

## NONES, BOREDOM, MUSING ON THE PHYSICAL, WONDER AND STEWARDSHIP

## CRITIQUE



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Except where noted, all articles are by Denis Haack.

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## **EDITOR'S NOTE**

# The Growth of Nones



It is an interesting exercise to ask friends what changes going on in our world seem to them to be most significant. The answers we give will say more about us than about the changes themselves, since our definition of the good life will shape which changes we deem most worthy of concern.

Here is one that is of interest to me. A recent study reported by Neil Monahan and Saeed Ahmed of CNN reveals that the number of Americans claiming No Religion has grown so that it now equals the number self-identifying as Evangelicals or Catholics. More specifically, the 2018 General Social Survey revealed the following facts:

- Percentage of population identifying as Roman Catholic: 23.0 percent
- Percentage of population identifying as Evangelical: 22.5 percent
- Percentage of population identifying as None: 23.1 percent

This represents real change. Since 1991 Nones have grown by an astounding 266 percent, Monahan and Ahmed say, and if present trends continue they will be by far the largest group in four to six years.

If we have been paying attention to our neighbors, friends, and colleagues, this will not be much of a surprise. It is, however, a reason for humility.

Our world has looked at the church and heard our message and remained unmoved. It is also a reason to confess that our eager culture warring has represented a tawdry politicization of the gospel. It is also a reason to stop accusing our non-Christian neighbors of various and sundry sins in a misguided attempt to convince them of their need of Christ since we have been expressly forbidden to judge those outside the church (1 Corinthians 5:9-13). It is also a reason to set aside the dehumanizing and reductive formulas for evangelism we have substituted for the authentic relationships and unhurried conversations demonstrated by our Lord. And it is a reason to learn to ask questions, extend loving service and hospitality, listen and imaginatively speak and live out the gospel with a creativity that might intrigue our neighbors.

It used to be that when Christians looked at their neighborhood we were encouraged to think how we might tell each person that they were sinners, that Christ died for them, and that by a simple decision for Jesus they could receive forgiveness. We need to confess that this is no longer applicable and, in fact, is problematic since our neighbors increasingly do not see reality in such terms. People hear such a presentation and assume Christ is irrelevant to them, and that they can find meaning and purpose while professing No Religion.

Instead, when Christians look at their neighborhood, we need to pray for insight into how we can serve people in love, sacrificially. "When the world sees the church doing evangelism, making converts," Tim Keller says, "it only sees us increasing our tribe, adding to our numbers and increasing our power. When it sees us sacrificially serving the needs of our neighbors, whether they believe as we do or not, then it may begin to see that believers are motivated more by love than by the desire to accrue power. In Christian theology, our belief in the God of judgment and grace is the basis for doing justice in our society. In the eyes of those outside the church, it is Christians' doing justice that makes belief in the gospel plausible. Doing justice for our neighbors, whether they believe in Christ or not, is paradoxically one of the best recommendations for the faith. Like Jesus, we must be mighty in both word and deed (Luke 24:19)."

Our Lord promised that even though the church may slide into grim darkness, she will not be erased from history. You could say he has staked his reputation on it. Not even hell itself will prevail against it (Matthew 16:17–19). The church in Africa is growing and has become the center of global Christianity. And the tomb remains empty. So, there are more than sufficient reasons to remain hopeful.

It's like the wag that compared the church to Noah's ark. Conditions in that boat would have been horrific, except for the deadly flood outside.

#### Sources:

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## **BOOK BRIEFS**

# Tisby, Glahn, Bobo, Standage

#### **BLACK LIVES MATTER**

Some of our stories are so grievous, so unpleasant, so full of duplicity and heartlessness that my impulse is to keep them hidden. But they must

be told if there is to be repentance and if we are to see the path that can lead us out of the thickets we weren't aware have kept us captive. They must be told if those who have suffered are to be named and known and granted at long last the dignity they deserve. They must be told if we are to take seriously the truth of the gospel and the glory of Christ's church. *The Color of Compromise* tells such a story, and it is a story that I as a white American evangelical need to hear not just with my ears but with my heart. If you are a white American evangelical you need to hear it too.

As his subtitle suggests, Jemar Tisby, president of The Witness, tells a very sad story—*The Truth about the American Church's Complicity in Racism*—but it is not a hopeless one. Animated by grace and the power of the gospel *The Color of Compromise* calls us to live as if we really believe what the Bible proclaims so that in that faithfulness we can begin to flourish as God intends for his people.

After reviewing the history of the American church's complicity in racism from the nation's founding to the present moment, Tisby concludes with a chapter of practical suggestions of where we can go from here. "This much is clear," he says in conclusion,

the American church has compromised with racism. Countless Christians have ignored, obscured, or misunderstood this history. But the excuses are gone. The information cannot be hidden. The only question that remains is what the church will do now that its complicity in racism has been exposed. In the Bible, James 4:17 says, "If anyone, then, knows the good they ought to do and doesn't do it, it is sin for them."

*Book recommended:* The Color of Compromise: The Truth about the American Church's Complicity in Racism *by Jemar Tisby (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan;* 2019) 215 pages + notes + index.

#### BIBLICAL WOMEN RECONSIDERED

No commentary contains the final word on the text of scripture. Rather, our apprehension of the biblical text unfolds in depth over time as God's Spirit grants careful readers insight so that we can see the truth of God's word with increasing clarity. And sadly, along the way misinterpretations occur and must be corrected. We understanding remains limited to what we see through a glass darkly.

In *Vindicating the Vixens* a series of thoughtful biblical scholars look closely at the stories of 14 women: Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, Bathsheba, the Virgin Mary, Eve, Sarah, Hagar, Deborah, Huldah, Vashti, the woman at the well, Mary Magdalene, and Junia.

In each instance their task involves answering six questions:

- 1. What does the text actually say?
- 2. What do I observe in and about the text?
- 3. What did this text mean to the original audience?
- 4. What was the point?
- 5. What truths in this text are timelessly relevant?

6. How does the part fit the whole?

Suffice it to say these reconsiderations of these stories suggest that some pretty shoddy interpretations have been circulating for too long in the church. Everyone will not agree at every point—not even the book's contributor's reach that level of agreement—but being forced to take the text of scripture seriously is always a bracing and worthwhile experience.

**Book recommended:** Vindicating the Vixens: Revisiting Sexualized, Vilified, and Marginalized Women of the Bible *edited by Sandra Glahn (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications; 2017) 285 pages + bibliography.* 

believe the Bible is inspired though our



#### **DRINKING OVER TIME**

good summer reading—a story full of odd facts, fascinating historical connections and humorous anecdotes that I didn't really need to

know but was glad to read them aloud to Margie so we could laugh together.

*Just as archaeologists divide history* into different periods based on the use of different materials—the stone age, the bronze age, the iron age, and so on—it is also possible to divide world history into

periods dominated by different drinks. Six beverages in particular—beer, wine, *spirits, coffee, tea, and cola—chart the* flow of world history. Three contain alcohol, and three contain caffeine, but what they all have in common is that each one was the defining drink during a pivotal historical period, from antiquity to the present day. [p. 2]

Each drink Standage highlights may have started in one place but soon spread across the globe as it became popular. Beer was discovered in Mesopotamia in prehistory but quickly was found wherever human beings grew grain. Wine characterized Greek and Roman culture, and distilled spirits the American colonial period. Coffee, developed in the Middle East, soon spread across the world to become the drink of the Age of Reason. Tea followed everywhere the British Empire spread in influence and domination. And in the modern era, the American development of cola produced a new drink that can now be found in virtually every corner of the globe.

Standage, a journalist living in Greenwich, England, takes care with his facts but is less interested in establishing a new outline for Western history than in telling a gripping story. He succeeds, I think, and A History of the World in 6 Glasses invites us to pour ourselves a glass of our favorite beverage and enjoy the tales involved in its development and spread as it conquered the world.

Book recommended: A History of the World in 6 Glasses by Tom Standage (New York, NY: Bloomsbury; 2005) 274 pages +appendix + notes + sources + index.

#### **EMBODYING THE** GOSPEL

RACE, ECONOMICS APOLOGETICS Margie and I heard Luke Bobo-no stranger to the pages of Critiquespeak on this topic and hoped to publish his talk. Luke had already arranged to have it published in short book form, and so I'm delighted to call attention to it here. In Race, Economics, and *Apologetics: Is There a Connection?*, Luke addresses issues relevant to today's headlines and crucial to the integrity of

the gospel in America in these opening decades of the twenty-first century.

Although there is a strange reluctance on the part of many to believe this, the free market in the United States does not contain a level playing field. Everyone does not have an equal opportunity to get ahead, and there are subtle, often hidden systemic barriers that keep some from flourishing no matter how hard they work or how much they desire to thrive as a worker using their energy and gifts. One of the most insidious barriers is racism, and its evil tendrils are deeply rooted in every aspect of our modern economic and social system.

Luke defines the problem and explains how we got here. He provides specific examples to demonstrate the

reality of racialized economics, and then he provides equally specific ways the church can embody the gospel to address this systemic problem. "In a time when the gospel is implausible," he says, "an embodied, nonverbal, lived apologetic is what is desperately needed in these troubled times."

He is absolutely correct, and we highly recommend Race, Economics, and Apologetics to you. It won't be all you'll want to read on the topic but it's a great place to start. ■

Book recommended: Race, Economics, and Apologetics: Is There a Connection? by Luke Bobo (READY Publication LLC; 2019) 51 pages + bibliography.

## **READING THE WORLD**

# In Praise of Boredom

#### by James K. A. Smith

n his book *The World Beyond Your Head*, Matthew Crawford talks about what he calls "ecologies of attention"—the social infrastructure that shapes and channels the way we attend to the world. In an earlier age, quiet spaces cultivated the sort of attention that freed you up to read *War and Peace*. In the frantic ecology that is now our default, you can't pump gas or ride an elevator without some corporation trying to steal your attention.

We need the arts to imagine the world otherwise. But such an invasion of the imagination, such an invitation to another world, has to overcome its competitors. This has always been the case, of course. The long human grind of mere survival, still a daily reality in too many places, has always threatened to consume any time or energy for play. Plato's philosopher-kings banish poetry from the city, while consumerism's corporate-kings are more sly, turning every endeavor into a commodity. Fascists shut down the theater while the gods of STEM shut down the music program.

But human longing has always managed to overcome such threats in order to make art that limns the beyond. Somehow our ancient forbears, exhausted by hunting and gathering, made time to create the ancient beauty that adorns the walls of caves in Lascaux. A Hebrew shepherd, and the poor of Appalachia, made stringed instruments sing. Those oppressed by slavery bequeathed to us jazz and the blues. We don't deserve *A Love Supreme*. Out of the unspeakable horrors of the Shoah, *Night* appeared.

Every work of art that is true or beautiful is, one might say, a pièce de résistance, telling the truth about how the world really is and offering us a portal to what we're called to be. Such art resists lies, apathy, and all the forces that would diminish us to mere consumers or enemies or copulating pieces of meat. Such imaginative works are at once disconcerting and enticing. They remind us that we're not as good as we think we are, and they call us to so much more than this. As in Terrence Malick's *Thin Red Line*, a dappled light finds its way through the cathedral of palms while war rages below, making us look up and wonder. And hope.

But how to overcome *distraction*? How to break through the bedazzling glare of our screens, the latest threat to parade as an angel of light?

The problem isn't simply that the technologies of distraction prevent us from making or appreciating art. This isn't simply a competition for attention. The concern is more egregious: our distraction demeans us. Like the dreaded Entertainment in David Foster Wallace's Infinite Jest, our social media feeds are dopamine dispensers. In a way that Wallace couldn't have imagined, we carry in our pockets the possibility of unceasing jolts of novelty. We just have to open Facebook or Instagram. There's always something new in our feeds: some tantalizing delight, some new outrage, and most of all, some new affirmation—a like, a fave, a comment, like an intravenous shot

of recognition.

If I've learned anything from Saint Augustine, it is an eyes-wide-open realism about our tendency to ruin things. And so, unsurprisingly, even our distractions have been hijacked by the worst angels of our nature. Now we turn to these devices over and over again looking for that peculiar joy of late modernity: the joy of outrage. The delight we take in recognizing what is detestable. The twisted bliss of offense. The haughty thrill of being aghast at the latest transgression. We can't believe he said *that*, and we secretly can't wait for it to happen again. Like love's negative, the joy of outrage is expansive: it only grows when it is shared.

And so we spend our days shrinking not only our attention but our souls' capacities. In some cosmic attic, our collective portrait, like Dorian Gray's, is absorbing all the effects of our habits. With each hungry "refresh" and mocking retweet and smug dismissal, this portrait of our soul is shriveling beyond recognition. We are better than this.

W

hat is the calling of art in such a world? And how can the arts disrupt these habits, perhaps

even teach us to be disappointed by distraction? Who will sing the song that transports us?

I won't pretend the answer is simple, or that I have figured this out. Heaven knows how much time I've lost to Twitter, and how many times I've had to apologize. I have no plans to delete my account in a quest for purity.

But I know at least this: Instagram won't save us, and tweeted verse will not undo what we've done to ourselves. But neither is there any special enchantment to reading in print. So this is not the Luddite's redoubt, nostalgically canonizing codex or canvas as if history had come to an end in some glorious past. Every medium now reaches us inside the ecology of attention masterminded by Silicon Valley. We take pictures of our books and coffee, for heaven's sake. The point isn't platform but desire: what do we want when we pick up our phones? We don't need better media, or to romanticize old media. We need to change what we want.

In a world of incessant distraction, the way out might look like learning how to be bored. A little ennui could go a long way; it could be the wardrobe we need now. We need to learn how to be bored in order to wean ourselves off distraction and open ourselves to others and the Other—to make ourselves available for irruptions of grace.

In a recent conversation with Terry Gross, the filmmaker Paul Schrader made a provocative observation: "People don't leave church because they're bored," he suggested; "they go to church to be bored." (The resonance this has for me personally might stem from our shared formation in Reformed churches.) But what Schrader means by "boredom" here is something more like stillness, the quiet that is the condition for contemplation. The quietude that is a prelude to reverence. To listening. To maybe even hearing.

For a culture jacked up on diverting entertainments, such stillness is going to look and feel like boredom. And it will be indescribably difficult—as impossible as a Holstein landing a grand jeté.

But what if art—paradoxically could teach us how to be bored? It's no accident that Schrader's affinity for holy boredom parallels his devotion to transcendental style in film and his appreciation for "slow cinema" (even if he insists on a difference between the two). In the new edition of his book, *Transcendental Style in Film*, Schrader discusses boredom as an aesthetic tool. It is the cinematic manifestation of a principle: "Deny the viewers what they seek. Deny, deny, deny." (Why am I thinking of Calvinism again?)

"Why would a viewer put up with such abuse? Such boredom?" Schrader asks. "Well, most viewers don't," he admits. And there may be a broader truth for us to consider there. But he goes on to note another possibility. Slow films, he says, can "hook the viewer." Masters of slow cinema, he points out:

use boredom as an aesthetic tool. Boring morphs into mesmerizing. These are the truly important films. Why do we take it? The boredom. The distance... [B]ecause effective slow cinema filmmakers are masters of anticipation. Employing striking visuals and auditory tricks and bits of activity, the slow film director keeps his viewer on the hook, thinking there is a reward, a "payoff" just around the corner. It's adroit blackmail. If I leave, I'll miss what I've been waiting for. Even the seasoned viewer of slow cinema anticipates something. Some moment. Some unexpectation. The wait will be worth it.

We need artists with the courage to teach us how to be bored. Who tease us with anticipation even when we're befuddled by the poem. Whose prose demands an attention that we want to give because of promises laden therein. Whose sculpture arrests us and frustrates us and jackhammers into our soul and unsettles us with recognition. The creators who teach us to be bored will be cultivating in us habits of stilled attention in which we might finally hear our creator.

itting on the corner of the Tuileries Garden, on the bank of the Seine is the remarkable Musée de l'Orangerie, a gem that displays 145 paintings collected by Paul Guillaume. The collection is a who's who of early twentiethcentury French painting, featuring works by Cézanne, Gauguin, Matisse, Modigliani, Renoir, and many others.

But on a recent visit I was taken with the role played by Claude Monet's famous *Nymphéas*—the eight massive canvases of water lilies painted especially for the museum's space. Before you descend to the main collection, you are invited into two oblong rooms where muted natural light falls gently



from skylights. Taking up almost the entirety of the walls are swelling images of Monet's gardens at Giverny. In the first room you inhabit the garden through time—from darkness to rising sun to the golden hour of twilight and the spooky beauty of dusk. In the second room we are invited to the see or perhaps better, *sense*—the ponds and lilies and willows from different angles, to get lost in the garden, as it were, to float on its ponds.

There is a hidden intentionality behind all of this, a partnership between the artist and the museum. Monet made the promise to donate his work the day after the Armistice in 1918. He wanted to create a monument to peace and give a gift to the people of France. But he also knew something about the world in which they lived—the fog of war; the doldrums of a dirty, demanding city; the exhaustion of work. So as he envisioned his work and its role in this space, he was conscious of a desire to create a sanctuary. Conceiving the installation early on, Monet wrote, "Nerves strained by work would relax in its presence, following the restful example of its stagnant waters, and for he who would live in it, this room would offer a refuge for peaceful meditation in the midst of a flowering aquarium."

Not everyone will be able to achieve such peaceful meditation ("most viewers don't," Schrader reminds us). Monet imagined all of the competition *outside* the gallery—the specter of war, the burdens of industry and commerce. He couldn't have imagined all the competitors that would make their way *inside:* the demanding tour-bus drivers clapping to keep their customers on schedule; the selfie sticks and preening postures of those who reduce his work to a backdrop. It's not easy to be bored. It's harder than ever to float.

Teach us, artists, how to be bored again. Invite us into the boredom that is the antechamber to the mesmerizing. Tease us with some unexpectation. Bore us so that God can bore into our souls and we can find ourselves again. ■

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## **READING THE WORD**

# **MUSING ON THE PHYSICAL**

ome natural beauty is quiet and surprising, like the tiny flower with delicate white petals and bright yellow stamen that I happened upon that was growing in a crack in the asphalt in front of a deserted building. The place reeked of abandonment, of things gone wrong, of jobs lost and dreams disappointed, and the invasive weeds spreading across the parking lot seemed to confirm the sense of failure and decay. And then there was this little flower, blooming bravely (or so it seemed to me) with a beauty so full of wonder as to feel almost ferocious when I knelt to look more closely.

I doubted the flower would last long. Flowers tend to fade all too rapidly anyway, and this one seemed to have landed in a tenuous and unstable spot. There was little soil that I could see in the crack in the asphalt, and there were signs that demolition might begin soon on the site. The Hebrew prophet Isaiah, interestingly enough, saw even the fading of flowers within the care and providence of their Creator (Isaiah 40:7–8). God has not withdrawn from them but oversees their decline and return to the dust.

The wonder, the mystery, the order, the beauty is all around us if we are not too busy or distracted to stop and observe. "After the one extravagant gesture of creation in the first place," Annie Dillard notes, "the universe has continued to deal exclusively in extravagances, flinging intricacies and colossi down aeons of emptiness, heaping profusions on profligacies with everfresh vigor. The whole show has been on fire from the word go."

The beauty is not secondary. The Hebrew scripture insists, for example that the Creator called trees into existence not merely because they were "good for food" but because they were "pleasant to the sight" (Genesis 2:9). God's concern was to meet *both* the practical, nutritional, *and* the spiritual, aesthetic needs of those made in his image. He adorned what he made with a trace of his magnificence and it would be both churlish and foolish to ignore or miss it.

Several years ago, along the southeastern edge of Lake Michigan, Margie and I hiked past immense oak trees, ancient, weathered, and impressive, stretching up into the sky. We stopped in wonder, remarking on their massive, craggily gnarly branches, and stood for a while simply to gaze. Later I deleted the photos I took because none came close to capturing even a miniscule hint of their majestic solidity.

Some people speak as if mystery is found exclusively in the spiritual realm of existence, as if it is absent in the physical. I suspect this is because the material is open to scientific study and so we are trained to see it in reductionist terms. Yet each discovery, glorious and fascinating in its own right, always reveals how much more remains to be discovered. New tools and research methods uncover phenomena previously unknown or only guessed at. I am not a scientist, but I suspect the complexity, order, and precision of the physical universe is why so many researchers happily give their lives to the unfolding and yet often tedious exploration and experimentation of science. If we have missed the mystery, awe, and wonder of the physical we simply aren't paying attention.

Scientists assure us that the wonder holds not just for the surface of things but the closer we look, down through a microscope or out into farthest space.

### EVERYBODY NEEDS BEAUTY AS WELL AS BREAD, PLACES TO PLAY IN AND PRAY IN, WHERE NATURE MAY HEAL AND GIVE STRENGTH TO BODY AND SOUL.

- John Muir

And, as Richard Dawkins notes, the sense of stunned marvel holds the more deeply the research penetrates into the intricate and inexplicable beauty of nature.

The feeling of awed wonder that science can give us is one of the highest experiences of which the human psyche is capable. It is a deep aesthetic passion to rank with the finest that music and poetry can deliver. It is truly one of the things that make life worth living and it does so, if anything, more effectively if it convinces us that the time we have for living is quite finite.

I can appreciate that. Still, to my mind, it is a bit too weak. Dawkins' naturalist assumptions will allow for no more, and so I applaud his honesty but I would also suggest a far richer perspective is both possible and more plausible.

I prefer the take on things expressed by poet, academic, and Anglican priest Malcolm Guite in the 2019 Laing Lectures at Regent College (Vancouver). The conference topic was Imagining the Kingdom: Parable, Poetry, and Gospel. In the second lecture, Christ and the Moral Imagination, Guite asks us to reflect on Christ's teaching, particularly in the parables of nature. He calls attention to the simple yet profound one of a seed falling into the ground and dying. "Truly, truly, I say to you," St. John records Jesus as saying, "unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. Whoever loves his life loses it, and whoever hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life" (12:24–25). Guite wants us to see...

the way Jesus appeals to our imagination in his parables. The way he invites us not only to see the beautiful appearances of nature but also to read them imaginatively, to read them as symbols, indeed to read them as a kind of language so that in those parables he can teach us the invisible through the visible.

But I want to start by remarking on something that we all take for granted. *Which is that there should be any* parallels to make up a parable. That there should in fact be any correspondence between the outward that we are told *is the blind unfolding of nature and the* inner workings of our own minds. If we *were to believe the bleak, reductive and* exclusively material account of ourselves of the kind you read in Dawkins and others, an account of ourselves as simply a set of survival and defense mechanisms as an unintended series of biochemical reactions whose sheer complexity has accidentally thrown up consciousness as a kind of isolated epiphenomenon. If we were to believe that then we should scarcely expect there to be any real correspondence between our accidental inner life of mind and all the supposedly mindless processes of nature going on out there. We might expect, perhaps, to have evolved so as to be aware of a tree in order not to bump into it, or even perhaps so as to hide in it, but we should scarcely expect that a tree, with its roots, and branches should so perfectly express and embody for us so many aspects of our inner life. The pattern of thought itself—we can't speak of thoughts except to say they have roots and branches and fruits. The pattern of history, the nature of organizations, and even our inner spiritual life—all in some way we find ourselves drawing on the language of rootedness, branchedness, growth—those outer things of nature provide us with a *language which is completely adequate* to and illuminating for our invisible,

#### inner life...

*So, there might be good evolutionary* reasons for our observing the cycles of sowing and growth in nature and for our ability to control those processes a little by plowing furrows and planting seeds for ourselves but the mechanistic and reductive view would scarcely lead us to the actual experience we have which is true for every farmer and indeed every gardener that in letting a seed fall from our hands and be covered in the earth, in waiting for its first fruits to rise we find a perfect outer emblem for a whole series of inward experiences-experiences of loss and letting go that lead to a new fruition. Let alone that we should find it in that cycle of supposedly an indifferent and purposeless nature a parable of death and resurrection that whispers to us a great hope—we shouldn't expect that were the mechanistic view to be the case.

But on the other hand, if the Christian assertion that all things were created in the Logos, in mind, in order, in meaning, and that that same Logos is also the inner light of every human mind, "the light who lightens everyone who comes into the world." If that assertion is true, then such rich and fruitful parallels between the inner life of the mind and the outer life of nature are precisely what we should expect to find. If we were further to assert, as John does in his Gospel, that this same Logos, through whom all of nature was made, and who *lights every human mind—this same* Logos actually came into the world as a human being not only to save but also to teach us then we would pay special attention to the way in which he used the *language of the outer world, which was made in and through him—the seeds, the* trees, the birds of the air and the flowers of the field—to express for us the life

of the spirit. For here we would have the privilege of meeting and listening to Meaning itself. Or rather we should say, to Meaning Himself. The author of the cosmos, this great work in which we find ourselves, would be reading to us and interpreting for us the poem of his own creation. And I think that is precisely what is happening when we sit at the feet of Jesus and hear him teaching in parables.

That is far closer, it seems to me, to the truth of things when I follow Jesus in opening my senses to nature.

Sometimes awe is evoked by quiet beauty, and sometimes when nature turns awful. The rolling thunder of a furious storm, wind whipping branches, and lightning cracking across the heavens can produce a delicious delight tinged with a touch of fear. Storms put us in our place so that we feel small and insignificant—appropriately so—finally facing our helplessness before such overwhelming force. The false confidence of modernity is stripped away by the most elemental of forces.

The Hebrew psalmist hears in the storm the thundering voice of divinity.

- The voice of the Lord is over the waters; the God of glory thunders, the Lord, over many waters.
- The voice of the Lord is powerful; the voice of the Lord is full of majesty.
- The voice of the Lord breaks the cedars; the Lord breaks the cedars of Lebanon...
- *The voice of the Lord flashes forth flames of fire.*
- The voice of the Lord shakes the wilderness; the Lord shakes the wilderness of Kadesh.
- The voice of the Lord makes the deer give birth

#### and strips the forests bare, and in his temple all cry, "Glory!" [Psalms 29:3–5,7–9]

Superhero movies still employ such imagery, with Thor the god of thunder slamming his mighty hammer on the ground to shake the firmament in his wrath. The metaphor works, especially if you have sufficient reasons to believe that all that is exists by the creatively sustaining word of the God on whom all existence depends. To see a flower blooming in a crack in the asphalt or a thundercloud boiling up into the atmosphere and see only bare material phenomena is a leap of faith that beggars my imagination.

"There are things in nature which engender an awful quiet in the heart of man," writes Native American scholar and novelist N. Scott Momaday. "Man must account for it. He must never fail to explain such a thing to himself, or else he is estranged forever from the universe." To be lost in the cosmos, to use Walker Percy's phrase, is to be alienated from all that matters most.

The final paragraph of Cormac McCarthy's brilliantly wrenching novel, *The Road*, took my breath away. Set in a blasted post-apocalyptic world, a father and son wander, starving and homeless in a gray and dust-filled landscape, fearful of being caught by roving gangs of people desperate to the point of cannibalism. Destruction and misery as far as the eye can see, though the road they travel stretches on into the halfdarkness as ash falls like filthy flakes of snow.

Once there were brook trout in the streams in the mountains. You could see them standing in the amber current where the white edges of their fins wimpled softly in the flow. They smelled of moss in your hand. Polished and muscular and torsional. On their backs were vermiculate patterns that were maps of the world in its becoming. Maps and mazes. Of a thing which could not be put back. Not be made right again. In the deep glens where they lived all things were older than man and they hummed of mystery.

McCarthy knows that the true response to apocalypse is not merely the recovery of the physical that has been ruined beyond recognition. What is missing for the lonely frightened and starving wanderers in *The Road* is far deeper than that. Being lost, they need to be found, and being found includes knowing that the world they inhabit is imbued with hope and true meaning, not just fire, chaos, destruction, and death.

We do not live in a post-apocalyptic world, but many wander without ever witnessing the trout in those streams. I

find it troubling that, in our world of advanced modernity, so many people are separated from the awe, stunning beauty, and wonder of material reality. Because of the flood of the

supposed to be?

night, our thoughts seem to expand beyond our own very narrow concerns. Somehow they draw us outward to larger ideas. "When I look at your heavens," the psalmist says, "the stars, which you have set in place, what is man that you are mindful of him?" (Psalm 8:3–4). This is not a special and unusual thing that only ancient Hebrew poets experience, but is, I am convinced, a common human response to the mysterious grandeur God has planted in the night sky. It is true that only a few of us will glimpse the Himalaya peaks, or the expanse of the Russian taiga, or the monkeys in the Amazonian canopy, or the seasonal melting of the ice on the Antarctica Ocean. Such wonders are available only to a few—but the stars? They are above us all, available to all those created in God's image, except to those whose vision is impaired or obstructed. This is not a criticism of artificial lighting; it is a lament that some

> are prevented from seeing a glimpse of the raw, unfiltered glory of God. And as a Christian I muse often on the brutal physicality at the heart of my faith. In his death—his

physical death—Christ assumed the full weight, the entire significance of our sins. In the cosmic scheme of things, even my little acts of misogyny and racism and unkindness and narcissism and all the rest, once committed, can't simply be magically erased. They inflict wounds, spawn brokenness, and multiply results that ripple out, perhaps unseen and unnoticed or studiously ignored by me, but very real nevertheless. Christ's loving act in shouldering this unbearable burden sounds like a spiritual act—spiritual in the sense of not physical, of occurring in a realm of reality far removed from the corporeal. Not so. Christ, St. Peter writes, "bore our sins in his body on the tree," so that "by his *wounds*" we can receive healing (1 Peter 2:24, my emphasis).

Miss the reality of the physical and we miss not merely the experience of wonder and the apprehension of glory, but the reality of redemption. ■

#### Sources:

Unweaving the Rainbow: Science, Delusion and the Appetite for Wonder *by Richard Dawkins (New York, NY: Houghton Mifflin Company; 1998) p. x.* 

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2019 Laing Lectures with Malcolm Guite at Regent College are available free online (www.youtube.com/ watch?v=6\_t3sk9jNI8&app=desktop). www.brainyquote.com.

When we gaze at the stars on a dark

centers who have never witnessed the glory of the Milky Way. The lights of

the city drown out the stars that sing in

the heavens. Tell me: is this the way it's

#### images that deluge us, we think we've physical seen all such things, but that isn't the same. Imagine this—sadly there are our sins children growing to maturity in urban even my

**IF PEOPLE SAT OUTSIDE AND** 

**LOOKED AT THE STARS EACH** 

NIGHT. I'LL BET THEY'D LIVE

A LOT DIFFERENTLY.

— Bill Watterson

## **DISCOVERING LIFE**

# Lies We've Been Told

In the April 15, 2019, issue of The *New York Times*, columnist David Brooks published a thoughtful opinion piece titled, "Five Lies Our Culture Tells: The cultural roots of our political problems." Brooks states the obvious, namely that something is badly amiss in our world. Then, however, he suggests that, contrary to popular opinion, the roots of the problem are not political and economic but instead are found on a far deeper level. "The whole country is going through some sort of spiritual and emotional crisis," he writes. "College mental health facilities are swamped, suicide rates are spiking, the president's repulsive behavior is tolerated or even celebrated by tens of millions of Americans. At the root of it all is the following problem: We've created a culture based on lies."

Brooks lists five specific lies he believes our world of advanced modernity is telling:

Career success is fulfilling. *This is the lie we foist on the young.* 

I can make myself happy. *This is the lie of self-sufficiency.* 

Life is an individual journey. *This lie* encourages people to believe freedom is the absence of restraint.

You have to find your own truth. *This is the privatization of meaning.* 

Rich and successful people are worth more than poorer and less successful people. *We pretend we don't tell this lie, but our whole meritocracy points to it.* 

Some of these lies are occasionally expressed blatantly, and all are implicitly built into the structure of the marketplace, the assumptions of the media, the values celebrated in popular music, and the stories told in the movies. Cultural lies are very insidious. Even if seldom spoken aloud, they advance by stealth, quietly being assumed instead of argued, and so rarely questioned they soon become accepted without question. When they don't come true we assume we must be at fault. Those who pride themselves as being out of the cultural mainstream are usually touched by them, even if in no other way than to embody a reaction against them.

As Christians we should need no convincing that, in a fallen world, every human culture contains a web of lies. This is what the scriptures mean when they identify the "world" as an enemy of the soul. Along with the flesh (our fallen nature) and the devil (evil powers that tempt us away from the good), the world is something that we cannot escape and must beware. Human beings are created for community, and yet all the systems we create-political, economic, cultural, sociological-tend to subtly align themselves against the kingdom of God. Because we must of necessity live within them, we must learn to be discerning so we aren't drawn into patterns of life or values or ideas that are contrary to the word of God.

This process of discernment is complicated by the fact that the lies we discover usually are subtle perversions of the truth. Consider the first lie identified by David Brooks: Career success is fulfilling. It's close to the truth, but the distance is damning. We are created for work, and being made in God's image means our work is of value and can be intensely satisfying. Still there is a fine line between that truth and the notion that human fulfillment is found ultimately in a successful career. The first is a great grace and the second quickly becomes a stifling slavery. All of which suggests an exercise in discernment for us.

#### **OUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION**

- Read the article written by David Brooks. What in the piece particularly caught your attention? Why?
- 2. How do you respond to the five lies listed by David Brooks? Did any of them surprise you? Where do you see them expressed? Why do so many find them attractive enough to believe they are the truth? Do you agree they are lies? Why or why not?
- 3. What other lies do you believe our culture tells us? Where do you see/hear these lies? Why are they dangerous?
- 4. What lies does the evangelical community (or wider church or popular expression of Christian faith) tend to tell?

**Source:** www.nytimes.com/2019/04/15/ opinion/cultural-revolution-meritocracy.html







# Wonder and Stewardship



Each episode of *Our Planet* (2019) opens with the same dazzling image. The camera is in space, hovering above the surface of the moon and over the lunar horizon we watch our planet rise in the sky. A bright blue orb flecked with white swirls of clouds and storms, a vivid globe of stunning and fragile beauty.

Just 50 years ago, we finally ventured to the moon. For the very first time, we looked back at our own planet. Since then, the human population has more than doubled. This series will celebrate the natural wonders that remain and reveal what we must preserve to ensure people—and nature—thrive.

It is a worthy goal, pursued with great and lovely creativity by the BBC in a series of eight hour-long episodes in collaboration with the World Wildlife Fund.

Christians believe that human beings were never intended to be separate from nature. Rather we were intended to enjoy it, to find our place and fulfill our callings within it, and to experience in it the very character and glory of God. "What can be known about God is plain," St. Paul insists, "because God has shown it." It is not a hidden or furtive thing, but revealed, not secret but declared. "For his invisible attributes, namely his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made" (Romans 1:19–20). When God met with Abraham we are told, "he brought him outside and said, 'Look toward heaven, and number the stars, if you are able to number them'" (Genesis 15:5). When the psalmist considers "your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars, which you have set in place," the poet is only then able to see reality and his own humanity in proper measure (Psalms 8:3–4).

To be cut off from the wonder of nature is to be cut off from one part of God's revelation of himself. I am reminded of a talk I heard years ago, given by Calvin DeWitt. He was speaking, as he so often did, on the glory of creation and the responsibility of our stewardship, and he told how he had returned recently from a camping trip that had taken him far from city lights. I don't remember where he had been, but he had been able to see the full expanse of the Milky Way spread out across the clear night sky. It's a breathtaking sight, so vast and brilliant that it can seem impossible, yet there it is, a celestial canopy of light spread out above us. Now DeWitt was driving home, and as he entered Madison (where he was professor of environmental studies at the University of Wisconsin) he became aware of how the urban lights drowned out the night sky. He pulled to the side of the road, overcome by the thought that some urban children might never glimpse the full wonder of the Milky Way. The Creator had made the lights of the night sky, Genesis tells us, and though the lights of the city represent their own kind of progress, that progress should

not divide beings made in God's image from the glory of God's handiwork. "God never intended that," Cal DeWitt insisted, "and it shouldn't be."

The gospel of grace begins not at the cross but at the beginning. The life, death, and resurrection of Jesus are central to a proper understanding of the Christian faith, but they are not the full story, nor are they the beginning. And if we get the beginning wrong, our understanding of that central fact of Redemption will be skewed so that all sorts of mistaken ideas and practices fall out.

The beginning is Creation, followed by the Fall. God called all things into existence, and declared them good. He did so in an act of creative imagination, not out of necessity but out of love. Like the rocks and birds and the Milky Way, we are his creatures, though different from them in bearing God's image, and so needing to bear special responsibility as his stewards. And ever since the beginning, the rocks and the birds and the Milky Way have been content to be as God called them to be while we have stubbornly gone our own way. Human beings are the ones who are fallen and who tend to spread the dust of death rather than the breath of life. Rather than being content to live according to God's word, we suppress the truth and so leave a legacy of destruction and exploitation rather than life. "Christians, of all people, should not be the destroyers," Francis Schaeffer argues.

We should treat nature with an overwhelming respect. We may cut down a tree to build a house, or to make a fire to keep the family warm. But we should not cut down the tree just to cut down the tree. We may, if necessary, bark the cork tree in order to have the use of the bark. But what we should not do is to bark the tree simply for the sake of doing so, and let it dry and stand there a dead skeleton in the wind. To do so is not to treat the tree with integrity. We have the right to rid our houses of ants; but what we have not the right to do is to forget to honor the ant as God made it, in its rightful place in nature. When we meet the ant on the sidewalk, we step over him. He is a creature, like ourselves; not made in the image of God, but equal with man as far as creation is concerned. The ant and the man are both creatures.

As God's stewards we are to work and to keep God's good world, to cultivate and maintain, to till and to defend (Genesis 2:15). We are to creatively and imaginatively develop God's world while caring for it with tender and life-enhancing respect. But instead we bicker over what that might mean in practice, argue that obedience is too costly, and even imagine that though the earth is the Lord's we won't actually be held responsible for our failure in the end.

But we've been warned. When Israel was taken into captivity—a time of horrific warfare, suffering, death, and dislocation—part of the reason, God said, was that his people had failed to treat their land—God's creation given into their care to work and to keep—properly as his chosen stewards (2 Chronicles 36:21).

The *Book of Common Prayer* has a lovely collect that touches on this responsibility given to us by our Lord:

O merciful Creator, your hand is open wide to satisfy the needs of every living creature: Make us always thankful for your loving providence; and grant that we, remembering the account that we must one day give, may be faithful stewards of your good gifts; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who with you and the Holy Spirit lives and reigns, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Occasionally I am asked to lead our congregation in the Prayers of the People, a time in our service of worship when a lay reader leads a prayer for the church and for the world. In our previous church it was called a pastoral prayer, but the intent and content remain the same. It is a time when the church corporately prays for the things that concern it. One entry in the Prayers of the People is this: "Give us all a reverence for the earth as your own creation, that we may use its resources rightly in the service of others and to your honor and glory." After which, I say, "Lord, in your mercy" and the people respond, "Hear our prayer." I think it is good that we pray that each week, for the thrust of modern society in the pursuit of productivity is so fast and furious that it is easily forgotten. At least I find that true for myself.

I am often told that environmental concerns are complicated, the politics fraught with hidden costs, and the divisiveness of the issues such that we will never achieve agreement. All that proves is that we live in a very fallen and very fragmented world. It is the place as God's stewards where we are called to live faithfully.

One thing should be clear to every Christian who takes scripture seriously: the issue is not complicated for the Christian. The biblical mandate is that of stewarding God's creation, doing all that is necessary to both work it and keep it. We may not know what that looks like, but that is not surprising since it is called a walk of faith. With prayer and study and experimentation, we can find a way forward, just as we do in other slices of life.

Even those of us who have had the privilege of camping somewhere in view of the Milky Way, there are unnumbered wonders of creation beyond our horizon. As finite creatures we see and experience so little when there is so much more to be seen and experienced. So, I give two cheers for good nature documentaries—and *Our Planet* is among the best.

Over 600 crew and photographers worked over four years in 50 countries to produce the series. The breathtaking creativity of the filming is cutting edge, and repeatedly Margie and I wondered how they managed to capture such images and scenes. "The series focuses," the production notes say, "on the breadth of the diversity of habitats around the world, including the Arctic wilderness, the deep sea, the vast landscapes of Africa, and the diverse jungles of South America." In every episode, some plant or animal we had never heard of is introduced and we were left wondering at the imagination-and humor-of the Creator. We see instances where nature is in trouble and floundering, stressed by human activity or natural upheavals so that the care of a steward is needed. And we see instances where the amazing resilience of nature causes flora and fauna to rebound when given the chance. These moments are like little estimations of what the new earth may be like, and that is a joyous anticipation.

And I confess, we like Sir David Attenborough as narrator. He is grandfatherly and knowledgeable, not too wordy, always slightly amazed by what nature includes and subtly witty in a dry, British way. I don't always agree with the producers of *Our Planet*, but I am always grateful to them for inviting me into such a worldwide exploration of God's creation, our home and the place we are ordained to steward, world without end. ■

*Sources:* Pollution and The Death of Man: The Christian View of Ecology *by Francis A. Schaeffer (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers; 1970) pages 74–75.* 

#### **QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION**

- 1. What was your initial or immediate reaction to the series? Why do you think you reacted that way?
- 2. In what ways were the techniques of filmmaking (casting, direction, lighting, script, music, sets, action, cinematography, editing, etc.) used to get the film's message(s) across, or to make the message plausible or compelling? In what ways were they ineffective or misused?
- 3. What is attractive here? How is it made attractive?
- 4. Why is caring for the earth so divisive among Christians? What does this reveal about the health of the church and its commitment to scripture?
- 5. Which scenes in which episodes were particularly striking or compelling to you? Why?
- 6. When and where have you experienced creation or nature in a way that deeply refreshed your soul and led you to gratitude and worship?
- 7. How should *Our Planet* change our prayer life?



















#### Credits for Our Planet

- Credits for Our Planet Directed by: episodes directed by Adam Chapman, Hugh Pearson, Huw Cordey, Sophie Lanfear, Mandi Stark, and Jeff Wilson Produced by: Alastair Fothergill and Keith Scholey Multiple cinematographers. Starring: Sir David Attenborough (narrator) United Kingdom; BBC, World Wildlife Fund and Netflix; 2019 Documentary; each episode approximately one hour.

- one hour.