfying by allowing us to feel superior as the victim, and is our default as broken people; the second takes a lifetime, involves suffering, initiates an offer of grace, and requires an intimidating leap of faith to begin.

As I write this I am made aware of another uncomfortable fact: I am more concerned about being disdained by people than the disdain I shelter in my own heart for others.

*So can we pretend sweetly
Before the mystery ends?
I am a man with a heart that offends
With its lonely and greedy demands
There’s only a shadow of me;
in a manner of speaking I’m dead
[“John My Beloved” on
Carrie & Lowell (2015) by
Sufjan Stevens] ■*



Letter to the editor:
Dear Denis,

How will I ever keep this letter a reasonable length?!

But for starters—Thank you for devoting 10 pages of *Critique* (2015:1) to the article by Mr. Froehlich, “Blaming God.” I’ve forwarded the article to others, with hopes that they will give it the thought it deserves.

The issues touched on in this article have shaped and changed our lives and our faith. We’ve tasted horror, grief, and feeling abandoned by the church; but by God’s grace and in many ways the ministry of L’Abri, we’ve also experienced “substantial healing.” Thank you so much for contributing to thoughtful discussion on these topics.

What follows is what I’ve felt compelled to do since the first page—interact with the author. Could you PLEASE forward this communication to Mr. Froehlich?

Together under His deep mercy,
Name withheld by request

Dear Mr. Froehlich,

For three weeks, since the day it came, I’ve been reflecting on your article in *Critique* (2015:1), “Blaming God.” My copy has underlines, circles, stars, comments, arguments, question marks, and exclamation marks...you get the idea! Behind all those reactions and responses is our story—one that you captured on the very first

page. “My hunch is....” Your hunch is right. On July 25, 2010, our son took his own life, in part because his own “doctrine of God had taken a beating, his relationship with God was suffering, and he was opened to doubt and fear.” That doubt and fear eventually led to despair.

The issues and questions you address in your article were so very many of Rob’s issues and questions. We can never know if more thoughtful teaching and better responses could have helped him. In the aftermath of his passing, those questions and issues have become ours. What is the nature of God’s control and his sovereignty? What is the role of evil, and why do so many evangelical American Christians want to ignore its existence? “On what basis do we say, ‘God did that?’ Or should we ever say, ‘God did that?’” “Is this the most helpful and accurate way to speak about God’s work in our lives and in the world?” Thank you for asking!!

A lifetime in a believing home and a very large and “successful” evangelical church didn’t prepare Rob for two tours in Iraq, for finding out about evil behaviors ignored and covered over by Christians, or facing the real evil in the world or his own heart. In bitter hindsight, we recognize what seems to be a glaring weakness in so many evangelical settings when it comes to acknowledging evil, discussing the ideas you raise in your article, accepting doubt and questions without judgment or pat answers, and actually coming alongside someone who is suffering deeply. We fear for the many, many other Christian young people whose doctrines about God and

about evil are poised to take a beating, whose relationships with God will suffer, and who will also be open to doubt, fear, and despair.

All this is a very long pathway to affirm your premise that YES, INDEED, great and irreparable harm is being done in how we speak about these issues!

If I responded to every phrase and idea in your article as I would like to, the length of this letter could exceed the article itself! So I won’t. But I hope you will receive my feedback—I needed to interact, even if you don’t have the time or inclination to respond.

There is one realm of your reasoning that I hear over and over and over again, but it seems quite dangerous. Christian discussions about the nature of God’s control and suffering almost always include the story of Job. Job 1:21 gets quoted almost as often as Romans 8:28, and I wonder whether the Job passage doesn’t also receive what you labeled as “tortured readings.” “The Lord gives and the Lord takes away.” Is that exactly what scripture says happened? (Job 1:12, 2:6) As you stated and gave examples of, sometimes God certainly does “take away,” but he is NOT the only cause in the universe. There is also the one who comes to steal, kill, and destroy. The book of Job does not let us ignore Satan’s role in how this story unfolds, and we mustn’t either!! Isolated quotes of Job 1:21 seem as unbalanced as isolated quotes of Romans 8:28.

It seems like the story of Job is partly about Job’s trust and faith, not “perfect doctrine.” Is it possible that, when God said that Job spoke what is right about Him, he wasn’t saying that Job’s perspectives or doctrines (including 1:21) were perfect, but that Job’s

trust is exactly what God longs for? It seems like the book of Job gives us a little window into some of how God allows his designed creation to function—choices by created beings that can bring about genuine evil, or that can exhibit faith, and can overcome evil with good. It seems to me that Job did “blame God;” he did assign responsibility to God for what had happened, when scripture itself tells us that was not the case. But in spite of his incomplete understanding, Job never cursed God. Job’s story seems just like so many others—Genesis 3:1; Matthew 17:14-18; Luke 4:1-13; Acts 5:1-11—all reflecting the verse you quoted, 1 Peter 5:8. We have an enemy who is worse than we knew, and a God who is better than we can imagine, a God who can and does work to overcome genuine evil with genuine good.

If I understood what you intended, you were asserting that Martha could not have known what Jesus would or would not have done had he come earlier. That her expression of grief and expectations, “If you had been here, my brother would not have died,” was unknowable. You wrote that Martha “had a good theological head on her shoulders.” Couldn’t her statement, full of grief and unknowables, be just like Job’s—both keeping their faces towards God in the midst of excruciating pain? Maybe neither statement was 100 percent reflective of all the truth, but TRUST?

Finally, I have no way of knowing your personal journey, so maybe you also know this from experience: gratitude can be healing. A few weeks before the first Christmas after Rob’s death, my own dad asked me whether or not I’d been able yet to thank God for what had happened. Is it possible

to express the way that opened more hemorrhaging in my soul? No. NO—and I never, ever, EVER will. Thank you for stating this so clearly, that we NEVER give thanks for evil, that “believing that God is at work does not mean that death, disease, and loneliness are transformed into anything other than what they are, evidence of the brokenness of a fallen world.” But I imagine the day when I will kiss the feet with holes in them, look into his eyes of love, and finally be fully healed. A year and a half after Rob’s death, I began to keep what I called a “thankfulness journal.” Somehow God let me know that I needed to look for, to see his love and his hand. NOT in parking spaces at the right time, NOT in circumstances the way I want them, but just in the warp and woof of creation, beauty, his design, his truth.... And slowly, slowly, I begin to live, to see that love is always the way forward.

So again, I want to strongly affirm how much encouragement I received from your article. My dear friend Dick Keyes is the one who gently told me, “Some people, when they have been suffering, have found comfort in meditating on the cross.” He also said that gratitude is “DOING the TRUTH.” So I hope, in spite of my questions, you will mostly hear gratitude, because you wrote so many things that I think could help people to “DO the TRUTH.”

Respectfully,

Name withheld by request

Steve Froehlich responds (in part):

Dear... ,

Thanks be to God that this bit of ink and paper has been his grace to you. Thank you for your kind and encouraging words.

I think your sense about how we read

Job is correct. We are viewing Job with knowledge he did not have in his suffering... or perhaps ever in his life. Nor should we expect Job (or Martha) to speak mechanical theological formulations—they (like we) speak “in part” because the totality of what we know as humans is always and only “in part” (1 Corinthians 13:9, 12). But I think our hearts deeply resonate with Job’s statement, “the Lord gives; the Lord takes away,” as the essence of trust in everyday life. We entrust ourselves to God. We entrust our children to God. We entrust the outcomes of life to God. We are not denying the reality of secondary causes—the enemy is a very real lion who would love nothing more than to devour us; the actions of people and the accidents of nature really do shape and direct our lives. But, I believe the most important line in Job’s words in that text is: “blessed be the name of the Lord.” He means, I think, that his worship of God is not ultimately driven by the circumstances of life. He’s anticipating Paul’s commitment to contentment (read: trust) in every circumstance of life. Job, again anticipating Paul, knows what we need to know: nothing can thwart the purposes of God (Job 42:2). Or as John writes: we know how the story ends. But these certainties, the ground of hope in Christ, do not resolve the massive uncertainties that cloud our lives right now. Nor do they provide us with explanation about how God is accomplishing that purpose in our lives or in our moment of history. But we are people who believe in the Resurrection, and we choose to be content living with hints and foretastes (none more important than the Eucharist) of the shalom of the world made new.

Grace and peace,
Steve Froehlich ■

Is Everything Political?



In *Our Only World* (2015), Wendell Berry argues that people must be careful to resist the temptation of politicization: the habit of mind that tends to reduce all of life to the political. “We must reject the idea—promoted by politicians, commentators, and various experts,” Berry says, “that the ultimate reality is political, and therefore that the ultimate solutions are political” (p. 63).

At first glance Berry’s idea sounds like a common sense proposal—after all who in their right mind actually believes that the political realm is ultimate to life—but in practical terms it’s really very radical. The reason it is radical is this: politicization is so common and has come to feel so natural that it can be uncomfortable to be with someone that resists politicizing whatever topic happens to be under discussion. We may not believe that politics is ultimate, but we tend to talk and act as if it is. It’s a habit we’ve picked up, inadvertently and unconsciously, from living in a society in which politicization has become so usual and expected that no one much thinks about it. We usually aren’t even aware we are engaging in it.

Here is the practical test: Raise a topic that is facing our world. It could be anything: income inequality, terrorism, racism, immigration, economic growth, judicial reform, abortion,

physician-assisted suicide, policing, welfare, poverty, climate change, education. Then see how quickly politics is raised or is somehow inserted into the conversation.

We usually aren’t even aware it has occurred. It just seems natural. Since all of these topics are being debated politically, loudly, and aggressively, it’s hard not to bring some political angle into the conversation. Everyone does it and, since that’s the framework in which these topics are discussed and debated, it takes effort to intentionally approach them another way. Besides, political rhetoric and party agendas seem to offer solutions to all these intractable problems. “If [political] ideologies are adept at facile sloganeering,” David Koyzis writes, “it is precisely because their approaches are deceptively simple—‘deceptive’ in that they mislead people into believing that the goods they seek are all too readily available if they will buy into their reductive worldviews” (*Political Visions & Illusions*, 2003, p. 266). Solutions are only an election away, if only the other party (can you believe what they stand for?) would be reasonable and not frustrate our efforts to do what the nation clearly needs.

I want to argue that politicization is an error we need to resist, especially within the church where it should never occur at all. Here are four reasons why.

First, as Berry points out, sometimes the political sphere is unable to provide a meaningful solution. “Obviously we could use political help, if we had it,” he says. “Mostly we don’t have it. There is, even so, a lot that can be done without waiting on the politicians. It seems likely that politics will improve after the people have improved, not before. The ‘leaders’ will have to be

led.” The political realm is a legitimate and necessary aspect of life, but it is not ultimate. Unless I am called to politics, my faithfulness does not center on the political sphere but only touches on it in my role as a citizen. For the vast majority of us, Michael Novak points out, politics like the engine room on a ship. We want it working smoothly on a cruise but we shouldn’t want to spend a lot of time there.

Second, Berry argues that politicization skews our sense of scale. “Though many of our worst problems are big,” he argues, “they do not necessarily have big solutions.” And even if bigger solutions are eventually required, beginning with small but meaningful steps in the right direction might be what is needed to get the process started. And even if our small meaningful solution doesn’t reach the tipping point of a larger effort, our faithfulness remains significant.

Third, I would argue that politicization replaces principle with ideology and confuses the end for the beginning. As a Christian, I need to begin not with political agendas or ideologies but with the foundational principles determined by the truth of God’s word. How do scripture and the tradition of orthodox teaching over the centuries speak to the topic? What foundational beliefs and practices does my faith provide to shape my perspective and understanding of the issue? Only after I have reflected deeply and well at such a foundational level will I be equipped to explore what possible political moves, if any, might be advisable. Politics shows up near the end, as one possible application of the principles we believe, not near the beginning of the conversation, and never as essential. This is a process of learning and thinking that takes time and, along the way, may raise more

questions than answers. Which is why political ideologies can be so attractive. They simplify the process, propose an agenda, and provide bullet points to win debates. And since all this is always being shouted in the wider marketplace, it takes effort not to let it shape our mind and imagination. However, being a Christian means we live under Christ's lordship, within the framework of the world and life view revealed in God's word, and so we must work to see that our mind and imagination is shaped by the foundational principles that make up that framework. As Koyzis demonstrates in *Political Visions & Illusions*, the biblical word for ideology is idolatry.

And fourth, politicization subverts the process whereby Christians seek to identify and explore foundational principles. Every political ideology begins with some truth about life and reality. A libertarian ideology, for example, sees the individual as having dignity and personal property in a free market as significant. Both of which are true, so it is easy to find texts of scripture that buttress such convictions. A progressive ideology, on the other hand, sees the community as necessary for human flourishing and the marketplace without regulation as easily perverted by greed. Once again, both are true and so biblical texts can be mustered. Thus, when believers turn to the Bible in trying to think about some economic issue, the simple act of reviewing the appropriate scriptural texts can inflame the emotions of the participants. In so doing the participants reveal that though they confess to being under Christ's lordship, their primary allegiance is actually to an ideology. Which might be the reason these issues are rarely explored seriously within the church.

The resources we have as Christians—scripture, centuries of wisdom in applying the truth to life and culture, insight from believers in different social and cultural settings, a covenant community where we should be safe to explore ideas freely—are very rich. Availing ourselves of them will allow us to identify and creatively engage the foundational principles that should inform our thinking and feeling and doing in relation to all the social issues that confront us, locally, nationally, and globally.

Hopefully we can all agree as Christians that it is scripture and historic orthodox teaching and practice that should shape our foundational principles. And we should all understand that, as we move from text to interpretation to policy to application to political effort, there is room for difference of opinion. We can live with that because love is ultimate in our covenant community, by the command of our Lord. But let's make certain that, in discussing important issues, we go back to the foundations of our faith and touch on politics only at the end...if it seems relevant and helpful.

All of which begs some discerning reflection and discussion. ■

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION & DISCUSSION:

1. Are there statements in this article that are misinformed, uninformed, or erroneous? What reasons would you supply to make your case?
2. To what extent has the habit of politicization infected your consciousness? Where is it most likely to appear? Of what do you need to repent?
3. Why does the politicization of life and society seem to make sense or be attractive in our modern world?
4. What political ideology(s) and/or agenda(s) are most attractive to you? Why?
5. Provide a recent concrete example of politicization in action. What effect did it have on the conversation or discussion?
6. To what extent do you think politicization has infiltrated your church community? ...the wider Christian community?
7. What would be required to form a safe discussion group that as objectively, authentically, and intentionally as possible seeks to identify and explore the foundational principles for some hot-button issue?
8. Some Christians might resist going back to foundational principles. Why might they resist it?
9. Many Christians seem to act as if difference of opinion in how best to apply the truth is as bad as refusing to believe the truth. Discuss.

POETRY

Phantom's Fist

My alarm clock went off this morning.

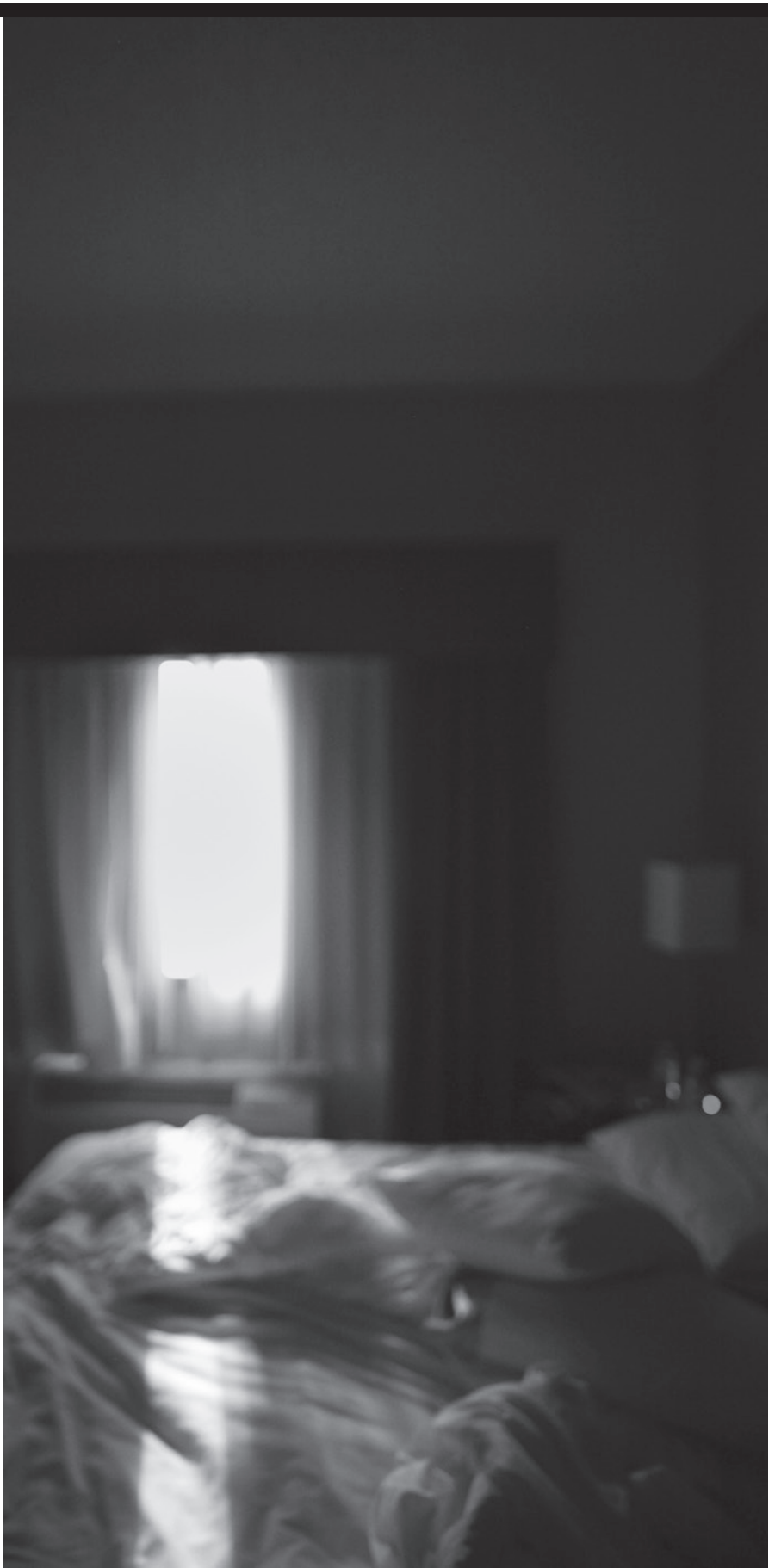
I'd like to know why that crack in my window
allows the numb fingers of winter's phantoms
to seep through and caress
anything warm, smudging color
smothering warmth,
leaving behind gray shadows and silhouettes
of my dresser, closet door, and desk.
The books on my desk are brittle and cracked.
The blankets on my bed are stiff and dull.
My alarm clock is hoarse.
Explain to me why my clock doesn't fear death.
It's not afraid of the frozen fingers
that creep into its insides,
icicles piercing its plastic and metal organs.
Soon it will be struck dead,
and fade into the shadows of gray and blue,
nothing but a silhouette
in the shape of the phantom's fist. ■

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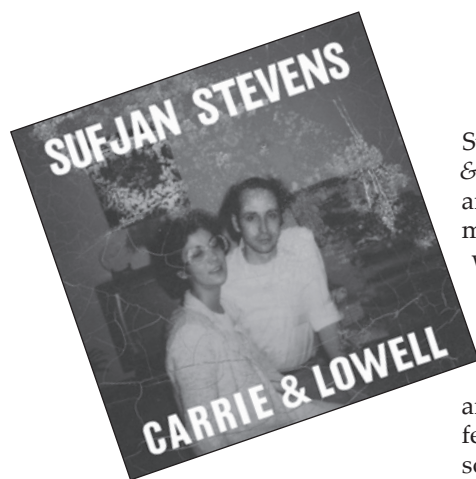


Mariah Gordon is an undergraduate in communication studies and creative writing at St. Cloud State University. An aspiring writer who loves to write

poetry, fiction, and nonfiction, her poems have been published in Upper Mississippi Harvest and Spirit Wind Poetry Gallery. She loves the ocean, long summer days, horseback riding, and spending lots of time with the ones she loves.



When Loss and Love Linger



For several days after downloading Sufjan Stevens' latest album, *Carrie & Lowell*, I simply pressed REPEAT and let it play. I was at my desk in my office, and so was focused on my work, writing emails and articles and working on a book manuscript.

Outside the windows the oaks and ash trees are slowly leafing out and the cardinals, woodpeckers, finches and chipping sparrows visiting our bird feeders are building nests. The album's sound is pensive, introspective, full of sweet lament, and a quiet hope that is born in love. Stevens is not producing music for a market as much as opening his heart. I am not qualified to state how this album rates compared to the rest of his music but I can state that this album is a stunning achievement.

*Somewhere in the desert there's a forest,
and an acre before us
But I don't know where to begin
But I don't know where to begin...*

*I forgive you, mother, I can hear you,
And I long to be near you
But every road leads to an end
["Death with Dignity"]*

Carrie is the name of Stevens' mother, a deeply troubled woman who left the family several times.

*Did you get enough love,
my little dove
Why do you cry?
And I'm sorry I left,
but it was for the best
Though it never felt right
["Fourth of July"]*

Carrie died in 2012. Lowell is the name of his stepfather, who was married to Carrie for five years and manages Stevens' label, Asthmatic Kitty Records. "With this record," Stevens told Pitchfork.com, "I needed to extract



myself out of this environment of make-believe. It's something that was necessary for me to do in the wake of my mother's death—to pursue a sense of peace and serenity in spite of suffering. It's not really trying to say anything new, or prove anything, or innovate. It feels artless, which is a good thing. This is not my art project; this is my life."

The ancients took lament seriously, and used poetry and music to both express it and to find a way to the other side. The Hebrew psalmists refined the art of lament and Jesus quoted from a psalm of lament when he cried out in agony during his crucifixion. Is it possible we have lost this art, and in the process have also lost something of our souls? Stevens does not invite us to his pity party, but demonstrates what health looks like in an essential part of existence in a fallen world.

I do not know how Sufjan Stevens gained such wisdom, but I am forever in his debt for having shared it with such aesthetic brilliance. ■

Music recommended: *Carrie & Lowell* by Sufjan Stevens (Asthmatic Kitty Records, 2015)

The Life of Faith in an Evolving World: A Sketch

by Preston Jones

In the beginning God created everything necessary for natural life. In time, the stars, planets, minerals, trees and all earthly beings would spring from what was there at creation's beginning. Among the more than 100 billion galaxies, there would be a Milky Way. One of the approximately 300 billion stars in the Milky Way would be called the Sun. On one of the planets orbiting the sun, life would develop.



Some three billion or so years into this earthly process, it was time for the emergence of a creature that could bear God's image on earth—a creature that could reflect and, if it wished, nurture a sense of eternity within something it alone among earthly beings would possess: an eternal soul. This was a new creation. The plan for such a creature—matter plus miracle—a living thing that could think complicated thoughts, speak complicated languages, sacrifice for the sake of the disabled, and sense (and then either embrace or reject) the divine—had been there from the beginning. And so God bestowed on this creature, the human, his own image, and he gave the human the capacity to rule and cultivate and to decide what to do with its soul—to heed or not to heed the directives of a God-given moral law.

This creature was the dual offspring of nature and God. In basic ways, the human was hardly different from other creatures. Like them, it was made of the stuff of stars and soil. And humans and other creatures shared many behavioral traits. So it was possible for people to learn about diligence from ants, about subtlety from serpents, and about gentleness from doves. The earthly creature with which humans had most in common was the chimpanzee.

In other ways, the human being was strikingly different. Where the chimpanzee could brutalize or kill in the morning and carry on peacefully in the afternoon, the human could feel remorse or was compelled to relate self-justifying stories. Where the chimpanzee would avoid death but had no thoughts as to why, the human saw death as a psychological and spiritual challenge—a problem for both body and

soul. Where wild creatures would be annoyed by thorns but not see them as an occasion to reflect on the hardness of the world, humans would do so. The human had the capacity to hear a voice, both internal and external, that urged it to look out for the good of others and the rest of God's creation. In doing so, it would be looking out for itself.

This was a deeply divided, split creature. Some of the old animal tendencies warred against God's image. The first humans, we call them Adam and Eve, had hardly started on their unique path before they chose selfish animal impulses over the beauty of God's image. They did good things but, being selfish, self-deceiving, and perhaps a little too clever, they also failed. For the first time in the history of this planet, creatures knew that to do something would be wrong but did it anyway. As we say, they fell. And when they had children, the misused abilities that led to the fall were passed on. So has it been for humans ever since.

The human's capacity for moral blindness and frivolity was sometimes infuriating to God. (There's a story about God almost giving up on the human project altogether.) At the same time, God felt compassion for this being who, after all, had not requested to exist. It was true that humans spared little time before acting against the call of God's image. It was also true that much of what drove them to do so was the legacy of their pre-human past. They had two sets of laws at war within them—an animal, sinful one and a God-given, eternity-acknowledging one. In addition to this struggle, they were subject to the difficulties of the natural world—storms, parasites, illness and disease, freezing and drought. It was a difficult life for all creatures, but most especially for

thinking and feeling humans. Once they learned to write, humans set down stories, poems, and songs about the hardness of life. The most ancient stories we know of ask why?

So, as frustrating as people were, God had compassion on them. They were his creation. He decided to spend time among them. As one of them, he would bear their sorrows and feel their grief. He would need sleep and would be subject to unnecessary conflict. He would cry. He would suffer an agonizing, unfair death. Along the way, he would also experience life's joys—beautiful days, the innocence of children, reflection on lilies and other nice, natural things—and he would remind people about their often suppressed inheritance as beings who bear God's image. He told people that God had a kingdom of his own and that, if people linked their hopes to him, then he could lead them there. He said that God would gladly forgive them if they would turn from their self-centered, animal ways. And in his conquest of death, he showed that the grave's word needn't be the last one.

One day when God was on earth in the form of Jesus of Nazareth, a man with leprosy approached him. The leprosy—whatever form of skin disease it was—was just one of the myriad difficulties humans had to face in a world in which all creatures are subject to natural hardships. Jesus, himself inhabiting an animal body and experiencing everything that goes with it, felt compassion for this man, and he touched him and healed him. Then he told the man to go and bear witness to what had happened—to play a small part in drawing people's attention to the kingdom of God and to the image of God that is in them.

We human beings are interesting creatures. We are made of the same material as the natural world.

About ninety-eight percent of our DNA is shared with chimpanzees. (Indeed, chimpanzees and humans are closer genetically than chimpanzees and gorillas.) When we study chimp society, we can see ourselves. Unfortunately, the same is true when we study chimpanzee brutality.

But chimps have never been recorded praying, and there's no reason to believe that chimpanzees in Liberia would have the slightest interest in the affairs of chimpanzees in Congo. Only humans have the capacity to care about the plight of people and other creatures living hundreds or thousands of miles away.

People are endlessly in conflict within and among themselves. Like other creatures, they preen and compete and fight and strut and claim alpha status and take their place in the pecking order. (Jesus' own advent was met with an act of appalling cruelty ordered by an anxious alpha male named Herod.) But unlike other creatures, humans regularly care for others not their own; they sacrifice for the sake of people they'll never meet. They'll even sacrifice for the sake of birds, whales, and lizards—even for the protection of swamps, deserts, and glaciers. And, sometimes, they try to keep the peace. Through human time, people have said that they do these things, at least in part, because there is a Creator who expects them to remember who they are—earthly creatures, dust—yes; but also bearers of God's image on earth and invited citizens in God's kingdom.

Given the reality of things, even the hardest-working people can't completely fulfill their highest purpose. But they can remember that God knows what it's like to bear a human body—to have the backaches that come with walking on two legs, the crooked teeth that come from having jaws that are too small, and strange goose bumps that don't work very well in the absence of a coat of fur. Perhaps he even bumped his tail bone once or twice. But he never surrendered to the kinds of negative animal impulses that make life harder than it naturally is. He showed us what it's like to be God's best image on this earth. And he says that if we want to live forever in a world free of parasites and predation and stupid pride, then we should hitch our life wagons to him.

Just how all of this works is a mystery. Using their God-given mental powers of discovery, twenty-first century humans living in industrialized societies inhabit a world that is much less mysterious than it has been before. It seems unlikely that mystery will ever be completely wiped out. But to the extent that it is, it's thanks to the gifts God gave to the unique creation that is humanity.

RELATED READINGS

1. The great fourth century theologian St. Augustine notes that knowledge about the natural world is available to people outside the family of faith and that if Christians speak from a disposition of ignorance about scientific matters, then they risk placing the Gospel in a negative light.

Usually, even a non-Christian knows something about the earth, the heavens, and the other elements of this world... and this knowledge he holds to as being

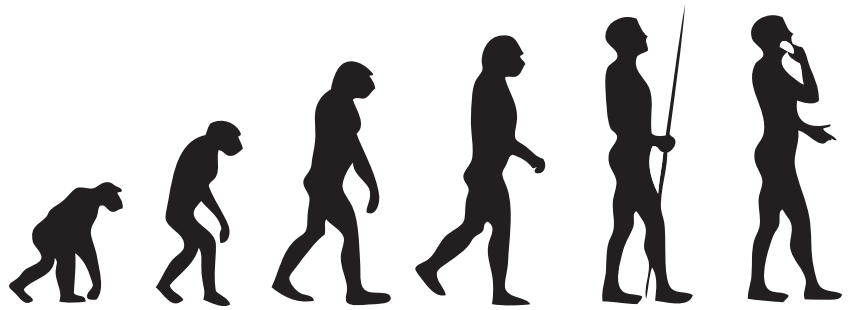
certain from reason and experience. Now, it is a disgraceful thing for an infidel to hear a Christian, presumably giving the meaning of Holy Scripture, talking nonsense on these topics; and we should take all means to prevent such an embarrassing situation, in which people show up vast ignorance in a Christian and laugh it to scorn.

The shame is not so much that an ignorant individual is derided, but that people outside the household of faith think our sacred writers held such opinions, and, to the great loss of those for whose salvation we toil, the writers of our Scripture are criticized and rejected as unlearned men. If they find a Christian mistaken in a field which they themselves know well and hear him maintaining his foolish opinions about our books, how are they going to believe those books in matters concerning the resurrection of the dead, the hope of eternal life, and the kingdom of heaven, when they think their pages are full of falsehoods on facts which they themselves have learnt from experience and the light of reason?

—Augustine,
On the Literal Meaning of Genesis

2. The great theologian Thomas Aquinas wrote that while the belief in God as creator is essential to Christian belief, it is possible to differ on questions about how God created. It is also worth noting that Aquinas was open to the idea of creation as a process—something that is ongoing.

With respect to the beginning of the world something pertains to the substance of faith, namely that the world began to be by creation, and all the saints agree in this. But how and in what order this was done pertains to faith only incidentally insofar as it is treated in



scripture.... For Augustine holds that at the very beginning of creation there were some things specifically distinct in their proper nature, such as the elements, celestial bodies and spiritual substances, but others existed in seminal notions alone, such as animals, plants and men, all of which were produced in their proper nature in the work of the six days [given in the creation story]. Of this work we read in John 5:17, 'My Father works even until now, and I work'.

—Thomas Aquinas,
thirteenth century

3. In his commentary on Romans 1:6, the great Reformation theologian John Calvin notes that the interests of the human writer of Genesis and the interests of formal astronomers are different.

Moses makes two great luminaries [the sun and moon]; but astronomers prove, by conclusive reasons that the star of Saturn, which on account of its great distance, appears the least of all, is greater than the moon. Here lies the difference; Moses wrote in a popular style things which without instruction, all ordinary persons, endued with common sense, are able to understand; but astronomers investigate with great labor whatever the sagacity of the human mind can comprehend. ■

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involved in leading discussions at factories on the personal and economic importance of all useful work.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION & DISCUSSION

1. Some Christians, such as the writer of the above essay, are comfortable with the theory of evolution. Others are completely opposed to it. Others aren't sure. What is your disposition toward the topic—and why? What new questions, if any, does the essay raise in your mind?
2. So short an essay on so large a topic is bound to raise many questions and leave them unanswered, while not touching on other themes that some consider important. In your view, what important matters does the essay not address? Of the themes that are addressed, which in your view are handled inadequately?
3. In the Genesis story, daylight is created on the second day and the sun on the fourth day. Obviously, the human writer of Genesis understood that daylight on this planet is impossible without the sun. We also know that, in the dominant cultures of the world the ancient Hebrews lived in, the sun was considered a great god. Does it seem plausible to you that, rather than making a literal scientific statement about the sun, the writer of Genesis is making a point about the irrelevance of the pagans' sun god in comparison to the greatness of the Hebrew God?
4. We sometimes hear that a strict literal interpretation of the Genesis creation story is the traditional approach to that passage. The excerpts from Aquinas and Calvin suggest that this may not really be the case. What is your reaction to this? Why do you have the reaction you do?
5. Unlike some Protestants, Roman Catholics and Eastern Orthodox Christians have had relatively little trouble with the theory of evolution. Some people think that this stems from a stronger knowledge of the Christian intellectual tradition—that is, of the works and thoughts of Christians who, over the millennia, confronted numerous challenges and worked through them. How does that claim strike you? What do you think might account for the difference?
6. Theological questions aside, the theory of evolution sometimes makes people uncomfortable. Why do you think this is?

The Power of Ideas

Over the years scholars have looked back on Stalin's bloody and brutal dictatorship and tried to explain how such a man could have done such horrible things. The explanations—a traumatic childhood, a clever but unintelligent power hungry thug—are now being shown to be untrue. Since the collapse of the Soviet empire, archives have been opened that allow access to Stalin's rule in detail never before possible. Stephen Kotkin, historian at Princeton University, is writing a series of books using this new material, and recently published the first volume, *Stalin: Paradoxes of Power, 1878–1928* (Penguin). Kotkin refutes the explanations, both Freudian and political, and insists the evidence points in another direction. In a review of Kotkin's book in *The Atlantic* (November 2014, p. 46-50), Anne Applebaum summarizes his conclusions:

The Bolsheviks, Kotkin rightly notes, were driven by “a combination of ideas or habits of thought, especially profound antipathy to markets and all things bourgeois, as well as no-holds-barred revolutionary methods.” Right after the revolution, these convictions led them to outlaw private trade, nationalize industry, confiscate property, seize grain and redistribute it in the cities—all policies that required mass violence to implement. In 1918, Lenin himself suggested that peasants should be forced to deliver their grain to the state, and that those who refused should be “shot on the spot.”

Although some of these policies, including forced grain requisitions, were temporarily abandoned in the 1920s, Stalin brought them back at the end of the decade, eventually enlarging upon them. And no wonder: they were the logical

consequence of every book he had read and every political argument he had ever had. Stalin, as Kotkin reveals him, was neither a dull bureaucrat nor an outlaw but a man shaped by rigid adherence to a puritanical doctrine. His violence was not the product of his subconscious but of the Bolshevik engagement with Marxist-Leninist ideology. (p. 48)

In other words, Stalin believed a set of ideas, and believed in them so passionately that he was willing to put them into practice regardless of the cost.

Applebaum recognizes that this view of things is both countercultural and important if we are to correctly understand our world.

Kotkin's first volume ends with Stalin's announcement of his decision to collectivize Soviet agriculture. Enacting that policy would require the displacement, the imprisonment, and eventually the orchestrated starvation of millions of people, and it resulted in Stalin's complete political triumph.

In the contemporary West, we often assume that perpetrators of mass violence must be insane or irrational, but as Kotkin tells the story, Stalin was neither. And in its way, the idea of Stalin as a rational and extremely intelligent man, bolstered by an ideology sufficiently powerful to justify the deaths of many millions of people, is even more terrifying. It means we might want to take more seriously the pronouncements of the Russian politicians who have lately argued for the use of nuclear weapons against the Baltic states, or of the ISIS leaders who call for the deaths of all Christians and Jews. Just because their language sounds strange to us doesn't mean that they, and those who follow them, don't find it compelling, or

that they won't pursue their logic to its ultimate conclusion. (p. 50)

A few reflections on the power of ideas come to mind:

- Stalin's example shows this is not merely a religious problem. A secular ideology is as able to motivate believers to dangerous fanaticism as can religious dogma. It is a human problem.
- Christians must remember that having access to absolute truth does not mean that all we believe is absolutely true. As we move from scripture to meaning to principle to policy to practice, we must see our ideas as increasingly tentative and incomplete. Belief without humility is antithetical to the claims of Christ.
- Any belief system, secular or religious, that is not self-correcting, that does not contain within it the resources and motivation needed to reform its own application, is dangerous.
- Foundational beliefs work themselves out into a narrative when we live them out. It's important to hear people's stories and to tell the story of scripture, to hear people's foundational ideas and clarify our own. Ideas are not neutral, we all have them, they have consequences, and the consequences matter. ■

Beauty Alters the Grain of Real



Imagine growing up having lost your mother when you are thirteen in an explosion at an art museum after your father, a rough drunk, has abandoned the family. You are given shelter, first by the wealthy parents of a school friend and then by your dad and his sleazy girlfriend. You befriend an equally marginalized boy and discover there are ways to medicate your numbness and pass time in an endlessly boring existence. You finally land in the delightfully cluttered home of a man who restores antiques and whose artistry, skill, and love of wood and well-crafted furniture are matched with a character of kindness, honesty, and integrity. He isn't a good businessman or salesman, but you are—so good that it's easy to let smug, self-satisfied, wealthy customers assume things about antiques that aren't true, so that the bottom line of the shop is vastly improved but at the cost of committing fraud. Imagine, too, that when

the explosion in the art museum rips apart your life, you carry out of the museum that day—in a daze from the shock and smoke and searing heat and at the request of a dying man caught in the explosion—a painting of a little bird, a goldfinch. The gentle beauty of this piece of art sustains you as you grow to manhood, serving as a sign that perhaps things are not as insignificant as they seem on the surface. But then the FBI is searching for the looted painting, and rumors emerge that it has surfaced in Europe, along with rumors that furniture sold at the shop has been sold under false pretenses. And all this time what's really going on, though you wouldn't have put it this way when you were thirteen, is that you are a young man on a journey of life in which death is only too real as you yearn desperately for home, a father, significance, and some hint that, in the end, life might offer more than loss.

If this sounds farfetched or implausible, I assure you it will not be if you read Donna Tartt's luminous and remarkable novel, *The Goldfinch*. I was drawn to Tartt's novel because I love the painting—it actually exists: a small (3¼ x 9 inches) delicate oil by Carel Fabritius (1622–1654) done in the final year of his life. A contemporary of Rembrandt, Fabritius pictures the tiny bird chained to a perch, a creature designed to be free but kept from soaring. I had heard good things about Tartt's earlier novels *The Secret History* (1998) and *The Little Friend* (2002), with people commenting that she published so few books because she worked on each one until every word was perfect. So I read *The Goldfinch*, delighted to have a copy in hardback—good books should have good bindings—and was captivated by Tartt's prose by the time I

had read five pages. It's been a long time since I've read fiction as lovingly crafted, characters that came so alive as they developed, and a story that drew me in until I felt changed for having read it.

The story of Theo Decker in *The Goldfinch* is sometimes compared to *Oliver Twist*, but though I believe both novels are masterful and both are stories of marginalized orphans, I think this isn't quite to the point. Dickens writes to expose the dark underbelly of capitalist London as a social critic whose conscience is finely tuned enough to protest against the rank pollution, the grinding child labor, and horrendous labor conditions of the working poor at the birth of modern industrialization. Tartt writes to bring us into the heart and life of an abandoned boy growing into manhood, forced to make his own way in a society where community is so fragmented that individuals must create their own identity, their significant relationships, and their own sense of meaning.

Now a man walking through one more in an endless series of airports, Theo looks around and thinks about what he sees.

White noise, impersonal roar. Deadening incandescence of the boarding terminals. But even these soul-free, sealed-off places are drenched with meaning, spangled and thundering with it. Sky Mall. Portable stereo systems. Mirrored isles of Drambuie and Tanqueray and Chanel No. 5. I look at the blanked-out faces of the other passengers—hoisting their briefcases, their backpacks, shuffling to disembark—and I think of what Hobie [the antique restorer] said: beauty alters the grain of reality. And I keep thinking too of the more conventional wisdom: namely, that the pursuit of pure

ity

beauty is a trap, a fast track to bitterness and sorrow, that beauty has to be wedded to something more meaningful.

Only what is that thing? Why am I made the way I am? Why do I care about all the wrong things, and nothing at all for the right ones? Or, to tip it another way: how can I see so clearly that everything I love or care about is illusion, and yet—for me, anyway—all that's worth living for lies in that charm?

A great sorrow, and one that I am only beginning to understand: we don't get to choose our own hearts. We can't make ourselves want what's good for us or what's good for other people. We don't get to choose the people we are.

Because— isn't it drilled into us constantly, from childhood on, an unquestioned platitude in the culture—? From William Blake to Lady Gaga, from Rousseau to Rumi to Tosca to Mister Rogers, it's a curiously uniform message, accepted from high to low: when in doubt, what to do? How do we know what's right for us? Every shrink, every career counselor, every Disney princess knows the answer: "Be yourself." "Follow your heart."

Only here's what I really, really want someone to explain to me. What if one happens to be possessed of a heart that can't be trusted—? (p. 760-761)

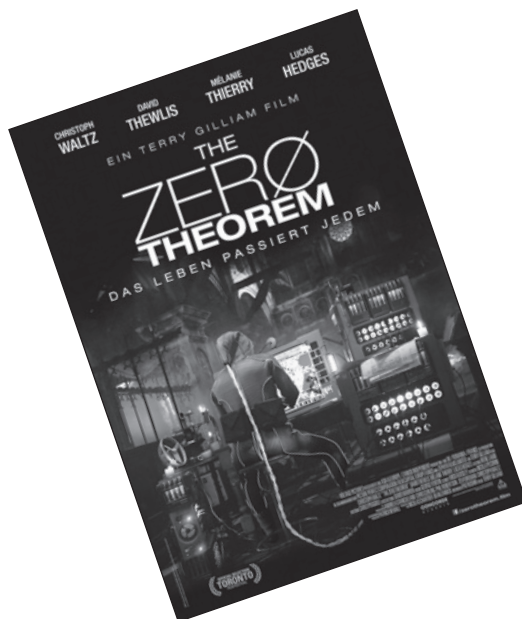
Dickens produced a classic cry for social justice in a society that grinds children under the heel of barons of wealth in a cold heartless world; Tarrt has produced an exceptional meditation on whether beauty is a sign, a signal in a fragmented, heartless world that points to something beyond the trivial here and now, and whether in finding such a sign as we find ourselves we will find anything much at all.

I recommend *The Goldfinch* to you. Tarrt writes such effortless, exquisite prose that it would be a shame to miss coming under the spell of her story. And there is too much in the story to process if we care about knowing our world and our own hearts. ■

Book recommended: *The Goldfinch* by Donna Tarrt (New York, NY: Little, Brown and Company; 2013) 771 pages.



What's the Point of Anything?



Absurdity, it is said, rests on the knife-edge between comedy and insanity. Those who mistake the absurd for reality are deemed unbalanced and considered mentally ill or possessed. On the other hand, absurdity in the repertoire of a gifted jester can provoke both laughter and sudden insight by forcing us to see things in a different light.

In ancient monarchies, the king held absolute power and his word and whim were law. In such a system, to speak against the king was treason, and so the tradition of the court jester was important if truth was ever to be spoken to power. The jester was the only one fully free to speak the truth, as long as the king laughed.

We laugh at jesters but must never underestimate the importance of their deliciously subversive humor in the matrix of human life and society. "Who is wise enough for this moment in history?" Os Guinness asks in *The Gravedigger File*. "The one who has always been wise enough to play the fool. For when the wise are foolish, the

wealthy poor and the godly worldly, it takes a special folly to subvert such foolishness, a special wit to teach true wisdom" (p. 230).

Even if royals, presidents, and CEOs no longer wield absolute power, the tradition of the jester continues. Charlie Chaplin, the Marx brothers, and Monty Python are brilliant at taking dialogue, story lines, and visual sketches to absurd lengths. At their best they make us laugh, and then pause to realize that some of the laughs are on us.

Sometimes, in taking ideas to absurd lengths, they warn of how things may unfold in the future, and the insight of their humor assumes a prophetic edge. One such jester is Terry Gilliam, the American member of the British comedy troupe Monty Python. He seems to delight in his gift of taking ideas to their logical but absurd conclusion in order to shed light on the folly that weaves its way through the affairs of a fallen humanity in a broken world.

In 1985 Gilliam wrote and directed *Brazil*, supposedly set in some future unspecified date in the twentieth century. In this absurdist, visionary, science fiction film, Gilliam imagined a world in which work seems meaningless; where the quest for youthfulness introduces ever more forms of cosmetic surgery; where technology, advertising, and impersonal bureaucracy are ubiquitous; where democracies excuse torture to extract needed information; and where liberty is happily sacrificed and intrusive police force is tolerated for greater security in the face of random terrorist violence. Sound at all familiar? The consensus I heard in 1985, however, was that *Brazil* was funny, at least for those who have a taste for Monty Python type humor, but as social commentary it was far too absurd to be

taken seriously.

In 2014 Gilliam released another film, *The Zero Theorem*. It isn't a sequel to *Brazil* but is similar in both genre and intent. You will find the same attention to detail, the deliciously subversive humor, and the wild imagination at work, inviting us to look again at life to see what we might have missed the first time we looked. In *The Zero Theorem*, Gilliam takes the perennial question of meaning in life and asks where the predominant answer proposed by our scientific secular world will take us as we try to find an answer.

We are introduced to Qohen Leth, played by Christoph Waltz, a brilliant computer gamer working for Mancom, a computer/net conglomerate. Leth lives in seclusion in an abandoned, dusty church waiting for a phone call from Management that will tell him the purpose of his life. Though the phone occasionally rings, his call never comes. Outside is a rapidly changing, fast paced, globalized world of constant noise, frenzied activity, intrusive advertising, religious pluralism, and online relationships. He works at an elaborate computer set in the sanctuary of the church, tasked with solving the zero theorem. That is a mathematical equation that will add up everything in life and reality and show the sum to be zero.

"Nothing adds up," Leth says to his supervisor, Joby (played by David Thewlis). "No," Joby says. "You've got it backwards, Qohen. Everything adds up to nothing, that's the point." "What's the point?" Leth asks. "Exactly," Joby says. "What's the point of anything?"

The film opens with the image of a huge, swirling black hole, an image that appears repeatedly in the background as Leth works on the zero theorem.

They are close to solving it, but Mancom is, as Management (played by Matt Damen) says, “still crunching the data.” Near the end of the film, Qohen and Management meet and talk. “Why would you want to prove that all is for nothing?” Leth asks. “I never said all is for nothing,” Management replies. “I’m a businessman, Mr. Leth, nothing is for nothing. *Ex inordinateo veni pecunia.*” “What?!” Leth says. “There’s money in ordering disorder,” Management says. “Chaos pays, Mr. Leth.”

Our secular world proposes that meaning and significance can be found without any reference to the divine or the transcendent. And since in such a world everything is finally indistinguishable from nothing, meaning and significance must arise out of nothing. Gilliam takes that idea seriously, runs it through his comedic imagination, and shows its sentimental absurdity in a way that is really quite stunning. After a lifetime of work to solve the zero theorem, at the end Leth is left with nothing. “What is the meaning of life, Mr. Leth?” Management asks rhetorically. “So close to its end and still no answers.” And then Management fires him.

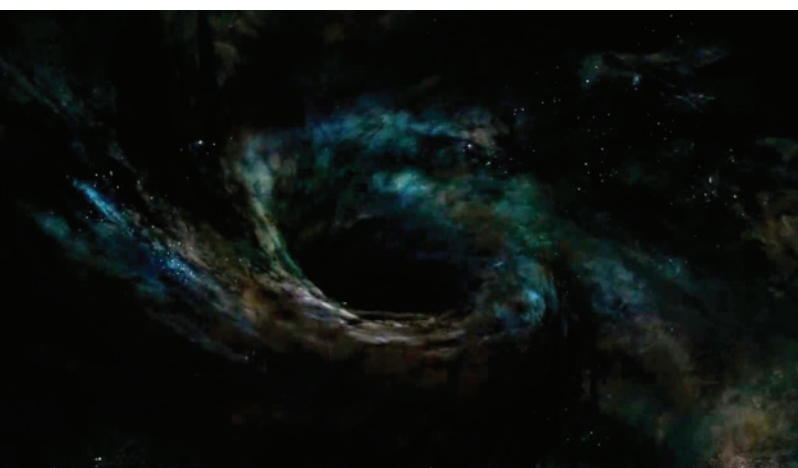
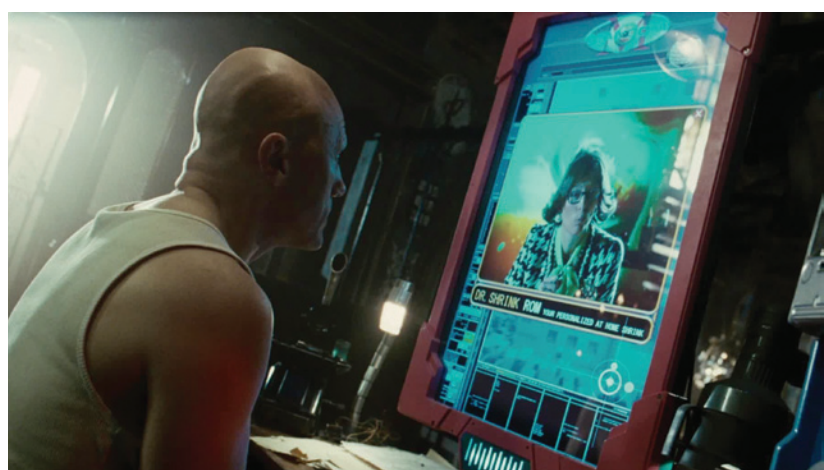
I’ll leave you to discover how Gilliam ends the film, and what you think it means. ■

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION & DISCUSSION

1. What was your initial or immediate reaction to the film? Why do you think you reacted that way? Remember that there is a difference between *liking* a piece of art and *getting* it, in the sense of understanding its cultural significance.
2. In what ways were the techniques of filmmaking (casting, direction, lighting, script, music, sets, action, dialogue, cinematography, editing, etc.) used to get the film’s message(s) across, or to make the message(s) plausible, attractive, or compelling? In what ways were they ineffective or misused?
3. Though the solution of the zero theorem is central to the plot, Terry Gilliam also provides glimpses of other aspects of life in Qohen Leth’s society, e.g., advertising, religion, relationships, urban life, business, virtual reality, work. What do you think Gilliam is communicating about each of these?
4. With whom did you identify in the film? Why? With whom were we meant to identify? Discuss the main characters in the film and their significance to the story.
5. What is the significance of the film’s ending? Why? Chris Sawin, in an online review on examiner.com, says this: “There’s a message lying dormant within *The Zero Theorem* that is just waiting for that initial spark to turn over and fire on all cylinders. Leth is more comfortable in the virtual world that is created for him and constantly retreats back to it. Even when he’s not plugged in,

he’s immersing himself in his work so that he doesn’t have to interact with the real world that he hates. While the zero theorem program could have just been a way to prove that nothing exists, Leth sees it as a way of rediscovering happiness, and he finds it in his experiences with Bainsley [an online call girl played by Melanie Thierry]. He has no joy in his life but, by the end of the film, he’s exactly where he belongs and has also figured out how to unlock the realms of his imagination.” Do you agree? Why or why not?

6. How do your non-Christian friends understand the film’s meaning? If there is a difference, what do you think accounts for it? What could you say to help communicate across that divide in perspective?
7. “I do want to say things in these films,” Gilliam is reported to have said. “I want audiences to come out with shards stuck in them.” In this view, the cinema is supposed to be part of a cultural dialogue about significant things, to be challenging, not merely entertaining. Yet we often hear people say they don’t want to think at the movies—they have to do that all week and want to just relax at the theater. Discuss this in light of a distinctly Christian view of art in a fallen world.



Credits for *The Zero Theorem*

Starring:

Christoph Waltz (Qohen Leth)
David Thewlis (Joby)
Lucas Hedges (Bob)
Mélanie Thierry (Bainsley)
Tilda Swinton (Dr. Shrink-Rom)

Director: Terry Gilliam

Writer: Pat Rushin

Producers: Patrick Newall, Christoph Waltz,
Amy Gilliam, and others

Cinematography: Nicola Pecorini

USA, 2014, 107 minutes

Rated R (language, sexuality/nudity)