

# critique



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2017 Issue 1

## IDOLS IN OUR MODERN WORLD

SOCIALISM  
LIBERALISM  
SECULARISM  
CONSERVATISM  
CONSUMERISM  
NATIONALISM  
CAPITALISM



## CRITIQUE



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## 2017:1 CONTENTS

# 1

EDITOR'S NOTE

### Reality and Current Events

# 2

DISCERNING LIFE

### Just a Few Words

# 4

READING THE WORD

### Idols in Our Modern World

# 9

OUT OF THEIR MIND

### Called to be Different

thoughts from the book *Impossible*  
People by Os Guinness

# 10

RESOURCES

### Blurring Lines, Ads Go Underecover

*Black Ops Advertising* by Mara Einstein

### Darwinism Falters Over Language

*The Kingdom of Speech* by Tom Wolfe

### The Faithfulness of Sadao Watanabe

*Beauty Given by Grace* from  
Square Halo Press

### Contemplating Work and Rest

*Finding Livelihood* by Nancy J. Nordenson

### After Paradise

*The Art of Mary McCleary* from  
Square Halo Press



# Reality and Current Events



Occasionally I come across something that was written in the past, sometimes in the far past, and wonder how it could be so relevant for the present moment. It could have been written today but it wasn't. One possible explanation is that nothing changed in the intervening period and that history has rolled on, unaltered. Another possibility is that what was written touches on reality so clearly and at such depth that it captures some bit of truth that does not wane in the passage of time, no matter how much has changed.

I am writing this in December 2016, just after a contentious presidential election and just before the inauguration of Donald Trump. If the election proved anything, it is that America is a deeply divided nation where uncertainty, anger, and fear are widespread, a place where we do not really know our neighbors as well as we might have thought. And at this moment I read this in *Reaching Out* by Henri Nouwen, which was written 41 years ago:

*In our world full of strangers, estranged from their own past, culture and country, from their neighbors, friends and family, from their deepest self and their God, we witness a painful search for a hospitable place where life can be lived without fear and where community can be found.*

*Although many, we might even say most, strangers in this world become easily the victim of a fearful hostility, it is possible for men and women and obligatory for Christians to offer an open and hospitable space where strangers can cast off their strangeness and become our fellow human beings. The movement from hostility to hospitality is hard and full of difficulties. Our society seems to be increasingly full of fearful, defensive, aggressive people anxiously clinging to their property and inclined to look at their surrounding world with suspicion, always expecting an enemy to suddenly appear, intrude and do harm. But still—that is our vocation: to convert the hostis into a hospes, the enemy into a guest and to create the free and fearless space where brotherhood and sisterhood can be formed and fully experienced.*

Was there something happening in 1975 that prompted Nouwen to write this? I don't know, of course, but the little I know about him makes me doubt he needed current events to see the world clearly. The newspaper may have confirmed to him what the scriptures revealed, but what was happening around him wasn't necessary for him to know the human condition.

We are lost in the cosmos, whether current events starkly reveal that reality or cunningly mask it. Even if this presidential election revealed an unusually unified citizenry, deeply content with their lot in life and eager to discuss their views with those who happen to disagree, we are still lost in the cosmos. Current events help define how we might go about being faithful as God's people but, if we think they show that the human condition has been changed, we should think again. In this broken world there is always a need for agents

of reconciliation to provide safe places that can be hints of the home we all have lost and yearn to have restored.

Okay, but isn't Nouwen being a bit legalistic here? "It is possible for men and women," he says, "and obligatory for Christians to offer an open and hospitable space." *Obligatory?*

If I love my wife, I am obligated to care for her, cherish her, and do all I can to allow her to flourish. I am obligated not by law or rules or the fear of guilt, but by love. Because God is love, St. John tells us, those who know him know his love, and so love others. "Anyone who does not love does not know God," he adds, not because of some law or rule or sense of guilt, but "because God is love" (1 John 4:8).

Yes, we are obligated as Christians, obligated by the love of God. It's just the way love is. ■

**Source:** *Reaching Out: The Three Movements of the Spiritual Life* by Henri J. M. Nouwen (New York, NY: Doubleday; 1975) p. 65-66

# Just a Few Words

The headline on the cover of *Self* was printed in a font clearly designed to catch our attention. “Live the Dream! Strong / Sexy / Confident.” The cover photograph was of the ballet dancer, Misty Copeland, in mid-leap looking into our eyes as we look at her. She is identified in another headline, smaller but impossible to miss: “Misty Copeland: One Badass Ballerina.” The words in both headlines fit Copeland beautifully—strong, sexy and confident is not all one would want to say about her, but they are true of her nevertheless.

Page 1 of the magazine features another full page image of Copeland along with a “Note to Self: Today is the beginning of anything you want.” “No,” I thought as I scanned the magazine. Not anything—that’s the sort of mindless ditty that seems empowering only if you don’t think about it. And if you really believe it, you’ve bought into a myth that is certain to disappoint. Today can be the beginning of something important, or good, or stretching (to keep with the Misty Copeland theme), but anything? No, not even close.

It’s not that I’m against motivational quotes, a thought that empowers us to step out of the comfort zone that limits our ability to flourish as a person. It’s nice, however, when they are true as well as motivational. So, I thought of some alternatives, each one a quote by someone I respect:

**Note to Self:** “Did I offer peace today? Did I bring a smile to someone’s face? Did I say words of healing? Did I let go of my anger and resentment? Did I forgive? Did I love? These are the real questions. I must trust that the little bit of love that I sow now will bear many fruits, here in this world and the life to

come” (Henri Nouwen).

**Note to Self:** “Knowing what must be done does away with fear” (Rosa Parks).

**Note to Self:** “Resolved, never to say anything at all against anybody, but when it is perfectly agreeable to the highest degree of Christian honor and of love to mankind, agreeable to the lowest humility and a sense of my own faults and failings, and agreeable to the Golden Rule” (Jonathan Edwards).

**Note to Self:** “Listening is about being present, not just about being quiet” (Krista Tippett).

Many of us have “Notes to Self” without realizing it—sayings that somehow were lodged in our memory, for blessing or for curse. Some are encouraging while some are not, and some we may have chosen while others were thrust into our imagination. This is one reason that many spiritual directors suggest memorizing passages of Holy Scripture—once embedded in our hearts and imaginations such texts tend to shape our thinking, feeling and doing. This also captures something of the appeal and importance of proverbs—short, pithy snippets of insight and wisdom that are so often repeated they are easily remembered. Proverbs are like poetry, using simile, word play, and metaphor to make a point that is more than the words initially suggest.

- “If one gives answer before hearing, it is folly and shame” (Proverbs 18:13).
- “A rumor goes in one ear and out many mouths” (Chinese proverb).
- “Fools show their anger at once, but the prudent ignore an insult” (Proverbs 12:16).
- “Do not use a hatchet to remove

a fly from your friend’s forehead” (Chinese proverb).

- “Do not blame God for having created the tiger, but thank him for not having given it wings” (Indian proverb).
- “Sometimes I go about pitying myself, and all the time I am being carried on great wings across the sky” (Ojibwa proverb).

But now consider the main headline: “Live the Dream! Strong / Sexy / Confident.” A lot of us may be so repelled by what we see as the glossy narcissism of *Self* that we automatically dismiss it. But reaction rather than discernment is a form of narcissism too, is it not?

Imagine this scenario: You have befriended a young woman who is about to be married. She is excited, but also plagued with doubts that have roots deep in her childhood. Her father mocked her looks and was critical of all she attempted, while cheering on an older brother who seemed to succeed without even trying. Her doubts have given rise to anxiety and a resurgence of acne, and you want to help. As part of that help, you might choose to design a card to be stuck to her bathroom mirror with the words in your best calligraphy: “Live the Dream! Strong / Sexy / Confident.”

“OK,” some parent might say, “I can imagine drawing that card for a friend. But I don’t think the headline of the magazine is something I’d like my 12 year old daughter imagining is the essence of what she should be aiming for in life.” Fair enough—and that suggests an exercise in discernment. ■



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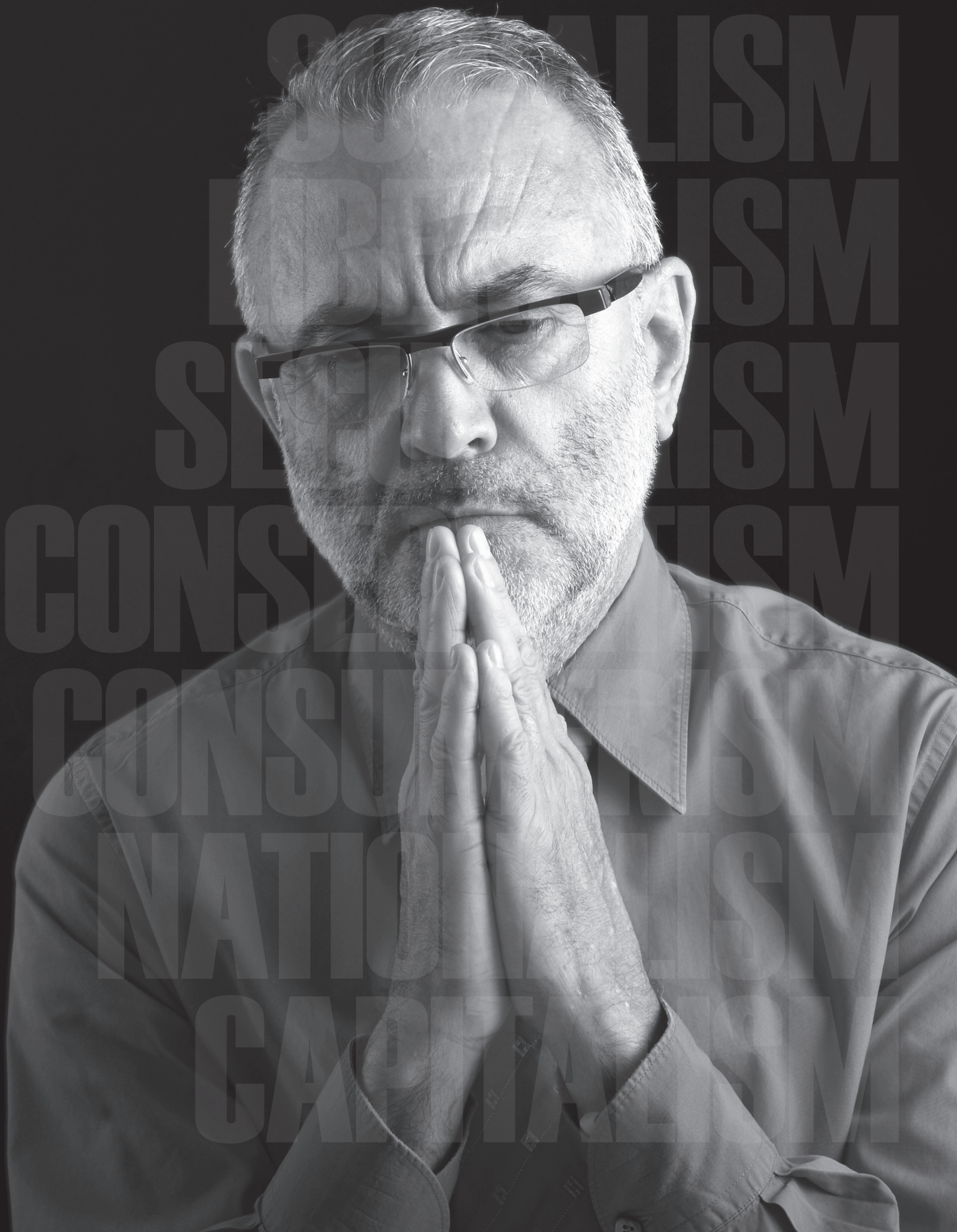
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### FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. For the sake of discussion, assume that "Living the Dream" refers to flourishing as a person. Realizing that this will be different for each person and will likely change for them over time, what three words would you choose to capture a sense of what you need to grow into ...in your work and vocation? ...in your relationships? ...in your spiritual pilgrimage? ...in your embrace of rest and stillness? ...in being creative? ...in reaching out to people different from you? ...in your life in time in a busy world?
2. To what extent do your words in this exercise involve religious jargon? Again, assuming that "Living the Dream" refers to flourishing as a person, what three words would you choose to capture a sense of what you need to grow into in your faith as a Christian that your non-Christian friends might find intriguing?
3. In the article about Misty Copeland, "Misty On Pointe," in *Self*, the author who interviewed her describes the dancer as "elegant, controlled, direct" (p. 73). Again, using only three words, how might your best friend ...your spouse, ... your children, ...your neighbor, ...your work colleague describe you? In what three words would you like to be described? Why?
4. How would you describe your assessment of the *Self* cover headlines and "Note to Self" to a non-Christian friend?
5. What "Notes to Self" are embedded in your memory, and how did they get there? What "Note to Self" would you like to adopt? What plans should you make?
6. How might this exercise be used by a group of Christian friends to pray for and encourage one another? What plans should you make?

# TO SELF





# Idols in Our Modern World

To live in the modern Western world is to live where the public square is determinedly secularized. The players in the square in America, for example, might be deeply religious in private, or actively pursuing forms of spirituality at home, but the prevailing social mindset is that in the public arena those convictions are not mentioned. There the problems and dilemmas of society, e.g., issues like the economy, education, technology, judicial reform, or immigration should be discussed and solved without any reference to the divine. The divine can be mentioned if the discussion is about one's personal, private life, but not as an essential part of finding a solution to pressing national or regional questions. So, though appealing to some ancient philosopher as an authority might be deemed acceptable, even admirable in the public square, appealing to an ancient prophet isn't considered equally authoritative, unless the quote is entirely devoid of religious content.

Read in this context, the Bible's repeated and passionate warnings of false gods, idols, and idolatry can seem rather quaint. Who today does what the prophet here warns against?

*All who fashion idols are nothing, and the things they delight in do not profit. Their witnesses neither see nor know, that they may be put to shame. Who fashions a god or casts an idol that is profitable for nothing? Behold, all his companions shall be put to shame, and the craftsmen are only human. Let them all assemble, let them stand forth. They shall be terrified; they shall be put to shame together.*

*The ironsmith takes a cutting tool and works it over the coals. He fashions it with hammers and works it with his strong arm. He becomes hungry, and his strength fails; he drinks no water and is faint. The carpenter stretches a line; he marks it out with a pencil. He shapes it with planes and marks it with a compass. He shapes it into the figure of a man, with the beauty of a man, to dwell in a house. He cuts down cedars, or he chooses a cypress tree or an oak and lets it grow strong among the trees of the forest. He plants a cedar and the rain nourishes it. Then it becomes fuel for a man. He takes a part of it and warms himself; he kindles a fire and bakes bread. Also he makes a god and worships it; he makes it an idol and falls down before it. Half of it he burns in the fire. Over the half he eats meat; he roasts it and is satisfied. Also he warms himself and says, "Aha, I am warm, I have seen the fire!" And the rest of it he makes into a god, his idol, and falls down to it and worships it. He prays to it and says, "Deliver me, for you are my god!"*

*They know not, nor do they discern, for he has shut their eyes, so that they cannot see, and their hearts, so that they cannot understand. No one considers, nor is there knowledge or discernment to say, "Half of it I burned in the fire; I also baked bread on its coals; I roasted meat and have eaten. And shall I make the rest of it an abomination? Shall I fall down before a block of wood?" He feeds on ashes; a deluded heart has led him astray, and he cannot deliver himself or say, "Is there not a lie in my right hand?" (Isaiah 44:9-20)*

But readings like this should not seem quaint to the Christian mind. The modern public square is rife with idols, even though they may not be named as

such and even though they may take a different form. Essential to Christian faithfulness is the ability to spot the idols of the present day and the danger they pose. The danger they pose not merely to others, but to us.

Read the prophetic text again, and this time see the description as a metaphor for human beings establishing something to which they will defer, for which they will sacrifice things, and which will give their life meaning, direction, and purpose. When modern people form an ideology or choose something like work, power, or fame as their central focus and allow it to shape their convictions, views, and values, they do with ideas exactly what Isaiah describes doing with a piece of wood.

Physical idols—statues of gods, goddesses, and spirits—and the religious rituals that accompany them can be hard for modern people, both Christian and secular, to fathom. That is changing, however, because modernity includes globalization that has prompted a migration of people and religious traditions into the Western world that not too long ago seemed to exist only very far away.

Forty minutes from my home, for example, is the Hindu Temple of Minnesota, an elaborate and impressive 43,000 square foot, \$9.5 million structure on 80 acres in Maple Grove, Minnesota. It is striking to be driving past fields of soybeans and corn to suddenly catch a glimpse of the 65-foot high temple, adorned with intricately carved images one expects to see in India but not in Minnesota. The temple includes several shrines that house images of gods, the largest dedicated to Sri Vishnu, one of the most widely known and revered deities in Hinduism.

Will the growth of Hinduism in the

Western world cause people here to see statues and the rituals surrounding them in new ways? Will Westerners begin to find them attractive? Time will tell. Eastern philosophy has long exercised an attraction for Americans, though in my experience it is Buddhism and the meditative traditions of Hinduism that have been most popular.

It's worth noting that temple tours are conducted regularly and visitors are welcome, something Christians in this area would be wise to include in the mentoring of young believers. It's a chance to learn, to civilly interact with neighbors who believe very differently than we do, to identify areas of agreement and disagreement, to discover what makes Hinduism attractive to so many, to explore how worldviews shape cultures, and to dig down into what we believe, why, and the difference it makes. Hinduism is now woven into the fabric of American society, and acting as if it doesn't exist next door is foolish.

Still, I suspect that the most dangerous idolatries are the hidden ones, the cultural norms and secular ideologies that we are so comfortable with that we don't worry about them, if we notice them at all. And when we notice them we seldom see them as idolatries, but imagine them to be merely ways of thinking about and seeing the world. In that light we imagine them to be neutral, not part of a great seething spiritual war in which principalities and powers clash with the hosts of the Lord.

A clue to how we see all this wrongly can be found in a simple thought experiment. It is this: Why is it that Christians in America are more comfortable with secularists than with pagans or Hindus? Part of the reason, of course, is that

most Christians have spent more time with secularists than with pagans and Hindus. Fair enough, and it is true that putting a face and a relationship with a label transforms our understanding. In that sense it is good that Christians are comfortable with friendships with secularists. We need to be. Still, as I've talked to Christians about this, it seems that having dinner with a group of secularists from work is just normal, but we worry that something "weird" might occur during dinner hosted by serious pagans or Hindus. The feeling is that we have more in common with secularists than with pagans and Hindus. But of course that isn't true; pagans and Hindus share far more in common with the Christian worldview than secularists do. Pagans, Hindus, and Christians believe in prayer, healing, spiritual beings and powers, evil spirits, the supernatural, revelation, an afterlife, and the divine, while secularists reject them all. Some secularists even consider belief in such things to be delusional, intolerant, and socially dangerous. My point is a simple one—could it be that our comfort with secularists make us blind to the dangers posed by secular ideologies?

Secular ideologies are all around us, woven into our national discourse, shaping political agendas, animating political parties, and defining people's convictions. They can be attractive and helpful in part, because they partake of some aspect of created reality. Libertarianism, for example, correctly insists on the value of individual freedom and responsibility. Consumerism correctly realizes that we all are by nature consumers and that what we consume matters. So to that extent Christians will find points of agreement. The problem is that each of

these -isms then takes its basic insight and makes it into a philosophy for all of life. At that point each secular ideology, whether nationalism, consumerism, politicization, libertarianism, conservatism, or socialism, becomes an idolatry, and we give ourselves to it at our peril.

Little children," St. John tells us, "keep yourselves from idols" (1 John 5:21). He must have known how easily seduced we are by idolatry to have inserted that statement into his letter. If we live in a world where idols exist, in other words, we must beware.

The process of globalization has brought near some idolatries that used to reside across the ocean. The process of secularization has multiplied ideologies that have assumed greater significance in the national discourse as Christianity has receded in importance. And recent events across the West in the early twenty-first century have caused one ideology—nationalism—that has long seemed limited to a small xenophobic minority on the fringe of society to break into the mainstream.

Christian faithfulness includes discerning the secular ideologies around us so that we see with clarity where we agree and where we must, civilly and respectfully, disagree. One place to begin is with David Koyzis's superb *Political Visions and Illusions*. He shows how secular ideology is idolatrous and then examines five prominent modern ones (liberalism, conservatism, nationalism, democracy, and socialism) before going on to propose a distinctly Christian alternative approach.

Speaking about such things today can be tricky. Idols, idolatry, false gods—these are religious terms, of course, but they speak to a common human reality.



Whether consciously or subconsciously, there is always something or someone that commands our allegiance, defines our beliefs, and shapes our values. So what we are really talking about is the danger of focusing our life and affections on something unworthy of bearing such significance. In *Counterfeit Gods*, Timothy Keller says that our fondest daydreams reveal our hidden idols.

*The true god of your heart is what your thoughts effortlessly go to when there is nothing else demanding your attention. What do you enjoy daydreaming about? What occupies your mind when you have nothing else to think about? Do you develop potential scenarios about career advancement? Or material goods such as a dream home? Or a relationship with a particular person? One or two daydreams are not an indication of idolatry. Ask rather, what do you habitually think about to get joy and comfort in the privacy of your heart? [p. 168]*

Idols are false gods but that does not mean they are powerless. Whatever shapes our values will have an impact on how we live, our choices, relationships, and priorities; and that in turn will impact those around us, for good or for evil; and that in turn can change the culture.

One need not be religious to appreciate the issue. Centering our deepest affections on the wrong things, taking something small and elevating it to the status of the Ultimate is a danger easily recognized by anyone who thoughtfully observes how human beings live. No one can live without some center or focus, some cherished end and purpose that shapes our ambition, even if we seem singularly unambitious to those who have adopted different ends.

A man may center his life on his

job and sacrifice (another religious term) his family for it. A woman may climb over the backs of fellow employees to get ahead and surrender her humanity and healthy relationships in the process. These two examples involve things—work and advancement—but ideologies can fulfill the same function. Consumerism, for example, not only argues (correctly) we are all consumers but makes consumption central to life, becoming a measure of our worth, a basis for our values, and a standard for our direction in life. It tells us that buying something can help get us out of the doldrums and that updating our things makes us feel aware and in touch. Ideologies have the added advantage of being systems of thought, philosophies of life defended by pundits and thinkers, and so seem to have added gravitas. “Idolatry distorts our feelings,” Rev Keller says.

*Just as idols are good things turned into ultimate things, so the desires they generate become paralyzing and overwhelming. Idols generate false beliefs such as ‘if I cannot achieve X, then my life won’t be valid’ or ‘since I have lost of failed Y, now I can never be happy or forgiven again.’ These beliefs magnify ordinary disappointments and failures into life-shattering experiences [p. 148]*

We love these things, believe them worthy of attention, serve these things and follow their implicit dictates for our time and priorities. In other words, we worship them.

As a Christian I would argue this is—intrinsically and essentially—a religious issue, that every person worships something or someone. Human beings are worshipping beings. What we worship—or adore as of



ultimate significance to give us meaning and our lives direction—will be either for blessing or curse, for flourishing or destruction. I do not mean that we must use religious terms to talk about it. Secular friends need not adopt religious terminology to observe the reality of it, but the conversation will naturally invite some creative mention of how Christian faith speaks so intelligently to this very vital human issue.

As we get to know someone and prove we are safe for honest conversation about the things that matter most, questions about this issue suggest themselves:

- What are you living for?
- If someone from another planet visited earth and watched you for a month, what evidence would they see that you, in fact, live for what you claim you live for?
- Why are you living for it?
- Who do you know or have you heard about that lived for this?
- Is there a religious, philosophical, or cultural tradition or ideology that defines what you are living for and captures your perspective on life?
- What difference does it make in your life? How does it determine or shape your priorities, use of time, values, lifestyle, politics, etc.?
- What are you willing to sacrifice for it?
- Would you commend it to me, to live for it as well?

Hard questions, serious questions, questions we must be prepared to answer with honest humility if we are to ever earn the right to pose them to others. Our answers should be thoughtful and creative, not triumphant, inauthentic, formulaic, or in language inappropriate for those outside our tribe to understand

and appreciate.

One reason these questions are so hard is because, try as we might, our heart and affections are never utterly pure. As a Christian I truly want my end and purpose in life to be glorifying and enjoying God, but it is easier to say that than to live it. The difficulty increases when fatigue sets in, when the pace of things picks up, when choices seem to be between equally ambiguous options, and when I am suddenly faced with something for which I am not prepared.

They are also hard because, even if it occurs on a subconscious level, the pressure to adopt an ideological perspective on political, economic, and social issues is relentless. This is true even in some Christian circles, where fellowship is predicated on one's political convictions or association as well as theological conviction. It is astounding that the unity of Christ's body might be fractured over how someone votes, but it does reveal the immense power of ideologies to attract passionate worshippers.

*"Christ is the answer" is a truth that too easily becomes a truism. Some unduly assume that if enough individual persons accept Christ as Savior, the restoration of social and political structures will follow as a matter of course. Others improperly attempt to use the state apparatus to effect a broader social transformation that can come only with multiple efforts from a variety of directions. Moreover, the crusading mindset risks not only underestimating the opposition, but harnessing Christian faith to one of the very ideological visions [popular in the public square].*

*However, the assurance of God's ultimate victory means, not that we are excused*

*from the hard work of fleshing out the command to do justice in his world, but that we know the end of the story in advance. We do not know quite how the twists and turns in the ongoing plot will contribute to the final chapter, despite the efforts of some Christians to seek such knowledge. We cannot know how soon Christ will return to bring his kingdom to its promised plenitude. It may be tomorrow. It may be a thousand years from now. Nor can we know the extent to which our own fallible labors will contribute to its advance. But we do know that the finale will come and that God sees fit to use these frail efforts of ours for his own purposes and glory. In short, every act of doing justice, whether in the political realm or in any other realm of human activity, is a signpost to the coming of God's final reign of justice over the new heaven and new earth.* [Koyzis, p. 267]

Regardless of being hard, the questions about what we are living for and why are too important not to answer. And to take the time, in community, to translate our answers so we can speak about them in the public square in a way that our non-Christian friends and neighbors might be able to understand and appreciate. And to identify the idols that populate our world and name what makes them attractive and how we might keep ourselves from them. ■

#### Sources:

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# Called to be Different

When the Lord freed the Israelites from slavery under the Pharaohs, he reminded them of the goal he had for them: “I will also walk among you and be your God, and you shall be My people.... I broke the bars of your yoke and made you walk erect” (Leviticus 26:12-13). Free people stand up. They walk upright, and they kowtow to no one and to nothing. Free people have the courage of their own dignity and convictions. Free people know what is wrong and know how to say no to what is wrong. And no one more so than the impossible people whom God has freed to live and stand and walk free before him. Need we talk of Moses before the Pharaoh, of Phinehas at a time of Israelite corruption, of Daniel and his friends before the might of Babylon and Medo-Persia, or St. Peter and St. Stephen, or Athanasius, Peter Damian, Martin Luther, Thomas Cranmer, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Dietrich von Hildebrand, Oscar Romero, Karol Wojtyla and countless others?

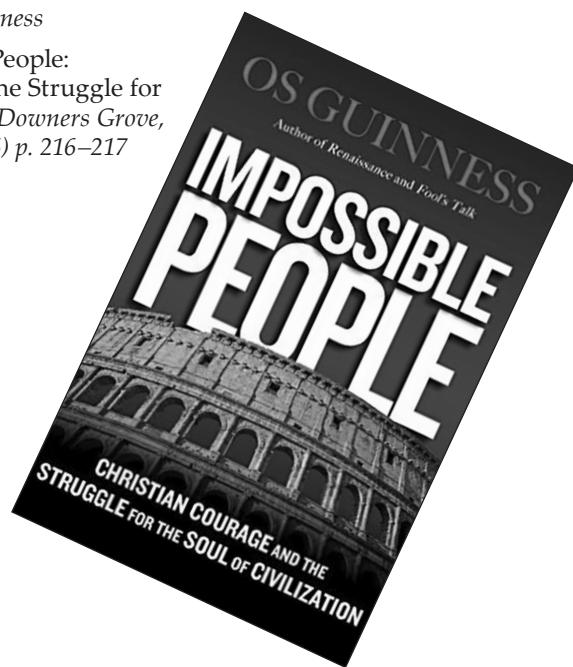
We all know that at times we are knocked down by life, and that one day we will all be leveled by death itself. But God keeps faith with us even when we lie in the dust, and because Jesus rose from death, we too will rise again. Marvelously, the Greek word for resurrection (anastasis) literally means “a standing up again.” So the impossible people gain their strength from an impossible God who is greater than all, who can be trusted in all situations and who strengthens his people to stand even against death. Despite everyone and despite everything, we are called to stand, and stand we must as God’s impossible people. However sweet the seduction, however popular and powerful the tide, however plausible the different gospel, however scornful or brutal the attacks, and however fearful the threats, impossible people stand, faithful only to Jesus, our Lord and our God. So may it be in our time.

This courage to be distinctively Christian and therefore to live differently must be

restored to the heart of Christian faith, just as its equivalent has always been the hallmark of the Jews and the secret of their remarkable survival down the centuries and across the continents. At Mount Sinai, the Lord commanded his people that whatever land they were in, “You shall not worship their gods, nor serve them, nor do according to their deeds” (Exodus 23:24). Later, their own prophet Ezekiel reminded them sternly that when they desired to be like other nations, they were thinking of something that simply could not be. God would never allow it. “What comes into your mind will not come about, when you say: ‘We will be like the nations’” (Ezekiel 20:32). As the Jewish sages reminded their people, “The whole world was on one side, and they were on the other.” Christians stand with Jews in this calling. For Christians to be the same as everyone else is impossible. Impossible people are called to be different, and different they will be or they will not be Christian. ■

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Excerpt from *Impossible People: Christian Courage and the Struggle for the Soul of Civilization* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press; 2016) p. 216–217



# Blurring Lines, Ads Go Undercover



Not too long ago it seemed that the understanding was that there should be a bright line drawn between advertising and content. “We’ll be right back,” talk show hosts said, “right after these messages.” Television programs were divided into sections, each separated by a series of commercials, unless we paid for cable in order to have commercial-free viewing. Magazines ran articles and advertisements on separate pages or separated by clear borders. Internet sites posted videos (content) and ran ads in sidebars. That has changed and will be changing even more in the future. Not only has the line between advertising and content been erased, it is becoming almost impossible to tell which is which. And to make matters worse, we are providing almost unlimited data about ourselves to advertisers in order to make their job of selling to us that much more efficient.

This is the message of Mara Einstein, former advertising agency executive

and now professor of media studies at Queens College, City University of New York. And she has written *Black Ops Advertising* to let us in on it.

This is not, of course, new. It was pretty clear things were changing when companies like Nike and Abercrombie & Fitch not only convinced consumers to buy their products but to wear products that advertised the company. Or when we saw appeals to children to buy special meals at fast food restaurants that are actually advertisements for movies. Or when we spotted product placement in films, so that brands are clearly displayed in scenes as the plot unfolds.

Einstein says this is only the beginning. Two recent developments are native advertising (ads are placed in the content) and content marketing (ads that are made to look like news or entertainment). In both cases, great expense and creativity is expended to make certain we are unaware of what is actually happening. She provides examples of each so we can learn to spot them.

Not only has the bright line between advertising and content been erased, Einstein says, we are also unaware of how the digital world allows marketers to manipulate us.

*Click a button and we can read the New York Times or watch our favorite TV show or stream the latest movie. Submit a query to Google and a world of knowledge appears on the screen, albeit algorithmically delimited. Newspaper or magazine, TV or movie, fact, tidbit, or commentary, no matter how big or small, how significant or trivial: it’s all available at our fingertips, and it’s all absolutely free.*

*This is the perception we have been lulled into believing. It is time to wake up.*

*There is no free lunch, free movie, news report, or factoid. We are paying and paying dearly.*

*We pay with our time and our attention—a scarce and valuable resource in the twenty-first century—and the coin of the realm in today’s “attention economy.” We pay by being forced to engage with what has become an unending stream of advertising blurred to be indistinguishable from legitimate news stories, leading to the utter skewing of our sense of reality. We pay by providing our personal data to marketers, who then use that data to sell us an increasing array of products “specifically targeted to us” by manipulating and whipsawing our emotions. We pay by turning our relationships into monetizable opportunities, making personal interactions into market transactions, and remaining in a constant state of buying or selling, albeit one that’s been prettied up to look like sharing and making “friends.” Exaggeration? I don’t think so. (p. 187–188)*

Einstein has written a helpful book intended to help us see the digital world, advertising, and media with greater clarity. My one caveat is that her rhetoric is too shrill at times, and the book is stronger at diagnosis than providing much of a solution. Still, this is the world we live in and participate in, so we should take notice. ■

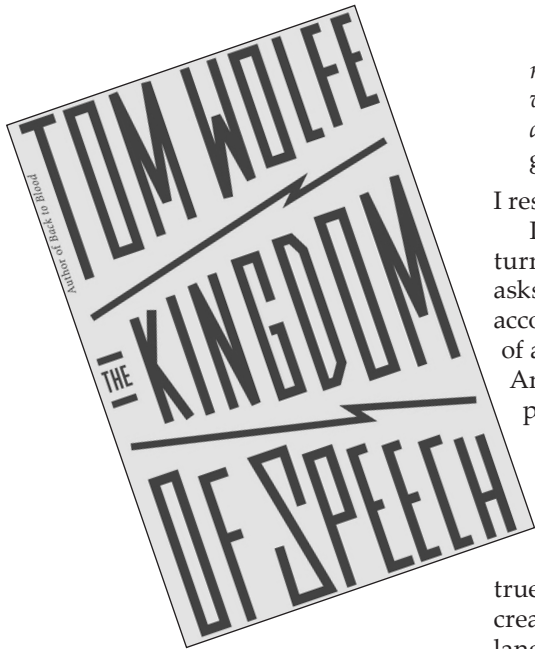
**Books recommended:** *Black Ops Advertising* by Mara Einstein (New York, NY: OR Books; 2016) 206 pages + notes



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## RESOURCE: TOM WOLFE

# Darwinism Falters Over Language



If you have never read Tom Wolfe, you will have to take my word for it that he loves language. As a journalist, novelist, and essayist, Wolfe doesn't just use words, he relishes them, brandishes them, piles them up, fills sentences with ellipsis and exclamation marks to turn words into weapons, and makes certain you imagine what he wants you to imagine.

*Throughout the voyage of the Beagle... way back when... Darwin had been in his twenties, enjoying the heedless animal health of youth. Today, in October of 1818, going on twenty-two years later, he was almost fifty... and afflicted with what his doctors told him was dyspepsia. But very likely their real diagnosis was hypochondria... referring to some recurring imaginary malady unlikely to kill you even if it were real. In Darwin's case it consisted of sudden, uncontrollable vomiting and every sort of pain in his distended belly and bowels, every known belch, retch, heave, gas-pass, watery*

*rush, and loathsome gush, plus foul wind erupting from one end of his digestive tract and foul sounds erupting grrrrkkk from the other [p. 41–42].*

I rest my case.

In *The Kingdom of Speech*, Wolfe turns his attention to Darwinism and asks why, if it is true, it is unable to account, why it is completely incapable of accounting for human language. And he tells the story of this failure in prose that only Tom Wolfe could pen.

Christians need to be careful with this book. For one thing, it is not an argument for creation and should not be mistaken as such—Wolfe is not a theist. It is true that the Christian doctrine of creation adequately accounts for human language, but Darwinism's failure to account for it does not prove that the biblical position will be credible to those who are committed Naturalists. The God of scripture is triune, and communication is therefore part of the very nature of ultimate reality. The members of the Godhead communicated from eternity past, God spoke to create, and has spoken in human language, so creatures that bear his likeness should wonder at, but need not be surprised at, the grace of language. Still, this position is only plausible when a series of assumptions are first accepted about God, his nature as triune, the scriptures, creation, and the nature of humankind. Besides, one common response to Wolfe's argument will be that though no account of language has been developed by evolutionists, one will be proposed eventually. We must remember that no one enjoys being shown that their world view is inadequate. Arguing for truth is a high and noble calling, but it is sin if done with the sordid glee

of triumphalism. If we wish to point out the flaws in the thinking of non-Christian friends, we must welcome the same from them and demonstrate we take such things seriously by living a lifestyle of repentance. One more thing: check out reviews of the book—many are very critical, and the criticisms need to be considered with care.

"Speech!" Wolfe writes in the final lines of the book. "To say that animals evolved into man is like saying that Carrara marble evolved in to Michelangelo's *David*. Speech is what man pays homage to in every moment he can imagine" (p. 169). Yes. And from where I sit, that homage does not merely float in a silent cosmos but one whose very existence rests on the gracious word of the God who speaks. ■

**Book recommended:** *The Kingdom of Speech* by Tom Wolfe (New York, NY: Little, Brown and Company; 2016) 169 pages + notes

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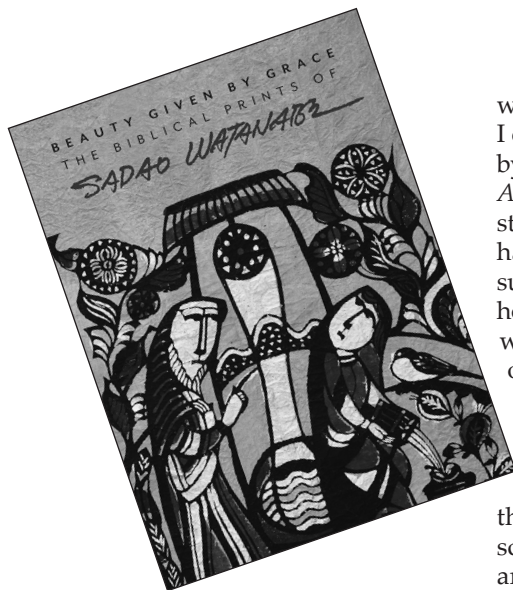
## RESOURCE

Hearts and Minds bookstore is a well-stocked haven for serious, reflective readers. When ordering resources, mention Ransom Fellowship and they will contribute 10 per cent of the total back to us. ■

**Resource:** Hearts and Minds bookstore, [www.heartsandmindsbooks.com](http://www.heartsandmindsbooks.com)



# The Faithfulness of Sadao Watanabe



I remember when I first fell in love with the art of printmaking. Somehow I came across the woodblock print by Albrecht Durer, *Four Riders of the Apocalypse* (1498) (near right). I was stunned by the rich detail the artist had painstakingly carved into the surface of the wood, and I wondered how such craft was possible. The image was transformative for me because not only did it reveal something of the glory of creativity in art, but it opened my imagination to Holy Scripture.

Being raised in a fundamentalist church meant I was familiar with the text from Revelation 6. A great scroll was before the throne of heaven and, as its seals are broken open, four horses—white, red, black, pale—surge forth, bringing judgment on the earth. Sermons on such texts were stern and ponderous, full of warning. But Durer's image was like a glimpse into another dimension, here but also beyond, setting my imagination free to see reality as bursting past the narrow confines of what I yet knew. There was a greater story unfolding and though I wasn't certain what that meant I wanted to be in it.

Fine printmaking occurs at a complex and creative intersection between craft and art. At the simplest level, a reverse image of the final work is carved into a wood or linoleum block. If multiple colors are to be used, multiple blocks will be made, one for each color, each carefully aligned to fit seamlessly into the final image. Then, one by one, the paint or ink is applied to each block in turn, the paper pressed onto the block and the task repeated for each color, the final image built up and then left to dry. There are myriad variations on the process, complicating an already complicated creative endeavor.



One variation comes from Japan, where stencil cutting and techniques of dying originally developed for kimono fabrics are also used to make prints. Special paper, handmade in a laborious process from the bark of the paper mulberry tree, called *kozo*, is used for the prints. The paper is treated with a solution of devil's tongue root, then crushed and wrinkled, stretched, and smoothed so that it presents a creased and textured surface. To produce the stencils *shibugami* is used, a tough paper made from mulberry, layered and hardened with persimmon tannin, and dried and cured in a smokehouse. The dyes used for the various colors are handmade as well from natural sources. The artists who master this ancient technique are content to step away from our one-click world to honor and maintain a tradition of high excellence that goes



The Appropriation of Isaac's Wife, 1976, wash  
7 x 6 inches, From the Boudin Collection



#### LAST SUPPER

1973, hand-colored kappazuri stencil print on  
washi handmade paper, 9 1/2 x 6 inches.  
From the Boudin Collection

And he took a cup, and when he had given  
thanks he said, "Take this, and divide it among  
yourself. For I tell you that from now on I  
will not drink of the fruit of the vine until the  
kingdom of God comes." And he took bread,  
and when he had given thanks, he broke it and  
gave it to them, saying, "This is my body, which  
is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me."  
And likewise the cup after they had eaten, say-  
ing, "This cup that is poured out for you is the  
new covenant in my blood."

Luke 22:17-20

a cactus-feeding insect, and blue came from the leaves of the indigo plant. Watanabe's  
favorite color was king's yellow, made from the mineral orpiment, containing arsenic  
trioxide. This beautiful but poisonous pigment has proved the least stable of  
Watanabe's natural colors; older monogram prints with yellow backgrounds often  
show signs of fading.

Watanabe seldom commented on the progress of his American pupil. When their  
time together came to an end, he paid Pyle the supreme compliment of requesting a  
print from a stencil she had made of a mother and child in the style of her mentor.  
Pyle often visited Watanabe during the next twenty-five years and has carried on the  
work of her late master in articles, lectures, and demonstrations of stencil print-  
making. Anne and Kenneth Pyle acquired their first Watanabe print in Japan in 1964.  
The Offering of the Donkey, a monogram print in the style of Listening, showing a single  
figure with elongated hands raised in praise to God that his donkey has been chosen  
to carry Christ into Jerusalem. They now have one of the largest private Watanabe  
collections in the world, including a rare print of The Story of Ruth (page 54), which  
the artist entrusted to Pyle in the last years of his life. Pyle always looked forward to  
receiving Watanabe's hand-colored kappazuri Christmas cards (pages 49, 51). The last  
one arrived just two weeks before the artist's death. The teacher closed his notes to his  
American pupil with a blessing coming out of a life of inspired art-making: "May God  
breathe on you!"



back centuries.

One such artist is Sadao Watanabe (1913–1996) who left a rich legacy of exquisite prints that should be of special interest to Christians. A Japanese Christian who worked with patience after long years of training, Watanabe dedicated himself to producing prints using biblical motifs. "I have always aspired to portray stories and episodes from the Bible," he said. "In this disturbed world, I would like to be able to heed the voice of heaven" [p. 74]. Watanabe knew that if Christianity is seen to be a foreign, alien, Western tradition, it will never be attractive in Japan. "Theology will not take deep root in Japanese soil," Watanabe said, "if it is merely an import" [p. 12].

Watanabe's art, both in detail and technique, is profoundly Japanese. "My task," he said, "is to stand within the

artistic tradition of Japan" [p. 11–12]. So if you take the time to observe his work, you will notice sweet hints that the biblical text is being reimagined cross-culturally. In his print of the marriage feast in Cana, *The First Miracle*, the guests are seen enjoying a meal of lobster. *The Last Supper* (above) depicts the disciples seated with the Lord around a table on which the central platter holds a luscious fish. It is not that Watanabe is mistaken in his understanding of scripture but that he desires his Japanese viewers to see these two feasts as noteworthy, celebrations they need to not just know about but enter.

I have had one opportunity to see Watanabe's prints in person. Last month Margie and I wandered east out of Minnesota for a road trip. We passed through 12 states, pausing in six places in five states for speaking and meetings.

One stop was in Pennsylvania where we visited Square Halo Gallery in downtown Lancaster. Curator Ned Bustard, creative director of Square Halo Books, and his wife, Leslie, were our companions for the visit. The gallery show was prints by Watanabe so, after walking around to view each one, we sat in easy chairs in one corner to talk. It was a delightful time of conversation about art, culture, scripture, Watanabe, and so much more.

Watanabe prints somehow exude a contemplative air, inviting us to be still and look. Like icons, the images are not rendered as a history lesson but to capture the essence of deeper truths embodied in the biblical story. Highly stylized, the figures are depicted simply but with a sense of dignity and gravitas. Color is used sparingly, highlighting the print so that our eye reads the image as a story. Some art I've seen makes me want to immediately talk about it. Watanabe's, however, makes me want to be quiet, to enter into something that rescues my ordinary from the merely boring and mundane, not by injecting excitement but by refocusing attention on the deeper things of the soul.

In *Beauty Given by Grace: The Biblical Prints of Sadao Watanabe*, Square Halo Books has produced an art book that rewards repeated readings. Half the pages in this large format book are full page, full color illustrations. Each is paired with the biblical text that inspired the image, and a second reproduction of another related print, either by Watanabe or by another artist worth noting and comparing. *Beauty Given by Grace* also includes, woven throughout, four thoughtful essays. Even if this is your first introduction to Japanese printmaking and to Watanabe, these insightful, clearly written, and

informative essays will serve to open a new world of visual art to your view. The essays include...

- **“Beauty Within Reach” by artist Sandra Bowden.** “It is gratifying,” Bowden writes, “to study the life of Sadao Watanabe and realize how dedicated he was to his calling. There were those close to him who discouraged his biblical art, fearing that he could not make a living creating prints of Bible stories. However, even in a culture unreceptive to Christianity, his commitment never wavered. Watanabe found an idiom that merged both his art and his faith, using a traditional Japanese stencil art form for dyeing kimonos that he hoped would speak to his people.” [p. 10]
- **“Soli Deo Gloria: My Experience as Sadao Watanabe’s Translator” by theologian I. John Hesselink.** “As I got to know Watanabe better, I would occasionally suggest biblical subjects to him that he had not yet covered. He respected me as a theological professor, but I don’t think he ever followed my suggestions in his artwork. He knew the Bible very well and was not about to let anyone tell him what biblical scenes his art should portray. His quiet self-confidence in what he was doing, however, was not a sign of arrogance—for he was one of the most humble men I have ever known.” [p. 30–32]
- **“My Journey with an Artist I Never Met” by artist Makoto Fujimura.** The visual language of Watanabe, Fujimura writes, “is generative: a feast to the eye and edifying to the spirit, a reserved pocket of synthesis in our fragmented, dissolute times.” [p. 40]

## MY JOURNEY WITH AN ARTIST I NEVER MET

MAKOTO FUJIMURA

### ELIJAH ASCENDING

1959, hand-colored Japanese stencil print on washi handmade paper, 3.52 x 6.53 inches. From the Sacred Art Pilgrim Collection

When they had crossed, Elijah said to Elisha, “What shall I do for you, before I am taken from you?” And Elisha said, “Please let there be a double portion of your spirit on me.” And he said, “You have asked a hard thing, yet I see you are as I am being taken from you, and shall not be with me.” And as they went on and talked, Elisha said, “Represent the two of us by a whetstone.” It was the end of the journey of his life.

In the fall of 1987, I arrived in Japan with a Japanese governmental scholarship to study, as an American, the traditional art form of shibubiki (Japanese-style painting). Although born in Boston, I spent my grade school years in Kawasaki, Japan, and I had not been back since my elementary school graduation. I walked about the Yamanote Line station area of Tokyo, near Tokyo University of the Arts, seeing the ginkgo trees whose yellow leaves seemed irrelevant under the blue autumn skies.

In the university library, where I spent a considerable amount of time studying the ancient art forms of Japan, I came across several books on Sadao Watanabe. His work seemed so familiar to me yet I could not recall where I had seen them. His colorful, sacred culture familiar to me yet I found myself attracted toward his overlapping with those of autumn in Japan and I found myself attracted toward his overlapping with those of autumn in Japan and I found myself attracted toward his overlapping with those of autumn in Japan.

In and out of my walks to and from my studio at school, several years later, as a student of fine arts at Tokyo University of the Arts, I attended the student Christian Fellowship at Watanabe’s home as a governmental scholar.

Sadao Watanabe and Kenjiro Saito at the Japanese Folk Art Museum for Watanabe’s 1947 mural for The Story of Ruth, which is now in the background.



### BAPTISM OF JESUS

1975, hand-colored Japanese stencil print on washi handmade paper, 3.52 x 6.53 inches. From the Bowden Collection

In these days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And when he came up out of the water, immediately he saw the heavens being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, “You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased.” The Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. And he was in the wilderness forty days, being tempted by Satan. And he was with the wild animals, and the angels were ministering to him.

Mark 1:9–13

### FOLK ART RELIANT ON GRACE

After the Meiji Restoration of 1868, Japan rapidly adopted Western culture and technology in an effort to force the pace of economic and social development and catch up with the industrialized world. This growing tendency to value all things foreign and neglect traditional culture was viewed with alarm in Japanese intellectual and artistic circles, giving rise to an anti-industrial, folk art movement in the mid-1920s.



- **“Profound Faith, Profound Beauty: The Life and Art of Sadao Watanabe” by former Time editor and Sacred Art Pilgrim Collection owner, John Kohan.** “A quiet, reserved man,” Kohan says, “Watanabe revealed a droll sense of humor in his biblical prints. In some versions of *Wedding at Cana*, servants can be seen furtively dipping their fingers into the water pots to sample the miraculous vintage of wine before passing it on to the guests.... In *An Angel and Shepherds*, Watanabe includes two black sheep in the flock these shepherds watched by night. The *katazome* master was asked one time why he chose to depict the *Three Kings* paddling for home in a boat. He had a wry answer no biblical scholar could dispute. As Watanabe pointed out, the text in Matthew 2:12 clearly states that after being warned in a

dream not to return to King Herod, the Three Kings ‘departed into their own country another way.’ If they had come by land, why not return by sea?” [p. 94]

I recommend *Beauty Given by Grace* to you warmly. Keep your copy on a coffeetable where people can pick it up easily. A wonderful introduction to a superb twentieth century Christian artist, it can also serve devotionally, providing biblical texts and accompanying art to help as we meditate on the things that nourish our souls. ■

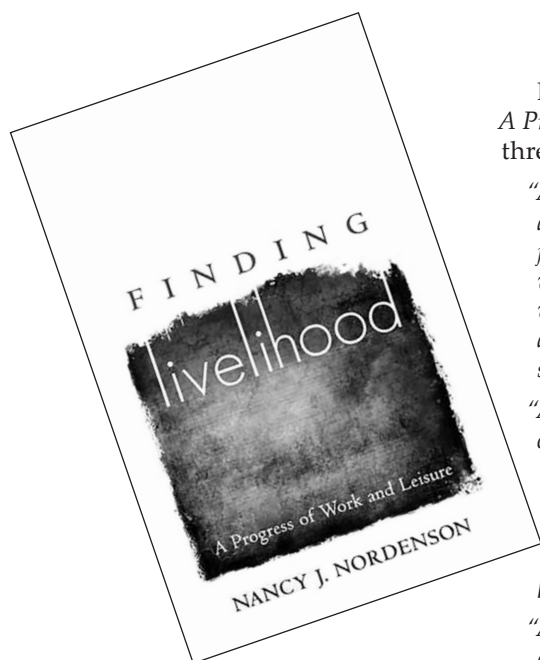
**Book recommended:** *Beauty Given by Grace: The Biblical Prints of Sadao Watanabe* (Baltimore, MD: Square Halo Books; 2012) 107 pages + glossary + bios + notes

*Images from the book included by permission of the publisher; all rights reserved*



## RESOURCE: *FINDING LIVELIHOOD*

# Contemplating Work and Rest



I'm not certain I can describe this clearly, but I'll try. There are two sorts of nonfiction books worth reading. The first sort are good because they help us think something through and we see more clearly, even if we feel a bit overwhelmed at the end. And then there are books that accomplish all that while also refreshing our souls in the process. The thinking and clarity are served with a measure of gracious solace that reassures and awakens a sense of hope. In the end steps of action do not intimidate because we are changed somehow, and though we and the world remain broken we have been freed to stumble more eagerly into grace.

*Finding Livelihood* is the second sort of book. Author Nancy Nordenson helps us think about work and leisure by inviting us to enter a place of wisdom, to breath deeply, and to dwell there. Her way of welcome to that place is serious and realistic yet contemplative and life affirming, lyrical and healing.

Nordenson divides *Finding Livelihood: A Progress of Work and Leisure* into three acts:

*"ACT I. Where we encounter ground level and metaphysical realities; unfair rules, job stress, and bad bosses; idealistic work experts and criteria for "good work"; hiddenness and exhaustion; and a longing for meaning and a will to be satisfied. [p. 9]*

*"ACT II. Where we encounter rest and contemplation; time and space; beauty, prayer, and faith; imagination; an urge for freedom; a dual job description; people and moments worthy of pause; bills that keep coming and a pink slip. [p. 67]*

*"ACT III. Where we encounter love, devotion, and guidance; the sacrament of the present moment and every moment; a never-ending journey; prayer, grace, and surrender; strength; two views of time; patience and transformation; and a blessing of countenance." [p. 151]*

Even if we understand and believe the scriptures concerning vocation and rest, it is a struggle to consistently live in that reality in our modern world. That shouldn't be surprising, since, as St John tells us, "all that is in the world—the desires of the flesh and the desires of the eyes and pride in possessions—is not from the Father but is from the world" (1 John 2:16–17). The world, our world, in other words, composes itself in great systems that agitate against everything—including our vocation and rest, work and leisure—that might display even a hint of the harmony of God's kingdom.

*Even the often quoted and highly respected advice of theologian and writer Frederick Buechner is problematic: "the place God calls you to is the place where*

*your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet."* While Buechner's words, an amplification of a sentiment first voiced by Aristotle, offer a starting point for dreams and plans when the future is in front of you and the choice is yours, who but a very small minority can find that exact intersection and from it feed a family? Or at that sweet spot sustain their position for a lifetime? Glance at history or literature and count the heroes who are swept into events not of their choosing, sometimes kicking and screaming. Consider the pivotal, but sometimes hidden, events visited upon the common man or woman who work far from deep gladness, the world's greatest need, or both.

This book is not about the modern work ethic. It is not a celebration of work, but neither is it an exposé or complaint. This book is about wrestling with work as with any large and powerful force that wants to have its way with you while you simultaneously want to have your way with it. This book adds another view to the body of literature about work. It adds nor just another way of thinking about the experience of work but another voice, a meditative and contemplative voice, a voice trying to speak into the tension between passion and need, between aspiration and limits, between the planned life and the given life. [p. 6]

We warmly recommend Nancy Nordenson's superb *Finding Livelihood* to you. ■

**Book recommended:** *Finding Livelihood: A Progress of Work and Leisure* by Nancy J. Nordenson (Oro Valley, AZ: Kalos Press; 2014) 224 pages + notes

# The Art of Mary McCleary



I have never seen a work by Mary McCleary in person, but wish I could. She makes collages, merging pieces of string, bits of wire, foil, paper, wood, and other ordinary things into paintings designed to make the viewer pause and ask questions. Sometimes she incorporates text, even rather long texts, into the work. The texts do not explain the work, but seem rather to be one more element to discover in the course of absorbing it. The words, whether from history, literature, poetry, or scripture, adds another layer of meaning, a reflection on something that both deepens and expands on the theme of the work as a whole. There is whimsy and edginess, touches of both brightness and dreadfulness in what McCleary produces, bright color and muted palattes, images that draw us in to reveal the glorious ruin we know so well as broken creatures in a broken world.

"I like the irony," McCleary writes on her website ([marymccleary.com](http://marymccleary.com)), "of using materials that are often trivial, foolish, and temporal to express ideas of what is significant, timeless, and transcendent." I see her artistic method as a redemptive technique, taking ordinary things and making them come alive with greater meaning in a larger work of power and beauty. The surface of her works is not smooth and two dimensional, but rough and textured, three dimensional, as if inserting itself off the gallery walls and into our existence.

We are introduced to McCleary's art and life in *Mary McCleary: After Paradise*. It is a good book, and one I am pleased to have in my library. It contains two short essays, one on McCleary herself by Clint Willour, a curator, and the other on her work by Harold Fickett, author and co-founder of the journal *Image*.

The rest of the book contains full color reproductions of McCleary's work.

Both essays are thoughtful and intelligent, but neither is for everyone. My one caveat about *Mary McCleary: After Paradise* is that this book will be primarily of interest to those who already have an appreciation for and understanding of contemporary art. Lay viewers who feel lost in art galleries and who want a beginners guide to understanding McCleary's work will not find it here. This is not a criticism of the book, though I do wish there was one more essay for viewers who simply don't get it but wish they could. Mary McCleary's art is worth getting.

McCleary, for those who prefer a more formal introduction, is Regent's Professor of Art Emeritus at Stephen F. Austin State University, and she's on the editorial advisory board of *Image*. She is a Christian whose art helps us see reality with greater clarity, making us stop and think rather than sweep past in our busyness. "Her art," Harold Fickett writes, "evokes the horror we are so adept at concocting and longs for the blessedness of a new earth characterized by love, justice, and peace—by God's redemption. Her work is an instance of how that process has already begun" (p. 8). ■

**Book recommended:** Mary McCleary: *After Paradise* (Baltimore, MD; Square Halo Press; 2006) 20 pages + notes on illustrations and exhibitions

**Image (right):** Names Written on Water by Mary McCleary (22 x 30 inches; Photopolymer Gravure, 2016); image included by permission of Square Halo; all rights reserved









ABOVE

from *Beauty Given by Grace: The Biblical Prints of Sadao Watanabe* (Baltimore, MD: Square Halo Books; 2012); images reproduced by permission of publisher; all rights reserved

*Flight into Egypt* (approximately 6 x 7 inches, hand-colored stencil print on wash handmade paper)

*The Crucifixion* (approximately 9 x 10 inches, hand-colored stencil print on wash handmade paper)

LEFT / BELOW

from *Mary McCleary: After Paradise* (Baltimore, MD: Square Halo Press; 2006); images reproduced by permission of publisher; all rights reserved

*Goldfinch in Thorns* (11 x 11 inches, 2010, mixed media collage on paper)

*Sehnsucht* (book cover art detail, 45 x 45 inches, 2006, mixed media collage on paper)



Learn more about these resource books inside this issue of *Critique*.