

critique

A RANSOM FELLOWSHIP PUBLICATION

ISSUE FOUR 2008

Engaging The New Atheists

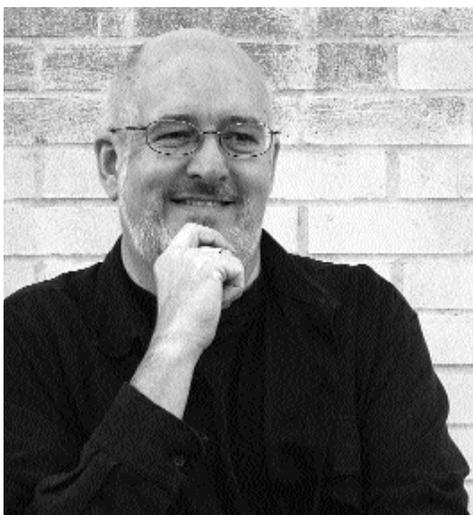
How They Help Us Understand God

**From Aaron to Zurishaddai:
Resources for Understanding Scripture**

**A Closer Look at Tim Keller's
*The Reason for God***

Magic and Monsters and Ghouls

**Love and Loss Amidst the Dunes:
A Review of Annie Dillard's Latest Novel**



Engaging Doubt For Clarity's Sake

Some things should become habits of the heart. Things like not agreeing to commitments until we've had an adequate chance to reflect on our calendars. Things like listening and asking questions before we begin to speak.

Developing habits always feels unnatural at first, especially if they mark a distinct change from how we've tended to operate in the past. If we keep at it faithfully, however, they can become a completely natural part of how we think, imagine, interact, and live.

At the beginning of *The Reason for God*, Tim Keller outlines a simple, yet radical idea.

I commend two processes to my readers. I urge skeptics to wrestle with the unexamined "blind faith" on which skepticism is based, and to see how hard it is to justify those beliefs to those who do not share them. I also urge believers to wrestle with their personal and culture's objections to the faith. At the end of each process, even if you remain the skeptic or believer you have been, you will hold your own position with both greater clarity and greater humility. Then there will be an understanding, sympathy, and respect for the other side that did not exist before. Believers and non-believers will rise to the level of disagreement rather than simply denouncing one another. This happens when each side has learned to represent the other's argument in its strongest and most positive form. Only then is it safe and fair to disagree with it. That achieves civility in a pluralistic society, which is no small thing.

We Christians must be willing to make this a habit of the heart (even if skeptics don't). Sound bites are not sufficient for making an adequate case for the faith, nor are easy arguments against unbelief convincing. A good way to demonstrate our conviction that non-Christians are made in God's image is to search out and engage their most profound doubts and challenges to Christian faith. Which means that at times we may help them formulate a stronger version of the challenge than they originally expressed. Doing that is a service of love, as is going on to engage it thoughtfully with them.

In the past, I think, the unspoken assumption has been to keep a respectful distance from doubt—make that a fearful, defensive distance. And to answer doubt quickly when it shows up as if a quick answer ever solves the issue. Let's engage it fully, carefully instead, for clarity's sake.

And if we find ourselves too busy for this task, then we're too busy.

Source: *The Reason for God: Belief in an Age of Skepticism* (New York, NY: Dutton; 2008) p. xviii-xix.

critique

ISSUE FOUR 2008

Editor

Denis Haack

Managing Editor

Matthew Hundley

Contributing Editors

Jennifer Disney, Steven Garber, R. Greg Grooms, Donald Guthrie, John Mason Hodges, Marsena Konkle, Preston Jones, David John Seel, Jr., Travis Scott, Andrew H. Trotter, Jr.

Board of Directors

Steven Garber

Director, The Washington Institute for Faith, Vocation & Culture, Washington, DC

Donald Guthrie

Associate Professor & Associate Dean of Educational Ministries; Senior Director, Francis A. Schaeffer Institute, Covenant Seminary, St Louis, MO

Denis and Margie Haack

Co-Founders of Ransom Fellowship

Rev. Ed Hague

Pastor of Adult Discipleship
Wildwood Presbyterian Church

Bonnie Liefer

Vice President for Marketing & Communications, Coalition for Christian Outreach, Pittsburgh, PA

Henry Tazelaar

Professor of Pathology, Mayo Clinic
College of Medicine

Submissions

critique considers unsolicited manuscripts only for poetry. submissions@ransomfellowship.org or mail with SASE to:

critique

1150 West Center
Rochester, MN 55902

Correspondence

All other correspondence
and changes of address:

critique

1150 West Center
Rochester, MN 55902

info@ransomfellowship.org



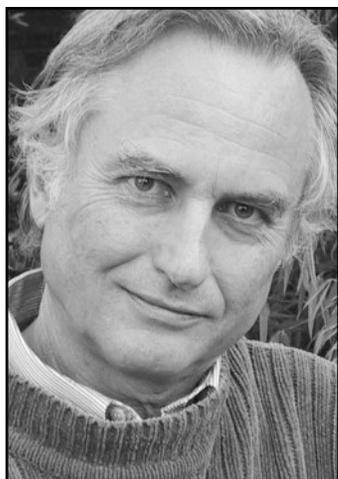
Distinctive Books and Music

www.heartsandmindsbooks.com
read@heartsandmindsbooks.com

234 East Main Street
Dallastown, PA 17313
(717) 246-3333

All books mentioned in **critique** may be ordered directly from Hearts and Minds. A portion of the proceeds will be donated to Ransom Fellowship.

For more about Ransom Fellowship visit:
<http://www.ransomfellowship.org>
Copyright © 2008 Ransom Fellowship



12



14

18



20

01 **COVER**

02 **ED NOTE**
The Unfairness of it All

03 **CONTENTS**

04 **DIALOGUE**

06 **READING THE WORLD**
Engaging New Atheists I:
Agreeing with Hitchens

12 **READING THE WORLD**
Engaging New Atheists II:
Consolation on Dawkins

14 **RESOURCES**
Tim Kellor's
Reason for God

16 **READING THE WORD**
***All the People* and**
OT Dictionary

18 **PAPER & CANVAS**
Reflecting on Annie
Dillard's Latest Work

20 **DISCERNING LIFE**
Magic and Monsters

24 **BACK PAGE**

Critique Mailing List: *Critique* is not available by subscription. Rather, interested readers can request to be added to Ransom's mailing list, which is updated frequently. Donors to Ransom Fellowship, a 501(c)(3) nonprofit, tax-deductible ministry, are added to the mailing list automatically unless requesting otherwise. To receive *Critique*, send your mailing address to: Ransom Fellowship, 1150 West Center, Rochester, MN, 55902. Everyone on Ransom's mailing list also receives *Notes from Toad Hall*, a newsletter written by Margie Haack in which she reflects on what it means to be faithful in the ordinary and routine of daily life, and gives news about Ransom's ministry. *Critique* is a newsletter (published six times each year, funds permitting) designed to, by God's grace, call attention to resources of interest to thinking Christians; model Christian discernment; & stimulate believers to think biblically about all of life. The articles and resources reproduced or recommended in *Critique* do not necessarily reflect the thinking of Ransom Fellowship. The purpose of this newsletter is to encourage thought, not dictate points of view. **Copying policy:** Feel free to make up to 50 copies of any article that appears in *Critique* for use with a small group. We only ask that you copy the entire article, note the source, and distribute the copies free of charge. **On the web:** www.ransomfellowship.org



To the editor:

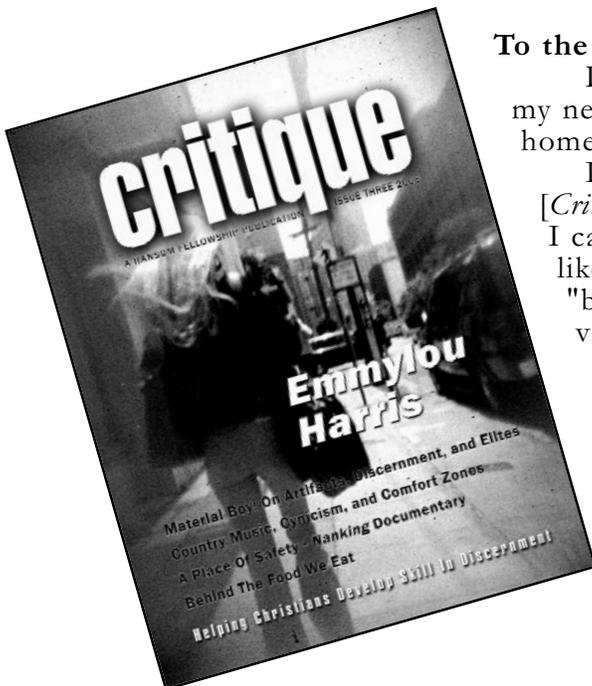
I just wanted to let you know, and I've thought this for a while, but *Critique* and the website look phenomenal! I love the new aesthetics and it truly makes me read more. Hope you and Margie are doing well. Hope we get to see each other soon!

Bailey Mohr
St Louis, MO
www.beautifulmessphoto.com

To the editor:

Just wanted to say a quick thank you for your ministry, Ransom Fellowship. I love getting the publications and please know that you are in my prayers that God would provide financially and otherwise. Thank you for stepping out in faith. I am proud to support you all.

Toby Meuli
North Hollywood, CA



To the editor:

Dinner's in the oven and I was delighted when Greg brought my new issue of *Critique* in from the mailbox when he arrived home from work. Yippee!!

I just read your Editor's Note, "Impatience in Prayer" [*Critique* #3-2008], and am crying already. Crying because, sadly, I can relate so well. Crying because I'm so thankful for people like you who share my struggles. Crying because I, too, "believe God loves us enough to bother us about our lack of virtue."

Go ahead and pray that prayer again, Denis. He'll speak again. You'll be more conformed to the image of His Son as a result. And you'll tell people like me about it. And some of us will cry tears that reveal the intimate connection we share with other broken followers.

Thank you.

Gotta run...dinner's ready! The rest of *Critique* will have to wait...!

In His grip,
Susan Albers
Zionsville, IN

To the editor:

I started out just wanting *Notes from Toad Hall* but have come to love *Critique*. I didn't realize how desperately I needed to think outside the box. Many concepts were only head knowledge--I knew them but not practically. I especially liked the *Critique* Dialogue [#1-2008] dealing with secular/sacred. Indeed, all of life is, or should be, worship.

Thanks
Frances Burden
Clayton, NC

To the editor:

i write to thank you for your commitment to honesty and reality.

i live in the south where we are too good at sugar coating the truth. reading articles in *critique* where you blatantly speak of god's grace entering into and redeeming the brokenness of our hearts and this world is like drinking a glass of cold water on a hot and humid south carolina day.

thank you,
jenny ohly
greenville, sc

Denis Haack responds:

It's hard to express how grateful we are when readers take time to email or tuck a note in with their gift to Ransom Fellowship. Margie and I always read them with care, and are thankful, both to you who write, and also to God's grace in allowing to do some small things that might be of some use in his Kingdom.

Bailey. Your feedback on the aesthetics of this publication is important to me, because you have an eye for beauty and a gift for art. We've so wanted the look of things to mesh with the substance of what we write, since both all truth and all beauty are God's. Thank you for your kind words.

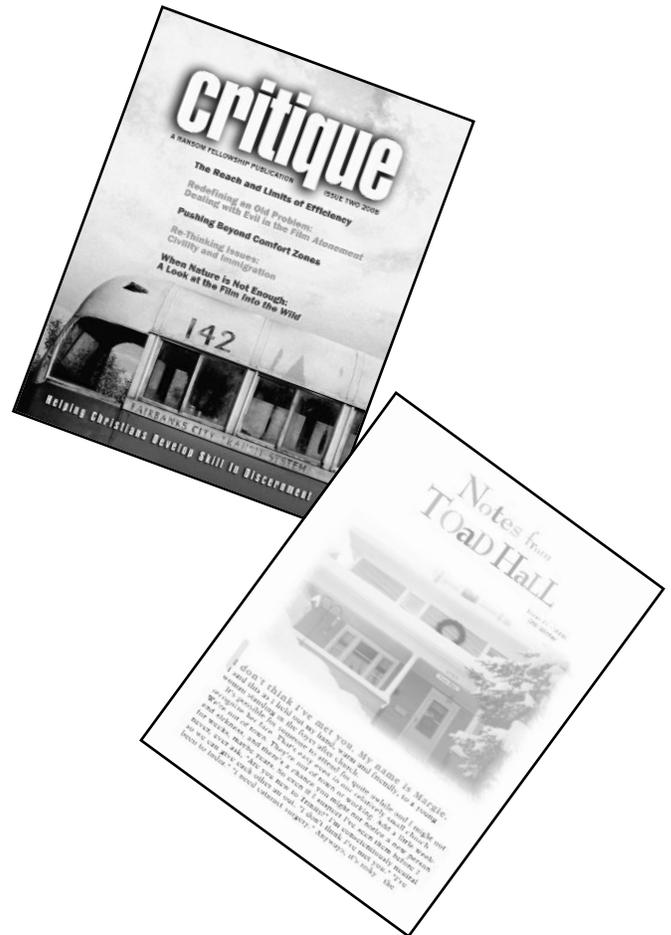
Toby. How to talk about Ransom's financial need in a way that does not oppress our readers is something we've worked hard to achieve. And something we pray constantly that we do achieve. The generosity of you and so many others, in giving and prayer, is what allows us to continue. Thank you.

Susan. Last night a dear friend sat in our liv-

ing room and as the conversation progressed, cried. Not from sadness, I think, but from the freedom that comes when God's people feel safe with one another. When we feel free to be ourselves, to face our doubts and failures and glories, and in the process know something of grace. It even works long distance. Thanks for your words.

Frances. Over the years, as I've traveled to lecture, I've stopped counting the number of times people have told me they prefer *Notes from Toad Hall* over *Critique*. Margie is a gifted writer, so effective in communicating how God's grace is evidenced in the ordinary and routine of life. She's also my best friend, I'm happy to add. On the other hand, I'm glad you saw the light. Thank you for writing.

jenny. we are deeply committed to the proposition that for the christian, authenticity is simply not optional. it's sad how seldom it is demonstrated. we northerners may have different cultural forces at work around us, but the temptation to slide is a plague in the church. thank you for your encouragement--it's delightful to know people actually read what we labor to write.





Engaging New Atheists, Part I Agreeing with Christopher Hitchens

The early 21st century has introduced puzzling cultural cross currents for the serious Christian. On the one hand, many postmodern young adults are unabashed in their yearning for spirituality, a quest reflected in much popular music, from the ethereal rock of Iceland's Sigur Rós on albums like *()* (2002) and *Takk* (2005) to the richly textured anthems of Arcade Fire on *Neon Bible* (2006). Films like *Fight Club* (1999), *Garden State* (2004), *Pan's Labyrinth* (2006), and *The Golden Compass* (2007) explicitly raise searching questions on perennial issues: the meaning of being human, the problem of evil, the need for significance, and the possibility of transcendence. At the same time and seemingly in sharp contrast, an impressive number of assertive voices are arguing that unbelief is the only possible option for thinking people today.

"A band of intellectual brothers," *Wired* noted in a cover story on the phenomenon, "is mounting a crusade against belief in God." In widely-selling, much-discussed books including *The God Delusion* (2006) by Richard Dawkins, and *God is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything* (2007) and *The Portable Atheist: Essential Readings for the Nonbeliever* (2007) by Christopher Hitchens, these self-professed atheists have advanced strongly worded arguments against belief in God. "The New Atheists," Wolf notes, "will not let us off the hook simply because we are not doctrinaire believers. They condemn not just belief in God but respect for belief in God. Religion is not only wrong; it's evil. Now that the battle has been joined, there's no excuse for shirking." I agree. ►►

The "New" in "New Atheists"

The new atheists are not "new" because they advance novel philosophical arguments against theism. In *There is a God: How the World's Most Notorious Atheist Changed His Mind*, a book of thoughtful, philosophical reflection seemingly belied by its spectacular subtitle, Roy Abraham Varghese asks how

these works and authors fit into the larger philosophical discussion on God of the last several decades? The answer is they don't... It would be fair to say that the "new atheism" is nothing less than a regression to the logical positivist philosophy that was renounced by even its most ardent proponents.

The new atheists, he concludes, "not only fail to make a case for this belief [atheism], but ignore the very phenomena that are particularly relevant to the question of whether God exists."

The new atheists are "new" primarily because they share in common the conviction that the latest advances of scientific discovery and thought make belief in God unnecessary. There is a simpler and more reasonable explanation for life, they believe, one that is rooted in science not faith. "Religion has run out of justifications," Hitchens says. "Thanks to the telescope and the microscope, it no longer offers an explanation of anything important." Thus, though they acknowledge that they share atheism with previous generations of unbelievers, the primary foundation of and essential reasons for their atheism--namely, the conclusions of evolutionary biology--were unavailable to previous generations.

There is one other way in which the new atheists represent something new. Although believers living under Marxism were confronted by militant atheism, believers in the West have been more used to living in societies where belief rather than unbelief tended to be a dominant cultural force and memory. The pressures of secularization and pluralization are transforming the cultural landscape in the West, however, and as this process unfolds the new atheists represent a significant challenge to Christian faith. They are persuasive, adept at getting their message out. They are erudite, highly educated thinkers. And they intend to issue a direct, powerful challenge to Christian theists. Early in his book, Dawkins responds to readers who are tempted to dismiss his arguments.

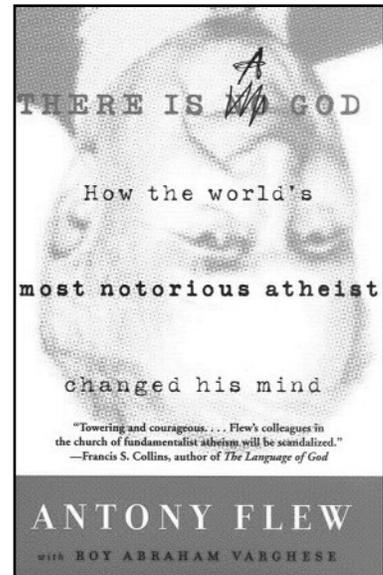
"The God that Dawkins doesn't believe in is a God that I don't believe in either."... I am not attacking any particular version of God or gods. I am attacking God, all gods, any thing and everything supernatural, wherever and whenever they have been or will be invented.

This challenge is not occurring in obscure academic circles, but in the marketplace of ideas. It is a conversation the church must not miss.

An essential part of this conversation involves significant ethical considerations. As might be expected, as a corollary to their argument that God, as Dawkins puts it, "almost certainly does not exist," the new atheists argue forcefully that ethics and morality do not require belief in God, revelation, or religion. As Hitchens puts it:

We speculate that it is at least possible that, once people accepted the fact of their short and struggling lives, they might behave better towards each other and not worse. We know with certainty that an ethical life can be lived without religion. And we know for a fact that the corollary holds true--that religion has caused innumerable people not just to conduct themselves no better than others, but to award themselves permission to behave in ways that would make a brothel-keeper or an ethnic cleanser raise an eye brow.

Hitchens' rhetoric in the final sentence just quoted is representative of his book. He expresses moral outrage not just for the violence and evil perpetrated in the name of God and religion, outrage not ►►



just for the violence and evil perpetrated in the name of God and religion, but religious ideas and values which he views as ignorant and superstitious. *God is Not Great* and *The Portable Atheist* are nothing if not extended exercises in moral outrage. This suggests a second, related ethical issue for the Christian, namely developing the morally acceptable way to respond in a pluralistic world to this challenge, especially since many will find the arguments and the rhetoric offensive. In the hope of bringing some light to this conversation, I will identify the basic ethical position and reasoning Christopher Hitchens presents, and go on to propose a biblically ethical response. (Obviously, a thoughtful Christian response is required for more than the ethical dimensions of Hitchens' argument--but I will limit my reflections here.)

Hitchens' Basis for Morality and Ethics

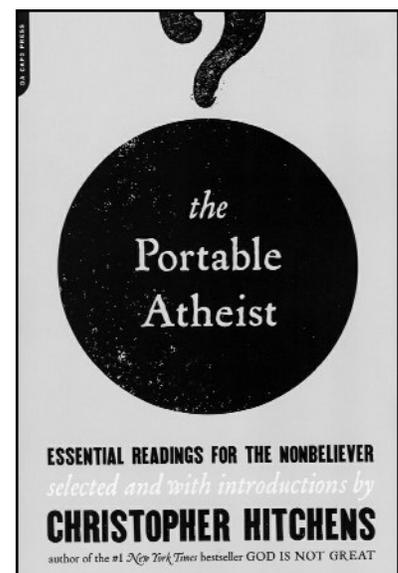
In a paragraph so revealing as to be worth quoting full in the Introduction of *The Portable Atheist*, Hitchens summarizes his position on morality and ethics. He asks his reader to imagine a conversation with a theist.

To be charitable, one may admit that the religious often seem unaware of how insulting their main proposition actually is. Exchange views with a believer even for a short time, and let us make the assumption that this is a mild and decent believer who does not open the bidding by telling you that your unbelief will endanger your soul and condemn you to hell. It will not be long until you are politely asked how you can possibly know right from wrong. Without holy awe, what is to prevent you from resorting to theft, murder, rape, and perjury? It will sometimes be conceded that non-believers have led ethical lives, and it will also be conceded (as it had better be) that many believers have been responsible for terrible crimes. Nonetheless, the working assumption is that we should have no moral compass if we were not some how in thrall to an unalterable and unchallengeable celestial dictatorship. What a repulsive idea! As well as taking the axe to the root of everything that we have learned about evolutionary biology (societies that tolerate murder and theft and perjury will not last long, and those that violate the taboos on incest and cannibalism do in fact simply die out), it constitutes a radical attack on the very concept of human self-respect. It does so

by suggesting that one could not do a right action or avoid a wrong one, except for the hope of a divine reward or the fear of divine retribution. Many of us, even the less unselfish, might hope to do better than that on our own. When I give blood, for example (something that several religions forbid), I do not lose a pint, but someone else gains one. There is something about this that appeals to me, and I derive other satisfactions as well from being of assistance to a fellow creature. Furthermore, I have a very rare blood type and I hope very much that when I am in need of a transfusion someone else will have thought and acted in precisely the same way that I have. Indeed, I can almost count on it. Nobody had to teach me any of this, let alone reinforce the teaching with sinister fairy-tales about appearances by the Archangel Gabriel. The so-called Golden Rule is innate in us.

Hitchens argues that a moral sense, a basic knowledge of right and wrong is simply part of our humanness. Rather than come from an external source, it arises from an internal source. As such it is something all human beings share, a condition prior to or more foundational than the conscious acceptance of religious belief or disbelief. This ethical sense is, he claims, innate--at least to the extent knowing the Golden Rule. Failing to recognize this truth is deeply offensive.

Our first response must be to see that rather than constituting an attack on Christianity, or positing a position contrary to biblical revelation, we must acknowledge his position as a point of agreement. ►►



David Jones writes that, "'natural law' refers to the moral law of which all human beings have some awareness, including a basic sense of justice, by virtue of their being created in the image of God."

This notion of natural law is firmly grounded in Scripture, St. Paul teaching it explicitly in Romans 2:14-15:

For when Gentiles, who do not have the law, by nature do what the law requires, they are a law to themselves, even though they do not have the law. They show that the work of the law is written on their hearts, while their conscience also bears witness, and their conflicting thoughts accuse or even excuse them.

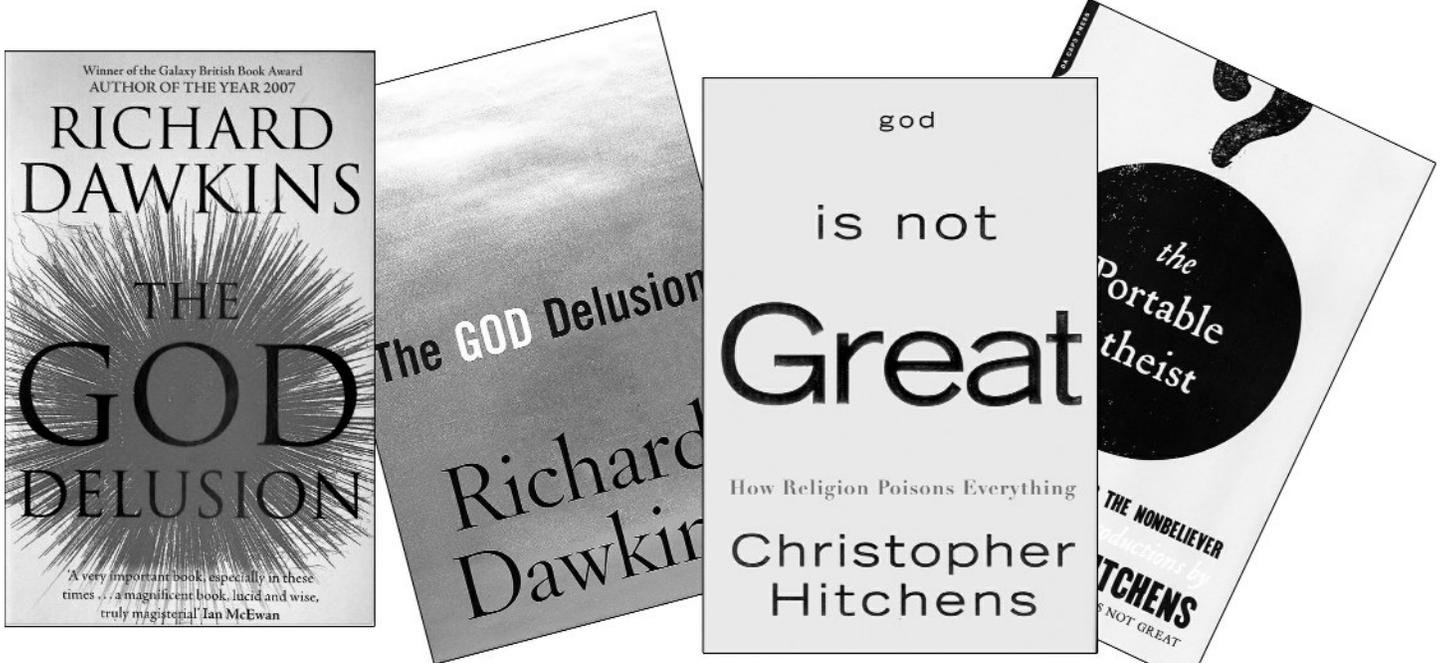
Following the biblical teaching, the Westminster divines spoke of those made in God's image as "having the law of God written on their hearts." The biblical teaching of natural law thus is part of the definition of what it means to be created in God's image, to be human.

This means that the Christian must also agree with Hitchens' sense of violation or offense at theists who insist that without belief in God no moral sense is possible. This is not simply a denial of biblical teaching, but a demeaning of the person made in God's image. Hitchens' finding this "insulting" and even "repulsive" is, in this light, a reflection of his humanness.

It will be noted that Hitchens comes to his position not just on the basis of personal experience and historical precedent, but also as a conclusion he draws from his belief in the develop-

ment of evolutionary biology. To this extent, the Christian might contend that since his foundation is (at least partially) mistaken, we must be careful not to identify this as a point of agreement. This is, at root, an ethical issue: Is it right for a believer to agree with an atheist about something that is true, but that the atheist claims is taught by an evolutionary theory that leaves no room for God?

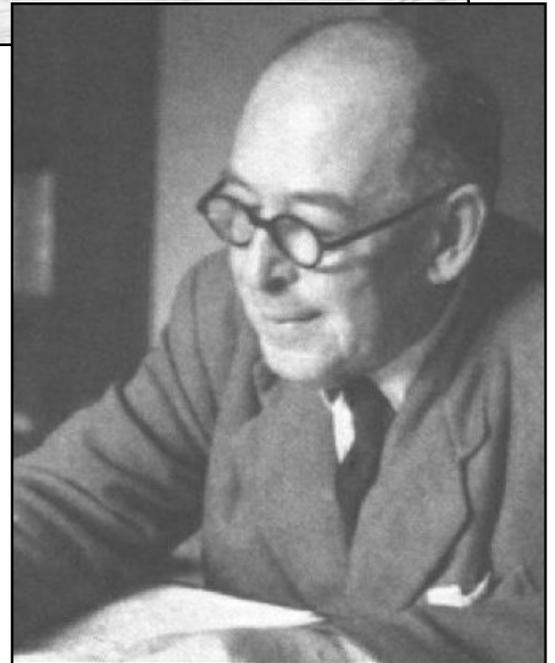
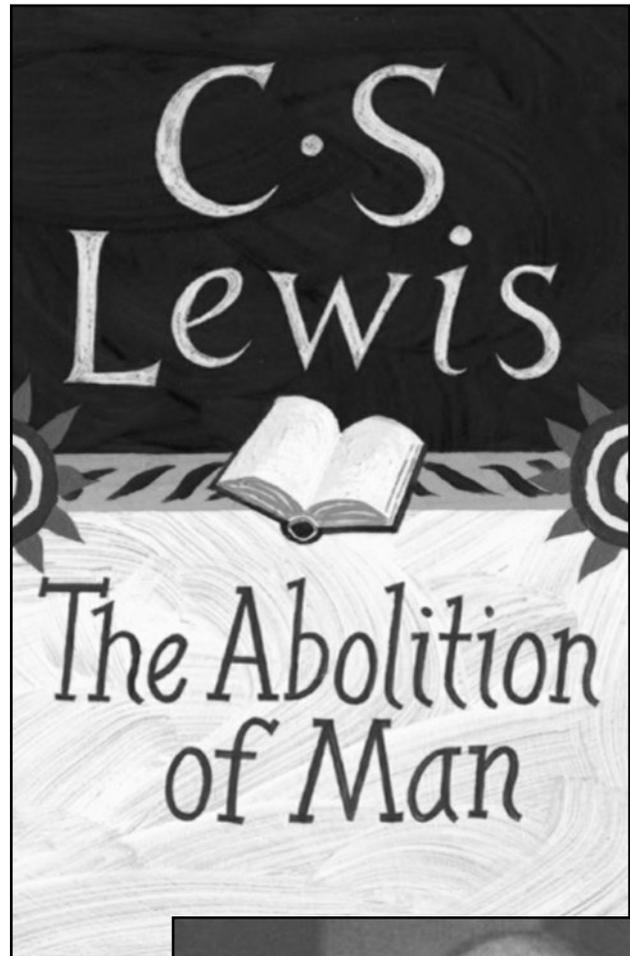
Several things must be said in response. First, incorrect reasons for drawing a correct conclusion do not falsify the truthfulness of the conclusion. Suppose someone believes that Christ truly was raised from the dead because they find this to be the only satisfying ending to the story. This is, clearly, an insufficient reason to believe in Christ's resurrection, especially given the weight of evidence, but they remain correct that Christ is raised from the dead. To refuse to agree with someone about something true until we are satisfied that all their reasons are equally true may give the appearance of an insistence on holiness, but in reality is a position of astonishing hubris. Second, Paul's teaching on natural law is not qualified but applies to all who are made in God's image. When he refers to those "who do not have the law" (2:14) he is referring to those (Gentiles) who, separated from the covenant people of God, have no access to or even knowledge of the special revelation of God. We can expect them, therefore, to have an innate sense of God's moral standards without expecting them to give or have good reasons for their moral convictions. They may even produce wrong reasons for correct moral notions, or, as in this case, wrong reasons for their innate sense of basic right and wrong. ▶



It is therefore morally right for the Christian to agree with Hitchens; it is morally wrong to withhold agreement because we find either his reasons weak or his cause wanting or his prose offensive. In his discussion on legalism, Jones makes an important point that speaks directly to the tendency of Christians who remain aloof from sinners in the hope of remaining holy: "rules are not righteous for being rigorous; it is not good to be more strict than God." Insufficient reasons for believing the truth are, according to Jesus, better than disbelieving (John 10:38).

C. S. Lewis argues that natural law "is not one among a series of possible systems of value. It is the sole source of all value judgments. If it is rejected, all value is rejected." God's act to write his law in his creatures is an act of creative grace, and it is wrong for Christians to demean, despise, or hesitate to acknowledge and honor it. This is true even when--as it always is--it is evident in a broken, fallen person. The fact that someone like Hitchens has not encountered Christians who agree with him at the point of natural law/innate values should grieve theologically serious believers. If this aspect of biblical theology is not being taught sufficiently, Christians will not be able to identify an important aspect of created reality. Not agreeing with someone like Hitchens on a point like this is to (inadvertent though it may be) place an unnecessary stumbling block between him and the gospel. And that is always wrong.

Finding points of agreement with implacable foes of Christian faith must be seen for what they are: as acts of love. Even if someone does not treat our beliefs with respect, we are bound as Christians to treat them as if they are created in God's image and persons for whom Christ gave his life. This is not the only point with which Christians can and should agree with Hitchens. As he unfolds his case against theism, for example, he reviews many of the tragic stories which bring disrepute to Christians in history. He mentions, among other things, the Crusades where not just Muslim soldiers but whole communities of Jews and "heretical" Christians were massacred, the sad legacy of Christian support for Southern slavery, and some of the outrageous public statements made by evangelical pundits after 9/11. We must not be slow to agree. These are abominations which call for repentance, not for defense or debate (at least initially) over details of the historical record. ▶▶



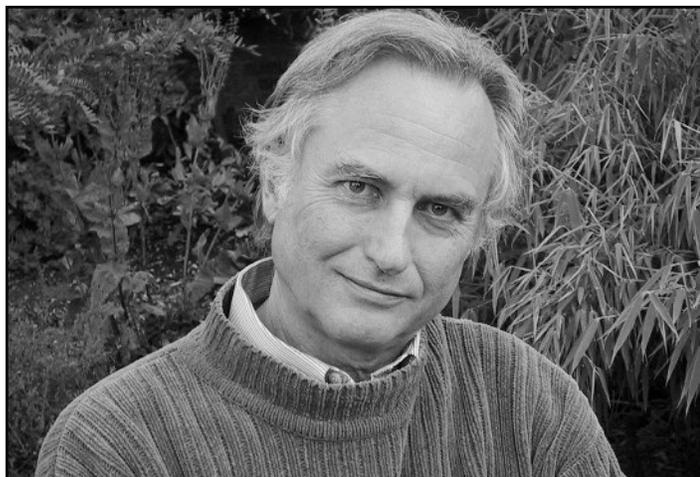
Engaging Hitchens in the public square

Christians must be prepared to accept blows against the faith since our Lord promised the world would hate us as it hated him. It is wrong to be defensive facing the challenge raised by Hitchens and the other new atheists. We need, instead, to demonstrate a quiet confidence in the gospel. Even as we repent when the evils and mistakes of the past are thrown in our face, we can know this is not the end of the story. As Roy Abraham Varghese correctly notes:

If they want to discourage belief in God, the popularizers must furnish arguments in support of their own atheistic views. Today's atheist evangelists hardly even try to argue their case in this regard. Instead, they train their guns on well-known abuses in the history of the major world religions. But the excesses and atrocities of organized religion have no bearing whatsoever on the existence of God, just as the threat of nuclear proliferation has no bearing on the question of whether $E = mc^2$.

Dawkins notes that "the nastiest of all" correspondents he has encountered since he began arguing for atheism are believers. To meet the challenge Hitchens and the other new atheists has raised is crucial. To see their prose as "words that breathe out violence" (Psalm 27) may be appropriate. To answer in kind, on the other hand, is morally wrong for the Christian.

According to the 6th commandment, respect for human life means we must treat all our fellow human beings with identical care and compassion. Specifically, we must treat them as is proper for creatures created in God's image regardless of what they are like, how they speak, what they believe, or how they act. "Apparently it makes no difference," J. Douma writes in his exposition of



Richard Dawkins photo (c) Lalla Ward

the Decalogue, "whether someone is behaving as the image of God." Although we find ourselves in the midst of a culture war, we must not wage one. Our calling is to witness to the Kingdom, which provides an entirely different perspective.

The Christian must not shirk the challenge of the new atheists. Nor must we hesitate to agree when our opponents believe the truth. The motivation for all of this, from beginning to end must be love of God, in deep gratitude for his grace towards us in Christ. The standard of that love is breathtaking, possible only in the power of God's Spirit. "Love for our neighbor," Jones writes--and the new atheists are most definitely our neighbors--"is beneficent affection for persons like ourselves." This must define every aspect of our response. And given the position and rhetoric of the new atheists, this will constitute a challenge to Christian faithfulness. ❖

SOURCES

"The Church of the Non-Believers" by Gary Wolf in *Wired* (November 2006) p. 182, 184 (italics in original);

There is a God: How the World's Most Notorious Atheist Changed His Mind by Anthony Flew and Roy Abraham Varghese (New York, NY: HarperOne, 2007) p. xvii, xviii, xxiv, 161-183;

God is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything by Christopher Hitchens (New York, NY: Twelve, 2007) p. 6-7, 23, 32, 120, 175, 178, 192, 209, 233, 282;

The God Delusion by Richard Dawkins (New York, NY: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2006) p. 36, 158, 211;

The Portable Atheist edited by Christopher Hitchens (Philadelphia, PA: Da Capo Press, 2007) p. xvi-xvii;

Biblical Christian Ethics by David Clyde Jones, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1994) p. 81-82, 124;

The Abolition of Man by C. S. Lewis (New York, NY: HarperOne, 1944, 1947, 1971, 1974) p. 43; Westminster Confession of Faith 4:2;

The Ten Commandments: Manual for the Christian Life by J. Douma (Phillipsburg, PA: Presbyterian & Reformed Publishing, 1996) p. 50, 211 (italics in original).

Editor's Note: A significantly longer version of this article has been posted on Ransom's web site.

Engaging New Atheists, Part 2: Three consolations on reading Dawkins



Editor's Introduction

When the New Atheists began producing books that quickly became bestsellers, I was interested to listen to what they were saying. I began by reading *The God Delusion*, by Oxford scientist Richard Dawkins. When I got to the third chapter in which he counters the traditional arguments that have been proposed by philosophers and theologians over the centuries to demonstrate the existence of God, I immediately thought of Fiona Grooms.

I've known Fiona for most of her life, and have been impressed with her thoughtful and deeply committed understanding of the truth of Christianity. And since she is a philosopher by calling and vocation, I asked her to respond to Dawkins' chapter, "Arguments for God's Existence." Here is her response, and I offer it to you, very pleased to be able to welcome her voice to the pages of *Critique*.

Three consolations on reading Dawkins

In the space of 32 pages, Richard Dawkins summarily refutes, to his own satisfaction, two thousand years worth of arguments for the existence of God. His treatment of each of the arguments is so cursory that it would take a good deal more than thirty pages to begin to explain how Christian philosophers have understood these arguments. For Christians who have read and been dismayed by Dawkins' *The God Delusion*, I can offer three sorts of consolation.

First, we should notice that Richard Dawkins is an expert in zoology, the science that deals with the

classification of animals. He is not an expert in philosophy of religion, much less in the science of philosophy itself. I suspect that most of the readers of Dawkins' book are at least unfamiliar, if not entirely unaware of the philosophical arguments for God's existence so that their first encounter with the arguments comes through Dawkins. This is a bit like learning about the inner workings of a computer from someone raised by confirmed Luddites. If someone who has not used a computer, never cared to use a computer, and hates the idea of a computer explains to you how computers work, you shouldn't think yourself now an expert on computers. The Luddite has no training in computer technology and has an avowed dislike of the machine. If he knows something about computers, his vision is so distorted by his dislike of them that he's hardly a reliable source about them. Having learned about computers from a reliable source, we might then learn something about the possible problems with computers and computer use from the Luddite.

Having passed through the first chapter of his book, the reader can have no doubt that Dawkins is like our Luddite in that he has only the deepest dislike and aversion to God. Dawkins' goal is not to find out whether or not God exists. His goal is to show that He does not. Those who are truly interested in understanding the philosophy of God should not look to Dawkins to instruct them; as a non-philosopher and confirmed atheist, he is neither intellectually nor dispositionally qualified for the task.

Second, it is worth thinking about the nature of philosophical arguments for a moment. Dawkins appears to hold two common assumptions about arguments: that the failure of arguments to prove the existence of God shows that it is irrational to be a theist and that we need arguments to be rational in believing that God exists. Neither of these assumptions is true. Consider your own existence. Do you have an argument supporting your belief that you exist? Do you need an argument for your own existence to believe that you exist? Likely not. If you think that you do, you have read too much bad philosophy. Philosophical proofs or demonstrations are hard to formulate and often difficult to understand; most people go merrily through life with many true▶

beliefs for which they could never give an argument. All this is not meant to imply that the arguments cannot be given or that they are not important for a defense of theism, but only to show that they are certainly not required for rational belief.

Notice too that an argument's failure does not mean that its conclusion is necessarily false. Here's an example:

Human feet would look funny without toes.
Nature does not make things that function properly and look funny. Therefore, human feet must have toes to function properly.

This is a bad argument. But the conclusion is true. I can generate endless bad arguments for the conclusion that human feet must have toes to function properly but the proliferation of bad arguments will not, in itself, show anything about the truth of the conclusion. If it is true, though I don't think it is, that all of the arguments humans have ever made for God's existence fail, it still does not follow that the conclusion, that God exists, is false. It just means that we haven't come up with a good argument for a true conclusion yet.

Finally, there are the arguments themselves to consider. It is difficult to take Dawkins' criticisms of most of these arguments very seriously as he shows, in his dismissal of each argument, that he has not taken the argument seriously. He dismisses Thomas Aquinas's arguments for God's existence by pointing out what he takes to be an obvious logical flaw. Omniscience and omnipotence, he argues, are clearly logically incompatible: "If God is omniscient, he must already know how he is going to intervene to change the course of history using his omnipotence. But that means he can't change his mind about his intervention, which means he is not omnipotent." This dismissal is vexed in several ways. To begin with, it shows that Dawkins did not bother to do his philosophical homework. Thomas Aquinas held that God is eternal and outside of time. He acts in the spatiotemporal world, but He is not bound to it. So, although from our perspective His actions are spread out in time, from His perspective, they are not spread out in time. There is no time for God: for God, there is an eternal now. We can't quite wrap our minds around it, but we should at least notice that, for Aquinas, God knows how He will intervene in our future because to Him our future is present. His knowledge of his action and his action are always simultaneous. 'Foreknowledge' is only 'fore' with respect to us. For God, all knowledge is knowledge of now. Those who are puzzled by this need not worry; God's eternity is a deep and difficult philosophical issue. The superficial point to understand here is just that Aquinas has reason for not worrying about God's omniscience and omnipotence of which Dawkins is apparently entirely unaware. At the very least, Dawkins ought to have done his homework. If he had, he might have found that some philosophers object to the idea that God is outside of time. But

their objection would not have helped him very much, as it is founded on the notion that God, as He reveals Himself in Scripture, seems to be changeable in a way that is not compatible with His being outside of time.

There is not space to address all of Dawkins's objections in such detail nor is there a need. Christian philosophers have written extensively about all these arguments already. They are more trustworthy than Dawkins for two reasons.

First, unlike Dawkins, they are qualified intellectually for the task in that they are trained in the discipline of philosophy. As good philosophers, they are not interested in giving poor arguments and they often disagree with each other. Look, for example, at Thomas Aquinas's argument against the ontological argument. He has a far better grasp of the argument than Dawkins and his criticism is thus the better of the two.

Second, whereas love moves us towards the object we love, hatred moves us away from it: The mushroom lover has eaten many mushrooms and knows intimately their flavor and texture. The mushroom hater has tried mushrooms once and won't go near them again. The mushroom lover is the one to ask if you want a detailed account of what mushrooms are like. If God exists, and God is truth, then those who love Him love and know the truth. The one who hates God rejects truth; the further he moves from God, the more his mind is darkened. Dawkins begins his book with his face set against God; it is of little surprise, then, that his grasp of the truth about divine things is so tenuous. My hope for Christians or seekers who are interested in arguments for God's existence is that they will look to Christian philosophers to teach them, not to an atheistic scientist. ❖

SOURCES

Dawkins from *The God Delusion* (New York, NY: Houghton Mifflin; 2006) p. 78.

READING SUGGESTION

For more on God's eternity, see Eleonore Stump's "Eternity" (with Norman Kretzmann), *Journal of Philosophy* 78 (1981) 429-458. Her paper is available online: <http://pages.slu.edu/faculty/stumpep/onlinepapers.html>

Fiona Grooms is a graduate student in philosophy at St Louis University where she teaches ethics. She hopes, by God's grace, to finish her dissertation on St Thomas Aquinas's philosophy of knowledge and culture within the next two years.

The perennial issues of life never change. Every generation in every culture and people group wrestle with the four crucial issues that undergird human existence: Who & where are we? What's wrong? What's the solution? Where are we headed?

The perennial issues may not change, but different generations in different cultures may raise strikingly different questions in their quest to make sense of things. This is why listening is so important for Christians (and anyone else) who wants to be part of conversations about the things that matter most. Explaining why believing in something makes sense will make little or no sense if my explanation is not in categories my companion can understand and appreciate.

This touches on one of the reasons many of the postmodern generation find biblically orthodox Christianity to be irrelevant. Many Christians have read and thought about defending their faith, but have done so in terms of questions that were relevant in the decades between the end of World War II and the Sixties. So, they give answers to questions that aren't being raised, and wonder why they are the only ones in the conversation that seem impressed.

This also sheds light on why many Christians feel defensive about their faith. Old arguments that seemed so certain now seem less so, and challenges are raised which the old answers don't address adequately.

St. Paul tells us that God raises up teachers and leaders in his Church. Right after warning us not to be squeezed into the mold of the world (Romans 12:1-2), he assures us that different members of Christ's Church have different gifts and callings (Romans 12:3-8). Thus we can grow together in being renewed in mind and discerning in life. When the apostle wrote to the Church in Ephesus, he pointed out that God provides leaders "to equip" Christians for faithful service in a fallen world (Ephesians 4:11-16). We must be grateful, then, when God raises up someone who is gifted at listening to the culture, at identifying the questions being raised, and at thinking through the issues with a passion for truth, love, and the gospel.

One such gifted leader for today is Timothy Keller, pastor of Redeemer Presbyterian in New York City. His book, *The Reason for God: Belief in an Age of Skepticism*, is must-reading, whether you are a Christian or a non-Christian. It is good for three reasons. First,

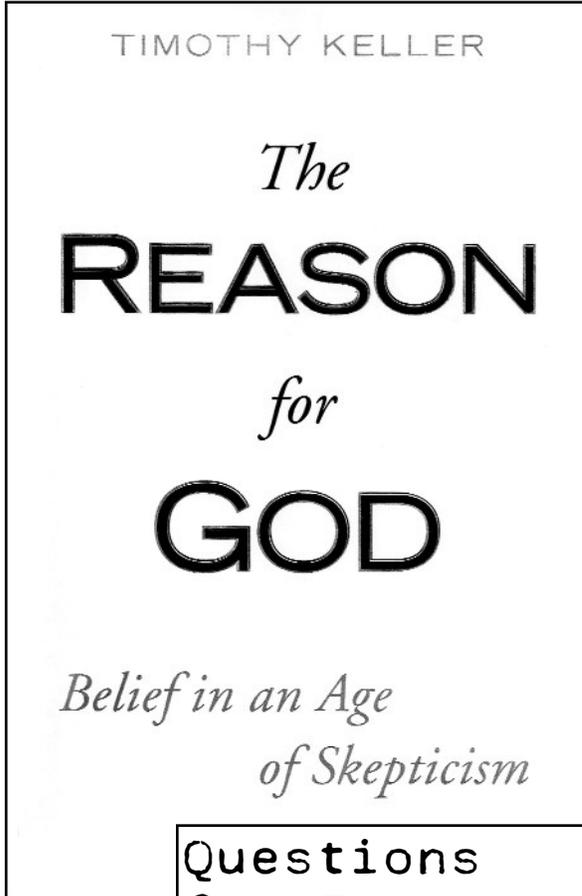
it identifies and answers the questions being raised today. Second, it gives reasons for Christian faith that are accessible, thoughtful and never overstated. And third, it approaches the topic with a quiet, confident winsomeness that is all too often missing in the ungodly rhetoric of culture warriors.

By the way, in case you are wondering about the set of questions--seven in all--that Keller correctly identifies as being important today, they include:

- Why should we embrace just one true religion?
- How could a good God allow suffering?
- Don't you feel like Christianity is a straitjacket?
- How can you be a part of a Church that is responsible for so much injustice?
- How can a loving God send people to hell?
- Hasn't Science disproved Christianity?
- How can you take the Bible literally?

The Reason for God is worth reading, reflecting on, and discussing with friends--both Christians and non-Christians. In an effort to further that, Ransom Fellowship is preparing detailed reflection and discussion questions for each section and chapter of the book. Available on our web site (as they are developed), what follows is a sampling of the questions for Keller's Introduction and first chapter. (The questions were formulated in weekly conversations I had on Keller's book with two young friends: David Richter, assistant pastor of Trinity Presbyterian Church, and David Van Norstrand, medical student in the Mayo School of Medicine.)

We hope you find our discussion guide to *The Reason for God* helpful.▶



The Reason for God: Introduction

1. "Skepticism, fear, and anger toward traditional religion are growing in power and influence. But at the same time, robust, orthodox belief in the traditional faiths is growing as well." [p. ix] Do you agree? What are the implications for your skepticism/faith?

2. "The people most passionate about social justice were moral relativists, while the morally upright didn't seem to care about the oppression going on all over the world." [p. xii] Have you noticed the same divide into two camps? If you haven't noticed this dichotomy, why haven't you? Where do you believe this divide stems from? Which one do you tend to identify with the most? Why is that? Does the gospel call us to believe in social justice, to care for God's creation? How has a biblical passion for social justice come to be seen by Christians as either a liberal or relativist concern?

3. Keller identifies three "barriers" to faith: intellectual, personal, and social. [p. xii-xiii] How have you experienced each? What role has each played in your spiritual pilgrimage?

4. Since Keller "was always looking for that third camp," he says he "became interested in shaping and initiating new Christian communities." [p. xiii] This interest is one dear to the hearts of postmodern Christians. Do you share it? Why or why not? Could this explain why so many younger Christians feel alienated from or disillusioned about a church seeking to conserve itself?

5. "Because doubt and belief are each on the rise, our political and public discourse on matters of faith and morality has become deadlocked and deeply divided. The culture wars are taking their toll. Emotions and rhetoric are intense, even hysterical." [p. xv]. Do you agree? Have the culture wars produced positive results? Give examples of rhetoric from the side of skepticism; from the side of Christian faith; from the side of faiths other than Christianity. Which do you find most problematic or troubling? Why?

6. "We don't reason with the other side; we only denounce." [p. xv] Give examples of Christians denouncing something rather than reasoning. What's the difference between denouncing and disagreeing?

7. Keller recommends that both skeptics and believers "look at doubt in a radically new way." [p. xvi] Is his proposal truly new? What are the usual views of doubt? What objections might Christians raise to Keller's proposal? What objections might skeptics raise? How would you respond to each?

8. Speaking to believers, Keller argues, "Only if you struggle long and hard with objections to your faith will you be able to provide grounds for your beliefs to skeptics, including yourself, that are plausible rather than ridiculous or offensive." [p. xvii] Do you agree or disagree? Why? How many Christians engage in such long and hard struggle? Some might argue that the alternatives Keller presents are too extreme—plausible v. ridiculous and offensive. Is this extreme or realistic? We all know of examples of how skeptics give ridiculous or offensive arguments against Christianity—ignoring for a moment the proper offense of the cross, give five examples of arguments against skepticism or for Christian faith where either the argument or the Christian are ridiculous or offensive to unbelievers.

9. How many churches provide safe places and the necessary resources for such long and hard struggle with doubts, with objections to faith? Why might this be? What would such a safe place look like? What plans do your small group need to make to create a safe place? What changes must our church make to be a safe place?

10. Keller says this process of engaging doubt should end when "each side has learned to represent the other's argument in its strongest and most positive form. Only then is it safe and fair to disagree with it. That achieves civility in a pluralistic society, which is no small thing." [p. xviii-xix] How often do Christians seek the very best arguments of their opponents? Do you ask perceptive questions of opponents to help them clarify their arguments against Christianity? How often do you? What plans should you make?

Chapter 1: There Can't Be Just One True Religion

1. Keller says he has often asked non-Christians, "What is your biggest problem with Christianity? What troubles you most about its beliefs or how it is practiced?" [p. 3] Do you make a habit of asking non-Christians questions similar to that? Why or why not? If yes, what questions do you ask? Sometimes such questions evoke strong emotions—where do these come from?

2. Keller agrees with the notion that religions claiming exclusivity of their beliefs are a barrier to world peace. [p. 4] Do you agree with Keller? Do you find his agreement surprising? Can you understand why exclusivity can be a concern of many in our culture?

3. Define, as objectively and carefully as possible, the three approaches to try to deal with the divisiveness of religion: to outlaw it [p. 5-6], to condemn it [p. 7-13], and to restrict it to the private sphere of life [p. 13-18]. Where have you noticed or encountered such approaches? What does Keller identify as the flaw in each approach? Do you agree they are flaws? How would you present each flaw to a skeptic who is making the argument?

4. "Ironically, the insistence that doctrines do not matter is really a doctrine itself" [p. 8]. What is a good, winsome way to present this truth to a skeptic without seeming arrogant or insensitive or offensive?

5. Given the refutation of the "story of the blind men and the elephant" [p. 8-9], how do we make this argument while maintaining the humility appropriate to knowing we see only in part, through a glass darkly (I Corinthians 13)?

6. Keller says, "The reality is that we all make truth-claims of some sort and it is very hard to weigh them responsibly, but we have no alternative but to try to do so" [p. 11]; "We are all exclusive in our beliefs about religion, but in different ways" [p. 13]. How do we lovingly move skeptics to see this truth? How do you weigh your truth-claims? How responsible have you been in this regard?

7. "The historian C. John Sommerville has pointed out that 'a religion can be judged only on the basis of another religion.' You can't evaluate a religion except on the basis of some ethical criteria that in the end amounts to your own religious stance" [p. 12]. What religious stance or ethical criteria have you found your unbelieving friends using to evaluate Christian faith? Do your non-Christian friends see their evaluation as based on a religious/ethical stance?

8. Because "all of us have fundamental, unprovable faith-commitments that we think are superior to those of others," Keller argues that we must ask, "which fundamentals will lead their believers to be the most loving and receptive to those with whom they differ?" [p. 19-20]. What "fundamentals" would apply to Christians? Why do so many Christians tend to act as if such fundamentals do not apply to them, since they are neither loving nor receptive?

9. Does it shock you when Keller says that Christians should expect to find nonbelievers who are "much nicer, kinder, wiser, and better than they are"? [p. 19].

10. Review the title of this chapter—does Keller fully answer this question, or does he primarily level the playing field for conversations with skeptics? What is the difference and why does this matter?

NOTE

A complete set of questions for reflection and discussion on *The Reason for God* by Timothy Keller is available (as they are developed) on Ransom's website: www.RansomFellowship.org

SOURCE

The Reason for God: Belief in an Age of Skepticism by Timothy Keller (New York, NY: Dutton; 2008) 240 pp. + notes + index.

Resources for Understanding Scripture

Wisdom, Poetry, & Writings

As I travel and speak on Christian discernment, the topic of Bible study often arises in conversations with people from a wide variety of callings and vocations living in a variety of settings and places. For all the variety, however, many of the same things keep coming up--how to find time to read and reflect, the best methodology to use in order to allow the text to order and structure our study, and how to make certain our ideas about the texts we study are both biblically and historically accurate.

Finding time is hard in our busy world, I always say. If we want to say Yes to something we'll need to say No to something else, so perhaps we should begin there.

As to the best method of study, because no specific approach is inspired by God, we have freedom to structure things around the way we learn best. One approach we have found useful can be found on Ransom's web site (www.ransomfellowship.org)--click on Publications, then on eBook archives, and download the file, "A Practical Method of Bible Study for Ordinary Christians."

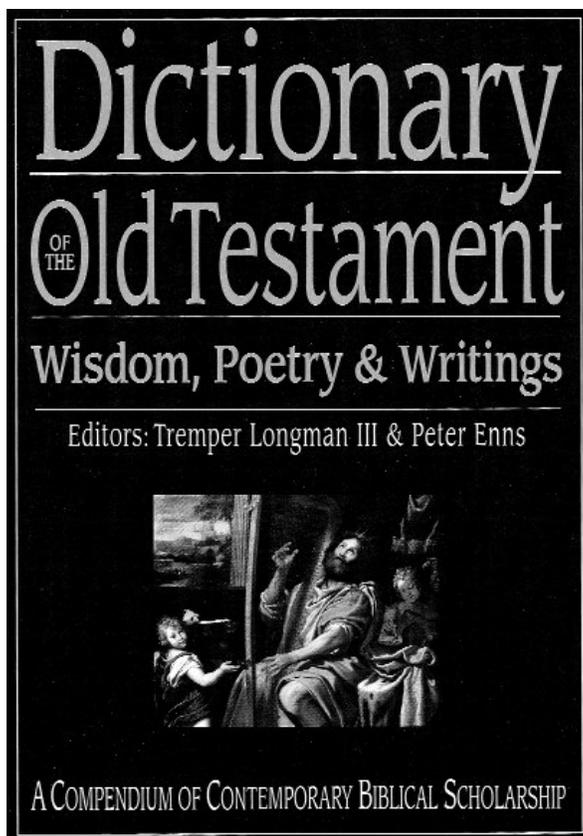
And as to making certain our ideas about the texts we study are both biblically and historically accurate, we can use good resources that are rooted in the great creeds, confessions of faith, and stream of orthodoxy from the past two millennia of Christian theology. I don't want to innovate when I interpret Scripture; I want to be biblically faithful. Creativity comes in applying the timeless teaching of God's word, not in determining what it means.

One section of the Bible for which the insight of good scholars can be of immense help includes the "wisdom, poetry, and writings" of the Christian Scriptures--the Old Testament books of Job, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Psalms, Song of Songs, Lamentations, Ruth, and Esther. There are several reasons why this is so. For one thing, these books represent the literature of cultures very different from our own and which produced these works many centuries ago. Of course we'll have questions. For another thing, the majority of Christians I discuss this with say they

read very little poetry on a regular basis. Is this perhaps why we tend to mine the psalms of the Old Testament for their theological ideas rather than read and respond to them as poetry? One more thing: has our culture produced a body of literature that is parallel to, or equivalent to the ancient writings known as "wisdom literature?" If we can't think of many titles in answer to that question, we should expect some difficulty in understanding the Old Testament books that comprise this genre.

Tremper Longman (Westmont College) and Peter Enns (Westminster Theological Seminary) have edited a superb resource that will deepen our understanding of this vital section of Scripture. Covering everything from Acrostic to Zion and a lot in between, *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Wisdom, Poetry & Writings* may be more than is needed in each individual library, but each individual who takes Bible study seriously will want to have access to it.

We recommend it to you. Buy a copy or donate one to your church library, and then dig deeper into a fascinating, profound, and richly textured section of sacred Scripture.▶



RESOURCE RECOMMENDED

Dictionary of the Old Testament: Wisdom, Poetry & Writings edited by Tremper Longman III and Peter Enns (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press; 2008) 941 pages + indices.

Christian discernment is not the process of applying minds and imaginations to issues of life and culture. It is, rather, applying minds and imaginations *shaped by Scripture* to issues of life and culture. Those three words make all the difference. A life-long and holy spirited process, it results in hearts committed to the gospel and lives that demonstrate ever-deepening faith, quiet hope, unsettling contentment, and ironic joy.

Given the importance of Bible study, here are two helpful resources that discerning Christians may want to consider adding to their--or their church's--library.

From Aaron to Zurishaddai

Rev. Richard Losch has already given us a helpful guide to all the places in the Bible in *The Uttermost Part Of The Earth*. Now he gives us *All the People of the Bible*. One of the nicest things about *All the People* is that although it is a fine reference book covering--no surprise here--all the people mentioned in Scripture, it doesn't read like a reference book. As I wrote this review, I repeatedly opened the book at random, began reading and quickly got so interested that I had to pull myself away to get back to this piece.

All the People is divided into three parts. The first--and by far the largest section--is a series of informative articles on individuals about which Scripture, history, and/or tradition provides some significant information. The second is a complete listing of every single name mentioned in the Bible and the Apocrypha, with a brief single-sentence description of who they are. This section includes more names, for example, because some appear only in genealogies or appear so briefly we have no information about them. And finally, Losch includes 5 helpful tables, including the Israelite kings, Seleucid emperors, Maccabean leaders, and the Herodian family of rulers.

In his Preface, Losch says something we should remember as we study the Scriptures and reflect on the people we meet in its pages:

We cannot draw a neat line and put saints on one side and scoundrels on the other. In fact, most of the great leaders of Judaism and Christianity started out as the worst sort of scoundrels. Abraham lied and cheated his way through Egypt in order to save his own skin. Jacob bilked his brother out of his birthright, then deceived and lied to his father in order to cheat his brother out of his paternal blessing. David was a liar, an adulterer and murderer, a terrible husband and a worse father. Matthew was a publican, the most contemptible kind of traitor to his own people. Tradition paints Mary Magdalene as a prostitute, even though the Bible does not portray her as such and she was almost certainly innocent of that charge. Nevertheless God, working with such weak and flawed material, molded them into spiritual powerhouses and examples of moral strength and righteousness. John Claypool likens God to the medieval alchemists who tried to turn lead into gold. God takes the crudest of lead in the characters of his creatures and turns it into glorious spiritual gold. We who are equally weak and flawed should find great encouragement in this. If the likes of Jacob could become a great patriarch of the faith, then we too can become spiritually strong and righteous. As George Santayana observed, "It is easier to make a saint out of a libertine than out of a prig."

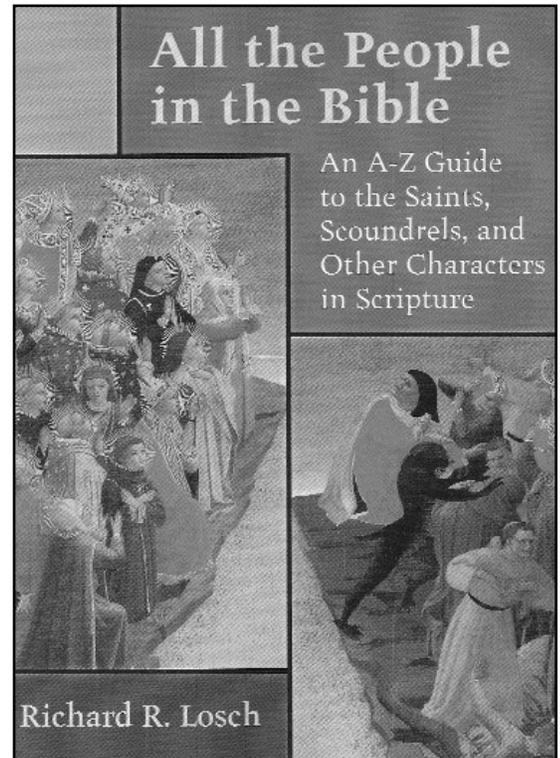
We recommend *All the People in the Bible* to you. Use it as a reference and your Bible study will be more richly informed. And read it casually--it's so well written by someone so obviously in love with Scripture that you'll hardly notice you're learning something new about someone who appears in the grand story of the Bible--the same Story you are part of. ❖

SOURCE

Losch from *All the People in the Bible*, p. vii-viii.

BOOK RECOMMENDED

All the People of the Bible: An A-Z Guide to the Saints, Scoundrels, and Other Characters in Scripture (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans; 2008) 578 pages.



Love and Loss Amidst the Dunes

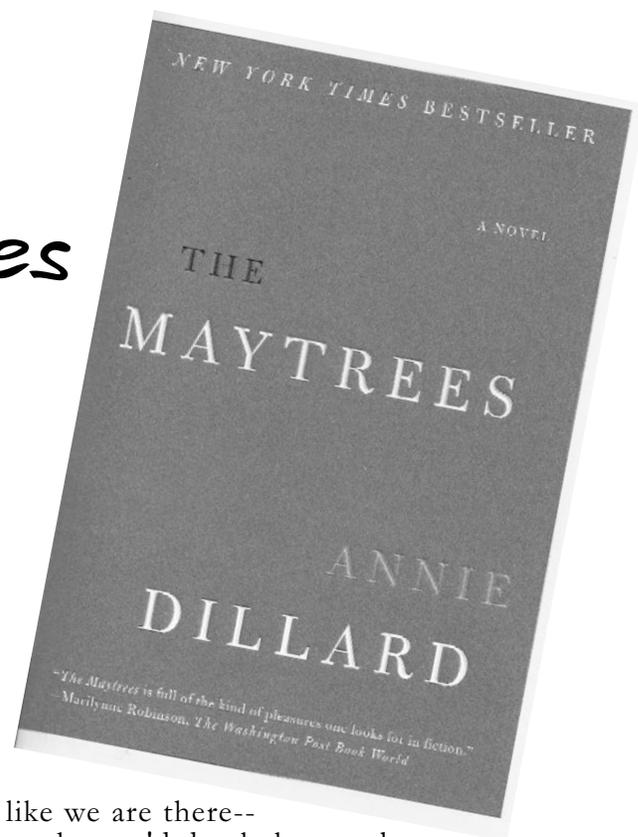
a review of the novel
The Maytrees
by Annie Dillard

Annie Dillard has an uncanny ability to see--to observe things, creatures, people, and life with a beguiling simplicity and clarity. More remarkably, she is gifted in capturing what she sees in words, so that when I read her finely crafted prose I see things, creatures, people, and life with greater clarity as well.

In *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* (1974) she invites us to pause with her beside a stream of water, and so transforms how we see not just that tiny slice of creation in Virginia, but all such slices that we usually glance at but do not truly see. Dillard reflects deeply on what she sees, and so presses past the surface to the reality towards which all creation points. *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* is not merely a book about nature but about transcendence, a wonderfully crafted meditation on creation's silent shout of glory.

In *The Maytrees* (2007), Dillard turns from non-fiction to fiction. It's the story of Toby Maytree and Lou Bigelow, who meet, marry, and live in Provincetown, on the very end of the tiny spit of curling peninsula known as Cape Cod. Surrounded by sand dunes, hemmed in by ocean, and covered by a sky more immense than the sea, life seems stripped to the essentials. The small community in which they live is surprising, peopled with artists and misfits, individuals not impressed with cultural measures of success and propriety. It is also a fallen place, and the brokenness fragments their relationship, leaving Lou to raise Pete while Maytree moves to Maine with another woman who had long lived homeless among the dunes. Years pass, and when Maytree brings Deary back to Provincetown to die, Lou, Pete, and Maytree must face one another, their past, and wrestle with the meaning of forgiveness and reconciliation.

One of the delights of this novel is Dillard's keen ability to observe human beings as they truly are. Bringing insight into people, community, relationships, and the stark loveliness of Cape Cod, it's



like we are there--

or that we'd dearly love to be.

The story unfolds quietly, for blessing and curse, a story related to the issues we all face in our desperate quest for meaning and transcendence in this sad, fragmented world.

One day the Maytrees' life is interrupted when a stranger, driving through town, hits Pete as he rides his bike. Pete would recover from a broken bone.

--It might not all be the man's fault, she had said when they came down.

Gently Maytree knocked over his chair and cursed back and forth and in toto implied in rare words that he, by contrast and on balance, found the man grievously at fault. The series ended "son of a sea-cook."

Maytree sat and covered his face with his hands. Lou found herself by habit checking whether his sweater's elbows rested on spills. He rubbed his eyes. These last two or three weeks, something bad had worsened. Lou did not know what, but it was her, something about her. He had been close-shaven or unshaven, gone to the dunes, sleepy, jumpy. In her company he wrapped himself in misery like a robe. Between them self-consciousness bulked as a river silts its channel. They sat to smoked mackerel and turnips and plied Petie with questions. Only these few weeks. They chewed and chewed. She dumped her plateful and washed. She sought to avoid him and secure privacy.

Sometimes these past weeks at dawn he started between them a deliberate chat.

--And what's your plan for the day? His bad acting was worse than silence. When friends came by, both of them roused: they ate, and Maytree told knock-knock jokes. ►►

During all their other years' short silences--but not this one--while they slept, while stars held fast their spots beyond the window and seas concussed the beach, they woke together as if at a temblor. They turned and rolled. They met and sought and hit. Then they talked under the blankets, holding each other's arms or ribs or hands. She searched out his eyes in the dark, and regarded him in the long way of longing and knowledge, and in the longer way of love. There had not been much of that this past year.

At the green kitchen table Maytree was biting his lips from the inside. This meant a speech. He bit his lips from inside before he chewed Pete out. It meant a speech he would rather skip and she would rather miss. She held her head erect. A gust shook the glass and jerked the lamps' reflections. She rose to wash dishes.

Now he was crying. He rose and held her as if he just remembered something. Tears traced his face creases and dripped. She held him. Crying--Maytree? He had sniffled a bit when his mother died. They disliked drama.

--I will always love you. Believe me.

Now what. She removed her arms and stepped back. Fast as shock she knew now what, what alone could come next, and her blood in every vessel tripped. Not her Maytree. Never her Maytree, who loved her, as he just unsaid.

Annie Dillard surprised me in *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* by writing exquisitely not just about the beautiful, the gentle, and the fragile that she observed, but about the cruelty, the hard, and the relentless competition she observed in life along the flowing stream. Moths circling the flame of a candle and the delicate wings of a dragonfly both exist, and so must be accounted for in the cosmic scheme of things. So too with commitment and disappointment, with presence and absence, in a world where no amount of trying guarantees we can live happily ever after on our own terms.

I have one criticism of *The Maytrees*, though I hope mentioning it will not discourage you from reading and discussing it. Occasionally Dillard's prose becomes unnecessarily convoluted, and she uses terms I had to stop to look up. I appreciate being stretched by an author, but this time it occurred too frequently and seemed to run counter to the brilliant simplicity of the story.

Good stories transport us into new places, to meet people who live only in imagination but who might, nevertheless, help us be more fully alive. Annie Dillard has written a very good story in *The Maytrees*, exploring themes that touch us all: relationship and love, the wound of abandonment, the constant need for forgiveness and reconciliation. ❖

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION AND REFLECTION

1. Read aloud paragraphs, pages or brief sections of the novel that stood out to you as particularly striking--for whatever reason.
2. As objectively as possible, using Dillard's own words as much as possible, describe each character in the story: Toby Maytree, Lou Bigelow Maytree, Petie/Pete, Deary, Reevadare Weaver, Sooner Roy, Cornelius, Jane Cairo.
3. Describe Provincetown, and its surroundings, as Dillard painted it as the setting for this story. How does geography play a role in the trajectory of the plot? Would you like to live in this place? Would you like to be part of this community of people? Why or why not?
4. Do you find the story plausible? Why or why not? What emotions did you experience as the story unfolded? To what extent did you "enter into" the world of the story?
5. Who is telling the story? Whose voice do you hear? (Is it the person going through the experience, or someone else telling you about that person?) How does the relationship between the narrator and the implied listener help the reader focus on what's important about the character(s)?
6. Who do you identify with? Why? Who are we meant to identify with? How do you know?
7. Does this story function as... ...a slice of reality? ...a microcosm of reality? ...a metaphor for reality?
8. Did Lou forgive Maytree? Did she forgive Deary? Did Maytree seek forgiveness? To what extent was there true reconciliation between them? How does Pete fit into this?
9. What does *The Maytrees* say about the nature of love? Of marriage? Of community? What does it say about the meaning of life, and the search for significance and spirituality?
10. Is there a hero in the story? A villain?
11. Does the world and life view in the fictional universe of the story resonate with the biblical world and life view of Creation, Fall, Redemption, and Restoration?
12. How has *The Maytrees* changed or deepened, your understanding of, or appreciation of life? Of marriage, relationships, and community? Of geography? Of forgiveness and reconciliation?
13. If you did not enjoy this work, is there a reason why you should encounter it anyway? Would you recommend this work of fiction to others? Why or why not?
14. How would you describe the work--and your reaction to it--in a way that would make sense to a Christian friend? To a non-Christian friend? Do the two descriptions differ? Why? Should they?

FICTION RECOMMENDED

The Maytrees by Annie Dillard (New York, NY: Harper/Perennial; 2007) 216 pp.

MAGIC AND MONSTERS

With the collapse of Yugoslavia in the late 20th century, small-scale independence movements formed along ethnic and religious fault lines in the Balkan region. Croats and Serbs separated from one another and retreated into religious ghettos. This "Balkanization of Europe" led directly to Bosnian and Serbian ethnic cleansing in 1992.

It's hard to know where America is headed, but Christians shunning Halloween celebrations for alternative "harvest" church events could be contributing to a kind of "Balkanization of America." Halloween used to be considered a church holiday. Shunning the celebration was largely unknown prior to the 19th century. What happened?

It's hard to sift fact from fiction but it seems that the Feast of All Saints, or "All Hallows," was moved by Pope Gregory III (d. 741) to November 1 and the day before became dubbed "All Hallows Even," or "Hallowe'en." It wasn't a big deal for Catholics. The French added fanciful costumes in the 14th and 15th centuries. Protestants threw in "Trick or treat" after Guy Fawkes' ill-fated attempt to blow up Parliament (we don't have time or space to discuss that here). Irish immigrants fleeing their country's potato famine brought Halloween to America in the 1840s. They used turnips for "Jack's lanterns" in Ireland but discovered that pumpkins were far more plentiful in America. The greeting card industry added witches in the late 1800s. The Halloween cards failed, but the witches stayed. Ta-da!

Up until the 19th century, the church was warm to magic and monsters. After the 1800s, it shunned witches and warlocks. If we drove the Chevy to the top of the 19th century levee and looked both ways--back to the medieval church and forward to the modern--we'd see what happened. We "cleansed" these stories of their scary elements.▶

Right up through the medieval age, the church believed that fantasy creatures, sorcerers, ghouls, goblins, and ghosts were as ancient as creation. Their inclusion reminded everyone that humans are more than mere mortals or machines. The world is all the richer for having a devil in it, wrote William James, so long as we keep our foot upon his neck.¹ Creepy creatures were part of the enchantment of the good news, according to C.S. Lewis. The place of witches and warlocks in medieval stories was as essentially "marginal fugitive creatures." In other words, they played the part of antagonists. "Their unimportance is their importance," Lewis wrote. Ghouls and goblins were not the main point, yet they evoked a "welcome hint of wildness and uncertainty into a universe that is in danger of being a little too self-explanatory."²

Fantasy riveted Lewis to the fantastic--the dramatic "four-chapter" story of creation, the fall, redemption and the final restoration. Gargoyles and gods are less dangerous than Satan and his demons in the wide world of wickedness. Yet they serve to widen our imagination and keep our faith from becoming a bit too tame--and boring. This is why, in the medieval world, Halloween was not about worshipping spiritual apparitions but widening the imagination. The medieval church figured we'd be wise enough to know the difference instead of steering kids clear of icky stuff.

On this side of the 19th century levee, we've forgotten that the early versions of *Sleeping Beauty* were quite raucous. The princess was originally wakened not by a chaste kiss but by the twins she gave birth to after the prince had come and fornicated with her sleeping body. Ancient epics and myths were often raucous or vulgar yet held a central place in the literary arts, told to young and old alike. Yes, even kids.

19th century Victorian England and evangelicals sanitized these stories or removed them altogether. Victorians romanticized the idea of "childhood" as something quite separate and distinct from adult life. They moved fairy tales from the family parlor to the children's rooms and cleaned them up. The result is a "nice" 20th century gospel that offers a therapeutic God and advertises church as a "safe" place. Is it any wonder that one of the 21st century's best-selling books addresses the pervasive problem of bored and wimpy men in the modern church? The author's diagnosis is correct yet the cure is disastrous. Rather than making men "wild at heart," it would be better to ask why we stripped the scary out of our story and began avoiding holidays like Halloween. My hunch is that Lewis would not be impressed with the book's solution of "authentic masculinity." He would have advocated for the medieval solution of authentic mysticism--for men and women.

Halloween matters because everyone is made in the image of God and destined for eternity--something far beyond our wildest imagination. Lewis was right--we long to be in lands where little men have fuzzy feet, dragons breathe fire, ghosts lurk behind doors, floors go creak, witches conjure spells and horses have wings. Halloween isn't about devil worship--it's about enriching our faith by widening our imagination. When Christians fail to join the celebration, we might instead be widening the cultural fault lines and contributing to the "Balkanization of America."❖

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION AND REFLECTION [by Denis Haack]

1. Was there anything surprising to you in Metzger's piece?
2. What arguments have you heard supporting the argument that Christians should not observe Halloween--that doing so might even be sinful? How convinced are you of these arguments? Why? How impressive or compelling do you think non-Christians would find this position? To what extent does it matter what non-Christians think?
3. What arguments have you heard supporting the argument that it's fine for Christians to observe Halloween--that even if it once was questionable, in our secular society those reasons no longer count? How convinced are you of these arguments? Why? How impressive or compelling do you think non-Christians would find this position? To what extent does it matter what non-Christians think?
4. Did you know the real--the original--story of Sleeping Beauty? Would you be comfortable telling it to children? Why or why not?
5. Compare and contrast the two visions of Christian faith (pre- and post-19th century) summarized by Metzger. Which seems more authentically biblical? Why?

6. Has this article changed your thinking in any way? Does it raise questions you would like to consider further, or perhaps research?
7. How can individual Christians, and Christian families, find their way through the myriad opposing positions advocated by Christians on so many issues in our world? In many cases, to disagree on such things is to be dismissed as "worldly" or perhaps even shunned, marginalized in the community of believers. How should we respond to these expressions of legalism?
8. "Gargoyles and gods," Metzger says, "are less dangerous than Satan and his demons in the wide world of wickedness. Yet they serve to widen our imagination and keep our faith from becoming a bit too tame-and boring." To what extent do you find common expressions of Christian faith tame or boring? Do your non-Christian friends see it similarly?
9. What have you done to intentionally develop a distinctly Christian mind? What have you done to help your imagination to flower in a distinctly Christian way? What plans should you make?
10. Do you sense "cultural fault lines" between the Christian community and the rest of society widening or closing? What should they be doing? Why?

ENDNOTES

1. William James (1842-1910) was a pioneering American psychologist and philosopher who decried institutional religion and championed individual religious experience and pragmatism. "God is real because he produces real effects," James said.

2. C. S. Lewis, *The Discarded Image: An Introduction to Medieval and Renaissance Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1964) p.122

AUTHOR

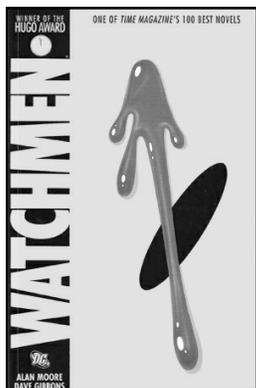
Michael W. Metzger is the President and Senior Fellow of The Clapham Institute. He is a graduate of Western Michigan University, Dallas Theological Seminary, and Trinity International University. He and his wife Kathy live in Severna Park, Maryland; they have two sons and a daughter.

SOURCE

"Magic and Monsters" was first published as part of Clapham Commentaries (October 29, 2007).

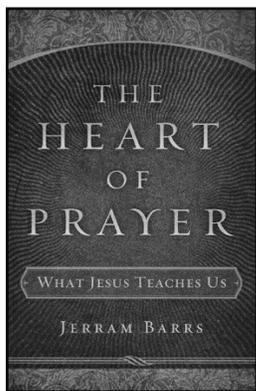
For more information or to sign up to receive these Commentaries (free via email) visit them online (www.claphaminstitute.org).

The Clapham Institute is based in Annapolis, Maryland. The Institute mentors leaders, helping people and organizations connect Sunday to Monday, to advance faith-centered cultural reform. They emphasize reframing conversations as the first step, assuming we live in a post-Christian age.



Graphic novels are a genre too popular to ignore, even if it is popular among the educated classes to look down on them. *Watchmen* is one of the best of the genre. It ends with an epigraph, *Quis custodiet ipsos custodes*, from Juvenal: "Who watches the watchmen?" Unlike comics written for escapist pleasure, *Watchmen* raises issues of importance for our modern world. How does a free democratic society guard itself from the myriad threats that arise from within and without? How can an increasingly pluralistic culture come to agree on a definition of justice? And how can we be certain that those who stand guard will not use their power unjustly, believing, even if momentarily, that the ends justifies the means?

Watchmen by Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons (New York: NY: DC Comics; 1986, 1987).



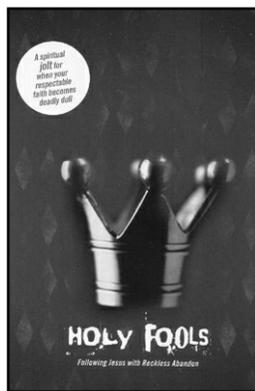
In my busy, efficient, productive live, it is all too easy to believe in prayer--after all, I am a deeply committed theist--while living, sadly, as if prayer were little more than a last resort when things get really, really bad. And I do not like books on prayer that compound my problem by simply increasing my guilt. I already have far too much of that. Which makes me delighted recommend *The Heart of Prayer*. Jerram Barrs is a lovely friend, steeped in grace, wise in living, and a teacher who invites us not to one more burdensome requirement but to a relationship with God that meets the deepest yearning of our hearts.

The Heart of Prayer by Jerram Barrs (Phillipsburg, PA: P&R Publishing; 2008) 251 pp.



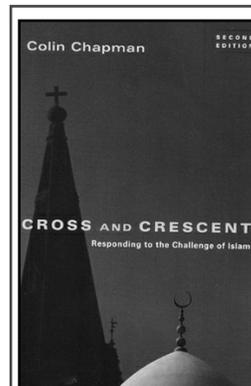
This month I am driving to Chicago to join my daughter in hearing Wovenhand in concert. *Ten Stones* is their latest release. I was first introduced to David Eugene Edwards (frontman for 16 Horsepower and now Wovenhand) at the Festival of Faith of Music at Calvin College. Edward's driving music, subversive lyrics, and unbridled passion for life, beauty and the gospel is electrifying. "Not one stone / Atop another will stand / As one of them / I always am / On my way down / This weary melody ends / The host of heaven descends / Down beneath this bleeding ground / Behold the lamb / Behold the lamb / Given for us."

Ten Stones (2008) by Wovenhand.



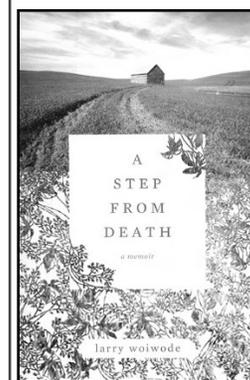
Matt Woodley, a friend of mine and pastor on Long Island, points the way by reminding us of a tradition that is firmly rooted in Scripture and the life of Christ, but which has been largely lost. If we love God enough to love his world, we would do well to reflect on whether the holy fools of history can teach us something significant about faithfully engaging our world with the gospel. Matt argues they can, and then invites us to join this ragtag crew who found ways to subvert the foolishness of unbelief with the grand Story of redemption in Christ.

Holy Fools: Following Jesus with Reckless Abandon by Matthew Woodley (Carol Stream, IL: SaltRiver, Tyndale House; 2008) 198 pp.



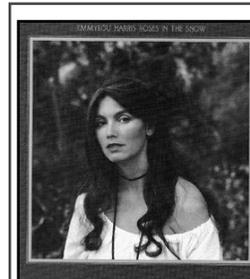
This helpful book has been expanded, making it even better. Chapman, a lecturer in Islamic studies in Beirut, brings careful scholarship, clear writing, a deep commitment to the gospel, and a desire to help Christians understand Islam.

Cross and Crescent: Responding to the Challenge of Islam (2nd Ed) by Colin Chapman (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press; 1995, 2003, 2007) 376 pp.



Poet, distinguished novelist, North Dakota organic farmer/rancher, vivid storyteller, and committed Christian, Woivode composes sentences that take your breath away. In this memoir he writes to his son about life, faith, work, and meaning

A Step from Death: a memoir by Larry Woivode (Berkeley, CA: Counterpoint; 2008) 272 pp.



In a long and distinguished career as a singer, this album will be remembered as one of her best. Backed by a superb cast of musicians, and with influence from country, gospel, and bluegrass, *Roses* reveals Harris' wonderful talent and amazing range.

Roses in the Snow by Emmylou Harris (1980, 2002).