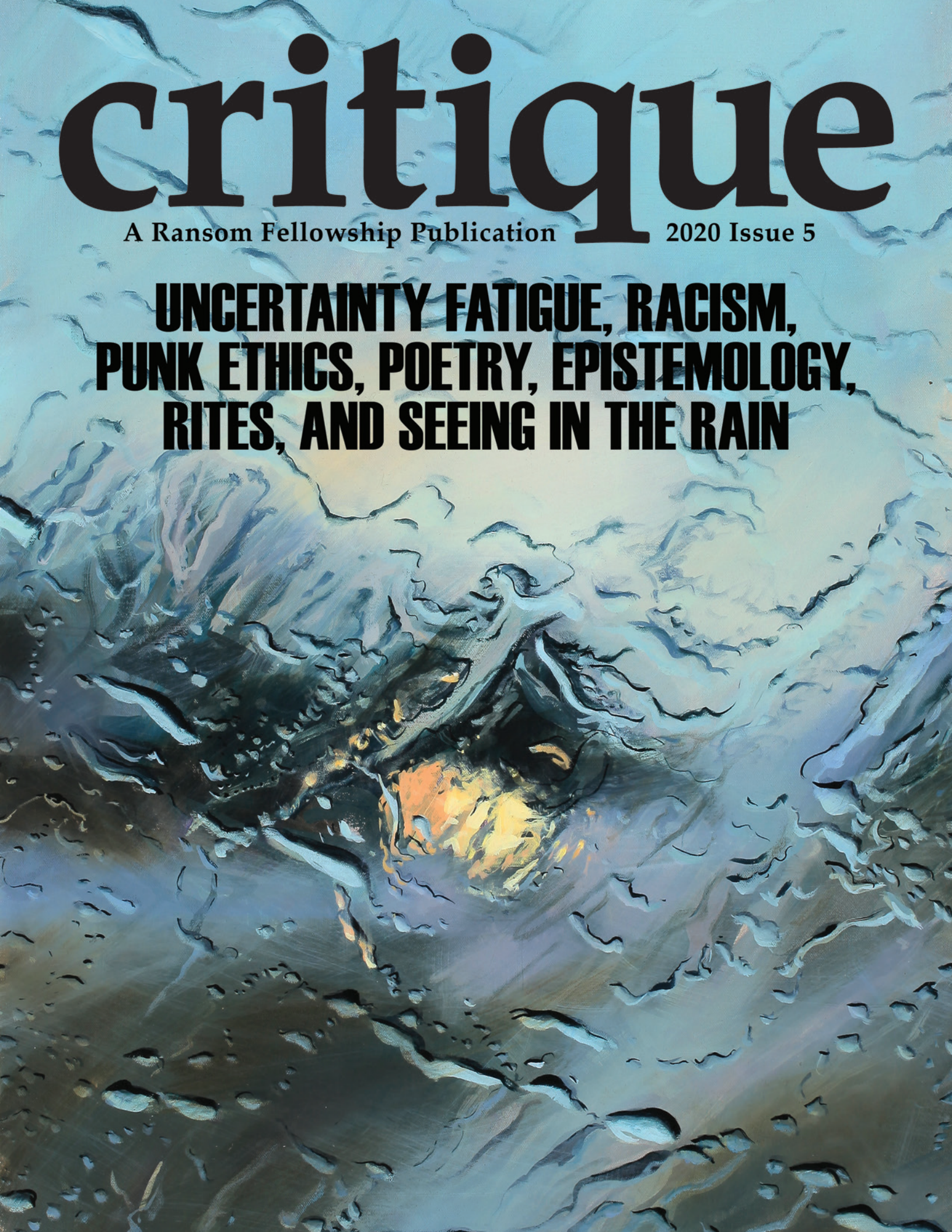


critique

A Ransom Fellowship Publication

2020 Issue 5

**UNCERTAINTY FATIGUE, RACISM,
PUNK ETHICS, POETRY, EPISTEMOLOGY,
RITES, AND SEEING IN THE RAIN**



CRITIQUE



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CONTACT CRITIQUE:

www.RansomFellowship.org
5245 132nd Court, Savage, MN 55378
ransomfellowship@gmail.com

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

Except where noted, all articles are by Denis Haack.

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Everyone on Ransom's mailing list also receives *Letters from The House Between* (formerly *Notes from Toad Hall*), a newsletter by Margie Haack in which she reflects on what it means to be faithful in the ordinary and routine of daily life and gives news about Ransom's ministry.

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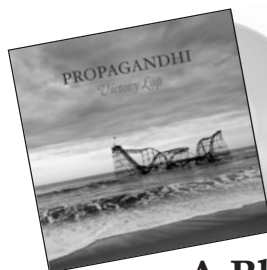
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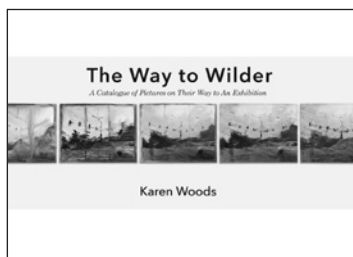


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PAPER AND CANVAS

Seeing in the Rain

words of appreciation for the work of Idaho artist Karen Woods and her book, *The Way to Wilder*



Uncertainty Fatigue



A friend recently mentioned that he has been feeling fatigued. He thought his body was signaling something his mind hadn't noticed. Margie and I have noticed the same thing. We are living in a time that is wearisome to our souls.

That's counterintuitive because the pandemic has slowed most of us down, restricting choices and limiting busyness. Instead of slogging through grocery store aisles, we order and pay online, pick it up, or have it delivered, contact free. Rather than attending meetings across town, dealing with traffic and parking, we sit in our living rooms, click, and Zoom. Even Sundays have changed for believers: no need to get dressed and corral the kids; now we can sit in our bathrobes and worship virtually or watch it later.

On the other hand, change, even good change, is stressful. All of us have had our ordinary made abnormal, our familiar unfamiliar, routines disrupted, dreams and plans interrupted, and relationships made difficult. And not all the change we've endured with the pandemic and civil unrest has been good. Many have experienced financial loss. Some of us have lost friends or loved ones to COVID-19. Not being able to visit them in hospital or to be present with the family at their memorials is a bitter thing. And we all feel a

loss of control. I'm the sort of person that begins each day by reviewing my calendar. I like feeling that I know what's coming, have planned for it, and am in control. I'm definitely not in control.

Another irritating stress is friends not following the medical protocols recommended by epidemiologists. Acting normal during a pandemic is not an act of love.

Add it all together and it is wearisome. Occasionally I've needed to vent. It may not be admirable, but it does relieve stress. Not enough to erase my weariness of soul, but still it's something. The fatigue remains.

It would be interesting to hear what people are doing as a result of the fatigue that flows from the uncertainty of life during this time. Even a nap can help. Or a weekend away if we can manage it. Some uninterrupted solitude with scripture and prayer. Gardening.

If we think of weariness as a debit, such efforts at rest can bring our negative balance closer to zero. A necessary move but insufficient. We need a positive balance to function in joy and to reside in hope.

It is beauty that refreshes the soul. Just as all truth is God's truth, so all beauty is an expression of God's glory. "For as God is infinitely the greatest Being," Jonathan Edwards said in *The Nature of True Virtue*, "so he is allowed to be infinitely the most beautiful and excellent: and all the beauty to be found throughout the whole creation, is but the reflection of the diffused beams of that Being who hath an infinite fullness of brightness and glory; God... is the foundation and fountain of all being and beauty." It's lovely to learn about the Milky Way but being entranced at the grandeur of the night sky makes my

heart burst with wonder and delight.

Rest moves the balance in our feeble, weary account from debit to zero, and beauty—in art and nature—the outpouring of God's glory can flood us, flowing out in hope and joy.

Do you remember the story of Job? A man weary unto death, his life interrupted, his family suffering, his resources shattered, his world upended. There have been 37 long, dense chapters of inquiry and philosophy, theology, and reasoning. All important, and in the centuries since, extraordinary thinkers and ordinary mortals have lingered in that conversation in a search for wisdom.

And then in the end is beauty.

God brings Job out of the ash heap and tells him to look around. The sea and the stars, the weather and the wild beasts, the trees and rivers—a creation that stuns with beauty and incredible order, and still fits who we are in space and time.

Beauty is a divine resourcefulness that disperses itself into human creativity and longing. Art is born and, in painting and poem, limerick and sculpture, drawing and song, creatures made in God's image share in glory unspeakable and eternal.

Make time for beauty in art and nature. Glory is the only cure for uncertainty fatigue. ■

DIALOGUE



To the editor:

Dear Denis,

Thank you!

Love reading your publications; they always make us think.

Blessings,

Annie Ludlow

Bainbridge Island, Washington

To the editor:

Hi Denis and Margie,

Sarah and I were very encouraged in reading the *Critique* [2019:6] article, "The Embarrassing Church." Encouraged that we are not the only Christians saddened by what we see. And also, in reading the compilations of stories told by young Christians walking away, we are encouraged that we have lived and worshipped and been taught wisdom in circles of loving and thoughtful Christians. Thank you both for being a sort of mentor to me for almost two decades—mostly through your writings, but also in the way you've listened to my questions and treated me with respect.

I shared the article with our weekly community group from our church. We had some great discussion. One newer Christian was surprised to learn that each of us loosely identified as evangelical. Long before becoming a Christian he had held antagonistic thoughts toward that term, and still

did—he did not realize that was the pond he now swam in! I am relieved that our local church doesn't fit neatly into any cultural category.

In Him,

Bradley Johannsen

Minneapolis, Minnesota

To the editor:

My wife was so taken with the article, "How to be a Better Lover: Attention in a Distracted World" [*Critique* 2020:1], that she has been sharing and talking with many of our friends.

Danny Bullington

Knoxville, Tennessee

To the editor:

Denis and Margie,

Over the years my wife and I have been blessed by the teaching, encouragement, exhortation and at times discipline through *Critique* and *Letters from the House Between* (and previous names). But my heart has never been touched as it was when I saw the picture of Denis and Jerram Barrs on page 4 of the current issue [*Letters* #1-2020]. We can talk about love, community, and authenticity until we are blue in the face and never reach the reality of them more than this picture demonstrates. What a

wonder deep Christian friendship is, what a marvel that God can so move a heart to love that nothing else matters, especially what anyone else might think. Oh that God's people might drink deeply from this well.

Peace in Christ,

Mike Fendrich

Mt. Vernon, Indiana

To the editor:

Dear Margie and Denis,

For some reason you both came to mind this afternoon as I was culling through some files and discovered this poem I wrote in 2012. And the thought came to share it with you...so here it is:

*I snapped impatiens' petal pink
the shimmery silken
hexagonal fan
yet captured not the gloss nor link
to fair Creator's glistening pan.
My eye discerns—but camera not—
this matchless, tender, day's
small jewel.*

*But here I try to save its glow
with lines I write with Pentel's tool.
The LORD alone makes bright
and fair
while I can only 'click' and stare.
Glory, His, makes praise arise,
fills my soul with Joy's surprise.*

I wrote this some years ago while meditating on my patio in St. Louis (now live in Tulsa, Oklahoma) trying to capture the beauty of this particular flower with my small digital camera. I was marveling in the iridescent property of its bloom that only God could give and longing for His same beloved touch in my soul—in other's souls, that we might display His glory more rightly, brilliantly, intently—and others be drawn to Him. Unfortunately, the camera could not quite capture the quality of the flower's beauty quite like my eye perceived, which surprised me. It seemed to me that in similar ways God's doings are viewable and yet not captured or retained quite as we would like. All the more reason to watch Him and remember...

I have to tell you how delighted I was to read the review of *A Hidden Life* [*Critique* 2020:2]. I loved that movie and bought it so I could see it whenever I liked and share with others when possible. What a masterpiece of beauty that fosters pondering and

worship. There were times within the viewing that I completely wept, trembling with thanksgiving for what I was seeing and hearing on the screen—prayers, questions—all so intimate, real, important, tragic, glorious. Thank you for putting a spotlight on this film so many others may view its glory and consider its message.

Joy to you both,
Susan DeAnn Harris
Tulsa, Oklahoma

To the editor:
Hi Denis,

A word of thanks for your writing “No More of This” [*Critique* 2020:4]. Nan and I have alternated between tears and anger many times over the last weeks since George Floyd’s murder. We have tried to let our sorrow move us to serve. Today, as we drove through our neighborhood we were taken aback by the level of destruction, the razor wire and fencing around the local police precinct, the burned out Salvation Army store, so many boarded up businesses yet. This on top of the mayhem surrounding COVID-19. We were on our way to the KMart parking lot at Lake and Nicollet. There we helped set up food for the 500–600 people they were expecting today. The Twin Cities is expecting unprecedented food insecurity for quite some time. So, we can help in little ways in Jesus’ name. On the way home we stopped by the George Floyd memorial just five minutes from our condo. So, life goes on and as you so well said at the end, we try to turn this into something meaningful, something practical, something good, something honorable to God and this city that we love.

Hello to Margie. Take care.
Dennis Nordstrum
Minneapolis, Minnesota

To the editor:
Denis and Margie,

Thank you for your words that so often resonate with me. I found myself thinking, “Yes,” as I read Denis’ words about faith’s fragility [*Critique* 2020:2]—because I finally had a description for what I have felt so many times in recent years. And I felt encouraged to stay the course and to remember what I have been given in Christ’s death and resurrection.

Kelly Makeever
Fishers, Indiana

To the editor:
Denis,

I was edified by your most recent issue of *Critique* 2020:4 (“Black Lives Matter”). Thank you for publishing substantive, and thoughtful, reflections on a myriad of real life content.

I was wondering if you had ever heard of Jason Petty, propaganda? (On YouTube search for Jason Petty Coffee, and listen to “If Coffee Were a Man.”)

Grace and Peace,
Tyler Dirks
Charlotte, North Carolina

To the editor:
Greetings, Denis and Margie!

I just finished reading *Critique* 2020:3, and I found the title article, “Finding Hope in a Pandemic” particularly profound. I have a student in my advisory group (high school) who is really into science, and loves Dawkins, and I purchased a couple of books by Greene, which I plan to give him, along with a couple of books by Robert Jastrow (are you familiar with his work? He comes to essentially the same conclusion as you do on finding meaning in the universe).

Thank you for continuing to write and share your work with us.

God bless,
P. J. Wiggin
Stillwater, Minnesota

To the editor:
Hello Denis,

The Dialogue about the “embarrassing” church (*Critique* 2020:3) disturbs me greatly.

I do not like President Trump’s style or agree with all that he says and does, but, given the gravity of the issues at stake I judge him to be better than the alternative and so support him. You may not agree with this line of reasoning, but why does your Dialogue jeer at fellow Christians who hold it? “Trump supporting and immigrant hating...” People “to be ashamed of.” Why are you jeering at Franklin Graham and Jerry Falwell, brothers in Christ whom I believe to be sincere?

Implicit in the Dialogue is that Gospel embedded in social work is worthy, and Gospel spoken is despised. Why? Why can’t we rejoice in both? Why isn’t it great that some ministries are helping the poor and others are street witnessing and preaching evangelistically (even to the

Jew first!)—as the apostles did.

“When churches use the term ‘outreach,’ it is code for the acknowledgement that they are not actually ‘in there.’” True. I guess that is what Jesus was coding when He said “Go.”

“Embarrassing”—before whom?

How can you use this word as a legitimate complaint when there is only One whom we need to please? “A mindset too embarrassing to endure”—what relevance does this sentiment have to the way of the Cross? You will say that it is only fellow Christians you are ashamed of, not Christ, and so you shame them. But your argument of why and how we must change our message and run after those leaving the Church strikes me as essentially man-pleasing.

“Post-evangelicals have been driven to the margins by some aspect of evangelical church culture with which they cannot honestly identify. This is the case for an increasing number of young believers and more cosmopolitan educated urban believers.” This sounds very elitist.

“A post-evangelical is committed to thinking and living out of the historic orthodox tradition of faith.” If you believe yourselves to be evolving or progressing to a more advanced Christianity, please clarify how you still belong to the historic orthodox tradition of faith. If instead you are critiquing not the baby but the dirty bathwater, please refrain from slinging mud.

Sincerely,
Linda Hammer
Minneapolis, Minnesota ■

Thinking Christianly Together

It's been fascinating, enlightening, and at the same time, discouraging to read various responses to my essay on racism and justice, "No More of This" [Critique 2020:4].

I expected some people would disagree with what I wrote, of course. We are a highly fragmented and polarized people, both within and without the church, and highly politicized as well. It's fertile ground for disagreement.

Francis Schaeffer said he thought it best to not respond to criticism. Henri Nouwen expressed the same thing in a letter to Fred Rogers after a critical article was published about Mr. Roger's work in children's television. Schaeffer preferred to give honest answers to honest questions while listening carefully to criticism to learn from it, but without responding. Minds tend to be made up.

In most instances I am uncertain I could say anything that would help. One critic, for example, acknowledged that Floyd's death "was wrong, wrong, wrong." He then went on to say, "George Floyd did more to harm the Black Community than I ever have. To be honest, I have nothing to confess along those lines, but I have plenty of other things I confess all too often with a cry of despair. George was a career criminal (multiple felons) who harassed and oppressed blacks. He robbed a black pregnant woman with a gun held to her stomach. He threatened to kill the unborn baby with the gun, if that isn't obvious. He had a scholarship to a college and quit before graduating. Although he didn't deserve to die, he is not the angel that people say he was and he had opportunity to do something productive." Would it help for me to say that I didn't speak of

his character or background because I find them irrelevant in a discussion of racism in American society? I believe, to use Bryan Stevenson's words, "We are all more than the worst things we've ever done."

Another criticism was that I shouldn't "judge cops." This one surprised me. Would it help if I reviewed what I actually wrote? I criticized the killing of George Floyd. I commended the police for quickly rescuing the semi-truck driver from the protesters after he had driven into their midst on the highway. I saluted officers who put themselves in harms way for the common good. I told of a personal experience with neighborhood policing, and how it both restrained crime and built trust. And I criticized one specific tactic used while arresting two nonviolent protesters on I-35 as they quietly and without resistance submitted to arrest, namely spraying chemical irritant in their faces at point blank range. Would it help to say I do not accept the charge that this is an illegitimate judgment of police?

In reading the responses of my critics, however, two things came up that I do want to address. They get at the heart of what we mean by being discerning and faithful as Christians.

Shocked when I received the latest issue of Critique—I saw the cover and lost my breath. I did read your article and was in agreement with most of it, but I sensed a lot of anger not well thought out. If you think BLACK LIVES MATTER is an acceptable solution you have not done your homework and I can no longer support you and your ministry.

Please take me off your mailing list.

Several others also reacted strongly against the cover image, an artistic rendering of hands holding a cardboard sign with the words BLACK LIVES MATTER. Assuming it meant support for the organization, Black Lives Matter (blacklivesmatter.com), they also ended our conversation.

I can't say this to them, obviously, but it would be helpful to reflect on this reaction. It represents, I suggest, a failure to embrace a biblical approach to creatively engage our world in terms our non-Christian neighbors are able to understand and appreciate. Let me explain.

Living in a pluralistic society means we are surrounded by neighbors, colleagues, and friends who do not share our deepest convictions and values. This is similar to Paul's situation when he visited the city of Athens. As Luke records the visit in Acts 17, we watch the apostle as he first establishes common ground with his pagan audience and then moves the conversation to challenge them to consider the claims of Christ. In other words, he first found ways of agreeing with them before disagreeing. He intentionally used their terms and means of expression, and their categories of thought so that they could appreciate and comprehend what he stood for. In this way he translated the truth into terms accessible to their non-Christian worldview.

Notice how St. Paul accomplished this. He found common ground with them in two ways. First, he identified their "unknown god" as the true God (17:23) he was wishing to speak to them about. And second, he applied the words of one of their poets to the God and Father of Jesus Christ knowing full

About Racism

well the poet was referring explicitly to Zeus (17:28). In other words, he intentionally entered their world, adopted their terminology, found common ground, and then was in a position to be able to help them comprehend the radical claims of Christ as opposed to their idolatrous myths and practices. And notice the outcome: some scoffed, Luke tells us, some believed, and some wanted the conversation to continue (17:32–34).

We must learn from and follow St. Paul's pattern. We must adopt terms that make sense to our non-Christian neighbors and establish agreement before identifying areas of disagreement. Christians today are often seen as negative, disapproving, and judgmental, quick to disagree. But disagreeing before finding common ground merely makes us seem disagreeable and closes off conversation. Culture warriors insist on choosing the terms of the discussion, refusing to stand for anything good with anyone who believes anything with which they disagree. The culture war mentality is *disagree and dismiss*. The winsome approach St. Paul demonstrated was, in contrast, *agree, engage, and challenge*.

Schaeffer taught that when Christians take a stand for truth or justice in a fallen and pluralistic world, we will be joined by *allies* and *co-belligerents*. Allies are those with whom we agree not only on the specific issue at hand, but all the way down to foundational beliefs and values. Co-belligerents, on the other hand are those with whom we gladly stand together on this specific issue, realizing that on others we will disagree, perhaps strongly.

Interestingly, it is only White evangelical friends who assume I am supporting the organization when I

say or display the term, Black Lives Matter. Everyone else assumes it means I support justice, equality for all, and an end to racism—and our conversation continues. And when the discussion touches on the issue of supporting organizations, I point out that we support the Equal Justice Initiative, have done so for several years, and am glad to explain why.

I have read your Critique on "Black Lives Matter" many times and with each reading I get more depressed and discouraged, because it does not present anything new or different than I have read in any "progressive" news outlet. All your views are those of the woke white with all insight promulgated by Black Lives Matter as a political party (which it is).

This too is worth some reflection. I suggest it represents a failure to understand a biblical perspective on being politically faithful in a society dominated and polarized by competing political ideologies. Again, let me explain.

Timothy Keller answered a question in a column in *The New York Times* (9/19/18) that served as the title for the piece. "How Do Christians Fit into the Two-Party System?" His answer was succinct and probably quite surprising to many evangelicals today. "They don't," he said. "The historical Christian positions on social issues don't match up with contemporary political alignments." He is correct. We represent a Third Way, characterized by sacrificial love, love of God and neighbor.

Os Guinness put it this way in *The Dust of Death* (p. 369):

How often in the contemporary discussion a sensitive modern person knows

that they cannot accept either of the polarized alternatives offered to them! Left versus right, radical versus establishment, Marxist versus Anarchist, idealist versus pragmatist, practical revolution versus mystical revolution of consciousness, optimism with no basis versus realism verging on despair, activism versus escapism—all these are polarizations born of the loss of center, of the death of absolutes. In Christianity, however, there can be a Third Way, a true middle ground which has a basis, is never compromise and is far from silent.

A s a result of this conviction that Christianity represents a Third Way, great streams of social thought flourished over the centuries. In one, Roman Catholic social thinking followed a tradition that flowed from scripture and the apostles through St. Augustine and Thomas Aquinas to modern interpreters such as Pope John Paul and Richard John Neuhaus. In a second, Reformed political philosophy followed a tradition that went from scripture and the apostles, through St. Augustine to the Protestant reformers, especially John Calvin, to modern interpreters such as Abraham Kuyper, Herman Dooyeweerd, and James Skillen. On the level of practical policy recommendations, these two lines of social and political philosophy converge more often than not, though they arrive at their conclusions in slightly different ways. I have also benefited from Anabaptist thinking that flows from Menno Simmons in the 16th century to modern interpreters such as Ronald Sider and Wendell Berry. More to my point here, however, is that this rich heritage of distinctly Christian ethical reasoning and political philosophy

is largely unknown today in evangelical circles. As a result, evangelicals find a sense of political direction by aligning themselves with modern political ideologies, whether Left or Right.

This is not merely unnecessary; it is spiritually dangerous. As David Koyzis shows in *Political Visions and Illusions: A Survey and Christian Critique of Contemporary Ideologies*, from a biblical perspective, the ideologies of Right and Left are idolatries. And for an example of how Reformed social thinking can provide a way to think clearly about an important issue in America today, read *Christian Hospitality and Muslim Immigration in an Age of Fear* by Matthew Kaemingk. He carefully demonstrates how to reflect on issues such as this, roots his reasoning in scripture and Reformed tradition, and shows how we can hold coherent Christian convictions about immigration based on love.

As you might guess, one practical result of this Third Way perspective on politics is that, depending on the issue and where the dominant political ideologies and parties are at any given moment, we will find ourselves reaching conclusions that may agree, at least partially, with the agendas of either the Right or the Left. So, in writing about the value and dignity of the lives of the unborn, some or many of my conclusions might be aligned with a Conservative political agenda. And in contrast, in writing “No More of This” about standing against racism and for equality for all, some of my conclusions end up more aligned with a Progressive political agenda. The first does not place me on the Right any more than the second places me on the Left. Nor does this practical reality delegitimize my position.

Racism and inequality have plagued America for 400 years. It pollutes America’s story and reputation, infecting both the church and the body politic with wickedness.

Tim Keller, in “The Sin of Racism—Life in the Gospel” (6/29/2020), lists the reasons racism is a sin. He first speaks of racism as breaking of the commandment of love and argues it is an assault on the image of God in us. Then Keller raises an idea seldom heard today. It provides a vision of hope that we need in these days of political uncertainty, nefarious culture warring, resistance to repentance, and fear of change.

The new creation is a renewed material world, wiped clean of all death, suffering and tears, war and injustice, sin and shame (Isaiah 25:7–8; 65:17–25). It will be established at the end of time, but part of the good news is that this is brought forward partially into the present. Herman Ridderbos writes that the new creation in Galatians 6:15 is: “the new reality of the kingdom of God. Through Christ this new thing is not merely future-eschatological (Revelation 21:1–5, 3:12 and Mark 14:25) but is already present, is already in man. This new creation is first of all a gift, but it brings its task with it.”

Many Christians think that Jesus saved us merely through the cross, where he paid the penalty of our sin, and the resurrection was just a grand miracle by which God proved that Jesus was the Son of God. It was that—but far more (Romans 4:25). This inadequate view conceives of the gift of salvation in exclusively individualistic terms—as a new personal relationship with God and little else. But Jesus rose as the “first fruits” (1 Corinthians 15:20–23) of the

future resurrection from the dead, and as such he brings us the Holy Spirit which is the “down payment” or “first installment” of the future renewed world and universe (1 Corinthians 1:22; 5:5; Ephesians 1:14–16).

*Through Christ’s resurrection we are united spiritually and vitally not only to him and to all others who believe, but to that future world cleansed of all suffering, tears, injustice, evil, and sin. The same power that will purify the universe at the end of time is what regenerates and comes into our lives now through the new birth (cf. word *palengensia*—in both Matthew 19:28 and Titus 3:5). The new heavens and new earth will not only contain saved individuals—it will have a new humanity without violence and conflict, war and injustice. The power of that new creation is partially but actually with us now. That is why Ridderbos can say this gift “brings its task with it.” We are to behave not according to the old age of sin and darkness, but to live in accordance with the world of light which is to come (Romans 13:11–14).*

One of the marks of that new future world will be the end of all racial, ethnic, and national strife, alienation, and violence. God will say: “Blessed be Egypt my people, Assyria my handiwork, and Israel my inheritance” (Isaiah 19:25)—a vivid expression of racial equality before the Lord in the new heavens and new earth. When Isaiah describes that new creation (Isaiah 65:25), he speaks of the nations and kings of the earth uniting before God (Isaiah 60:1–7). Revelation echoes this when it foresees the kings of all the nations bringing their glory into the City of God (Revelation 21:4) and the people of God consisting of “every tongue, tribe, people and nation” (Revelation 7:9).

These remarkable visions of the final new creation show that our distinct 'peoplehoods' and nationalities do mean something. They are so important that they will be carried over, not eradicated, into the new creation. They will be purified of all the sinful distortions, just as our bodies with their distinctions will be brought in and purified of all weakness and decay. It is this future—this new creation—that Christians must bear witness to and practice now, to the greatest degree that we can. The Bible shows us that one of the important features of that new creation is to practice equality of the races and the healing of their relationships, because "in Christ...there is neither Jew nor Gentile" (Galatians 3:26–28).

Keller is not merely saying that someday, when Christ returns as King to consummate his kingdom, all will be better. He is insisting on something far more radical. He is saying that the resurrection means that the kingdom has arrived. The future is yet future, but it is also now. It is incomplete now, but it is not absent, and it is the Christian's great purpose to witness to Christ's kingdom not just as something that is coming but as something that has begun. As we live in the reality of Christ's resurrection, we demonstrate kingdom values in our lives. This is what being faithful in the ordinary means. So, as Christians we live in a multi-layered sense of reality. We speak of the

promise of a coming new creation, and we live in it now as fully as we can, so that the hope of the future is made real by how we live. And we live by love.

May we be so gripped by the hope granted to us in the resurrection of Christ that this vision of a new creation be made real in our hearts and lives now by God's grace.

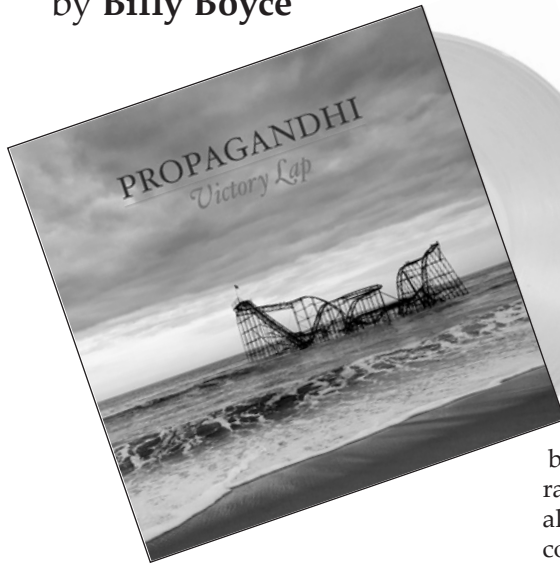
*Righteous and gracious Father,
Build your kingdom here
Let the darkness fear
Show your mighty hand
Heal our streets and land
Set your church on fire
Win creation back
Change the atmosphere
Build your kingdom here we pray.
Amen. (Rend Collective) ■*



STOP RACISM

A Blast of Ethics to the Face: The “Secular Lament” of Propagandhi

by Billy Boyce



Consider the world of Ecclesiastes: it is a place of destruction, malaise, repetition, and despair “under the sun,” where even the beauty you see is stained with the bittersweet reality that the clock is ticking slowly toward death. It’s a challenging vision, even for Christians. Now imagine this same world, with one difference: there is no divine presence to offer respite from the sun’s withering gaze. What emotions would come to the surface in such a world? Anger and frustration, without question. What type of music would capture the essence of despair? Punk rock, most likely.

Enter Propagandhi, one of Canada’s premier punk bands. For over 25 years, Propagandhi has paired blazing punk riffs with searing social commentary, and their musical caliber and moral voice have only ripened with age. Their seventh album, 2017’s *Victory Lap*, perfectly demonstrates their musical chops and ethical vision, making it an important piece for Christians to digest. If we take the doctrine of common grace to be those places where the walls are

thin between the world and God’s redemptive activity, *Victory Lap* serves to shake Christians out of some of our cultural captivity and offers a possible bridge for socially-conscious punk rockers to eventually hear the message of Christ.

Victory Lap engages a wide range of issues, such as police violence, the #MeToo movement, sexism, and animal rights. Less of a sniper rifle and more of a shotgun blast, Propagandhi targets a whole range of 21st century problems. If the album has an overarching theme, its cover art is suggestive; with a roller coaster sinking into the ocean, “victory lap” becomes the ironic descriptor of a culture in its last throes, partying while the tide rises.

From the opening lines, visions of death loom large, as does the band’s rage:

*When the flames engulfed
the home of the brave
the stampede toward the border was
in vain.*

*Faces palmed, faces pale
as the wall they said would make them
great could not be scaled.*

*When the free-market
fundamentalist steps on a roadside bomb
outside Kandahar
bleeding to death,
I swear to Ayn Rand
I’ll ask if he needs an invisible hand.
 (“Victory Lap”)*

There is a fatalistic sense of doom here; despair is inevitable, from the futility of People of Color to escape the violence of White supremacy, *Comply? Resist? / No difference. / Resist? Comply? / You die.* (“Comply/Resist”), to the inability

of activists to make any lasting change in society, *Damned if we don’t. Damned if we do. / I’d just shut my mouth if I were you.* (“Letters to a Young Anus”), to the inability of anyone to escape their eventual death, *Our lives lead to nowhere, we’re counting time. / Then grasping for each other, as we’re crushed beneath the tide.* (“Nigredo”). *You’re nothing but the bottom of some far future latrine / my little libertine. / That’s your universe in a nutshell.* (“Call before You Dig”).

The inevitability of suffering is amplified by a sense of ironic backfiring: the things meant to theoretically help society end up destroying society. America’s hoped-for wall on the southern border becomes its cage of death (“Victory Lap”). Victorious soldiers who fought for freedom are ensnared by their involvement in war (“Failed Imagineer”). The “enrichment programs implemented to extend our captive lifespans” turn out to be nothing more than “longer chains” (“Adventures in Zoochosis”). Our best efforts backfire in our faces; fate mocks us, then dishes up more suffering.

Propagandhi does recognize a sense of beauty in the world, but these glimpses of beauty only make the tragedy of human life more painful. *The colossal waste of energy / talent upon the talented / freedom upon the free. / This whole damn beautiful life wasted on you and me.* (“Victory Lap”).

As much as beauty tragically emphasizes our human misery, it does serve a more hopeful purpose: to undermine the status quo. In the animal-rights song “Lower Order (A Good Laugh),” Chris Hannah, the lead singer and songwriter, recounts the aftermath of his first hunting trip as a young boy: *They laughed as I cried / and stroked his blood-soaked iridescent quills. A trip*

Propagandhi's Victory Lap

intended to be a rite of passage becomes the inception of a life-long commitment to animal rights; beauty undermined the status quo. Likewise, on "Cop Just Out of Frame":

*They say that Quang Duc's heart
survived the flames unscarred.
A righteous calling card left upon the
palace gates
for the invertebrates, their grip on power
pried apart
by just one frail human being.
No weapon, no war machine.*

Another unexpected reversal, the beauty of the self-sacrificial act upending corruption. Propagandhi's music might implicitly bear the hope of beauty to bring change; musically, the album vacillates between the fast and loud and melodic and lovely. Both sonically and lyrically, beauty and brokenness vie for supremacy on this album.

Adding to human devastation is Hannah's observation about humanity: no one is innocent, including him. As much as he has ranted about systemic evils, he is often a complicit bystander, and even participant. In "Cop Just Out of Frame," Hannah risks contemplating a dramatic act of self-sacrifice in the style of Vietnam's Quang Duc, the Buddhist monk who famously committed suicide as a political protest in 1963: *If I thought it would help I would immolate myself / in full view of the camera crews.* He initially dismisses this idea, because like so many efforts, it too might backfire: *But as we all know the only tale that would be told / would be that it was me, not them, who was insane.* Yet instead of blaming society for their idiocy, he takes a surprising turn of introspection:

*But who the fuck do I think I am fooling?
As if I know the first thing of sacrifice*

*or selflessness.
I'm the cop just out of frame, who at the
first sight of the flames,
throws himself prostrate to the ground
in reverence.*

Some accounts of Quang Duc's self-immolation include stunned passersby, even some police, throwing themselves to the ground in awed recognition of this sacrificial act. Such police were agents of the regime that Quang Duc protested, placed there to maintain an oppressive status quo. Thus, Hannah sees himself as part of the corruption, despite his attempts to live differently. This adds a note of humility to Hannah's own words from the opening song, "Victory Lap": *You say #notallcops. / You say #notallmen. / Yeah you insist #itonly99%.* Here, Hannah criticizes those who lay the blame for police brutality on only the "bad apples," refusing to see systemic injustices. Yet, by the album's third song, Hannah moves to examine himself; he is "the cop just out of frame," unable to escape judgement with epithets of "not all cops." All efforts of self-justification fail.

This personal corruption haunts Hannah's moral vision. Like the psalmist, Hannah understands that "there is none who does good, not even one" (Psalm 14:3), and if so, who is wise enough to render judgment? He explores this tension even more personally on the bonus track "Laughing Stock." Upon seeing Clayton Matchee, the torturer of Shidane Arone, now living with severe brain damage as a result of a failed suicide attempt, Hannah's sense of vengeance withered. Was this man's brain-damaged state true justice? It's hard to say. The experience leaves Hannah chastened: *The fool seeks retribution, the fool leaves seeking*

penitence. Forgive me, I know not what I do. If we all get what we deserve, and we are all implicated, what hope is there?

In the end, *Victory Lap* offers little hope of salvation. The album starts by yawning at the day of salvation, *The day the rapture came, / a forgettable event. / The clouds, they opened up and not a single person went.* ("Victory Lap") Is this because God does not actually exist, or because there are no righteous people to be taken up? Perhaps both. It ends by contemplating the horrors of reincarnation:

*I think my only fear of death is that it
may not be the end.
That we may be eternal beings and must
do all of this again.
Oh please lord let no such thing be true.
("Adventures in Zoochosis.")*

Corruption reigns and death comes to everyone, and to spite it all, the lingering sense of beauty comes partnered with loss. This final song begins with some of the most melodic and lovely guitar riffs on the album, coupled with the sound of children laughing. Overlaying these joyful sounds are the misogynistic words of now-President Donald Trump, describing exactly what you can do to women "when you're a star." This is the emotional dissonance of modern life: where there is beauty, there is also nauseating rot. The title of this final song heightens to the despair—Zoochosis—the tendency of animals in captivity to act with certain features of insanity, pacing back and forth, gnawing at their bars. When trapped in a futile world that constantly mocks you with beauty, with your failures the soul longs for freedom, but can we do anything more than slobber on the bonds of our captivity?

And what of our kids? The next

generation adds depth to the lament. A parent of two boys, Hannah finally finds his pure motive for self-sacrifice. His last stand will be to shield his children.

*"Dad are we gonna die?" Yes son, both
you and I
...but maybe not today.
Boys, I've bowed to the keepers whip for
so damn long
I think the sad truth is this enclosure is
where your old man belongs.
But you, your hearts are pure,
so when operant conditioners come to
break you in
I'll sink my squandered teeth.
You grab your little brother's hand run
like the wind.
And if I'm not there, don't look back.
Just go. ("Adventures in Zoochosis")*

It's both a heartbreaking and inspiring image, an old man spending the last of his energy fighting to give his boys a few fleeting moments to break out of captivity. It's still not much, as far as salvation goes, but with the tide rising, you take what you can get.

Propagandhi's Secular Lament

Aside from the simple joys of the loud guitars and fast drums, what can a Christian benefit from this bleak vision of late modernity in the West, a rich and oppressive society hurtling toward the downfall caused by its own abuses, without hope of salvation? Along the lines of Karl Barth's "secular parables"—stories from outside of Christianity that correspond to the Bible but need completion by the Bible—these songs are "secular laments," true to the realities of fallen humanity, while crying out for a true response from God. In a Christian community with an anemic practice of lament and

plastered-on praise, *Victory Lap* reminds us of heartbreak, exhaustion, and anger in the face of death, injustice, and failure. The writer of Ecclesiastes would surely agree.

The album also sheds light on the broader scope of our salvation. A side effect of evangelicalism's conversionist emphasis is an at-times myopic focus on the individual's eternal destiny, which then makes most other issues in life irrelevant. Worse still, when these other issues become irrelevant, the Christian imagination becomes formed by pragmatic forces like politics and money, not Scripture. When listening to *Victory Lap*, I am reminded that Christian salvation is meant to address issues like these, not offer an escape from them.

Consider Propagandhi's critique of animal abuse in "Lower Order (A Good Laugh)."

His story begins on the earlier-mentioned hunting trip, meant to initiate him into manhood. He then recounts another bloody image

*Don't recall just how I got there.
To the hatchery I mean.
Stumbled through the bush on a field trip
and there it stood in front of me.
I stooped down upon the concrete pad
to verify what I was seeing.
The aftermath of stomping boots
upon hundreds of tiny, helpless beings.*

Hannah sees the inherent dignity of these animals and rightly laments their mistreatment, but this is more than simple animal abuse. For him, animal cruelty is linked to toxic masculinity. There is a relationship between the men laughing at the death of a beautiful bird, the cruelty at the hatchery, and Trump's reprehensible words about women. Going deeper, the same power-hungry swagger that insists on its own way,

that is bad for animals and for women, is ultimately bad for society. This sentiment should receive resounding agreement from Christians, yet too often is dismissed as nothing more than liberal politics. Is it not true that sometimes "protecting our women" is a ploy to retain our power? In linking animal abuse to toxic masculinity, Propagandhi is on to something that many Christians in America struggle to see clearly. Their vantage point is strikingly biblical: God does not appreciate men who think they can do whatever they want.

It is this way throughout *Victory Lap*. The album is filled with topics that God cares about, and the Christian can and should confidently declare that God is concerned about rape, about indigenous peoples' rights, about police brutality, about death, about corrupt leadership, and yes, even about chickens, pigs, and cows. Propagandhi's ethics are like a slap to the face, helping the Christian wake up from cultural captivity to political platforms and see the broader scope of God's passion for his world. Christians may sometimes forget that these issues matter to God, but God does not.

At the same time, discerning listeners cannot simply baptize punk ethics as if they are fully Christian. Hannah's higher commitment to animals is wedded to a diminished view of humanity—that humans are also merely animals. While Propagandhi rallies against fascism, historically, the radical left can be just as oppressive. And though death is inevitable, the lack of hopeful eschatology can create a despair that ends in hatred. Though the band personally retains empathy for humankind, in more sinister hands even Propagandhi's ideas backfire to cause untold suffering. In the end, only

a robust Christian worldview can hold together the wonder of human dignity, the tragedy of human suffering, and the responsibility of human action in the world.

What might happen if evangelical Christians embraced this broader emphasis in our religion, without losing our core doctrines of scripture and salvation? Far from losing the gospel, we will actually become more fully biblical. While Propagandhi rightly identifies the decay, the Christian story possesses something that *Victory Lap* does not: hope. This enables us to engage Propagandhi's worldview, accepting the slap to the face as a needed rebuke, while offering a message of hope in response: the promise of salvation. Not merely "die and go to heaven" salvation, but the good news of God's presence in the midst of our misery, and God's ultimate victory over our death and decay in Christ.

When I listen to *Victory Lap*, my prayer is that their "secular lament" might become, in God's hands, a bridge to the gospel. They feel injustice, which God promises to correct. They long for salvation, which Christ purchased. They see beauty, which overturns the status quo and is ultimately laden with the grandeur of God. These longings open a skylight in Propagandhi's "immanent frame," to channel Charles Taylor, revealing God's presence in the darkness. In this way, punk can function as a *praeparatio evangelica*—a preparation for the gospel, where God has imbedded his own passion for justice in order to eventually prepare the way for salvation, where death and decay do not have the first or the final word. ■

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Billy Boyce is a pastor living in Arlington, Virginia, with his wife, Melynda, and their four children. He recently completed his Doctor of Ministry from Trinity School for Ministry, studying the intersection of race, theology, and experience among Black pastors in the Presbyterian Church in America.



POETRY

Outside My Office Window

by Scott Schuleit

Sleek vehicles enclosing
flesh, blood, souls
hurtling over darkening earth,
the bending world.

Road thins into distance,
roars and whines,
beasts circling something
injured, crying.

Smooth, undying glitter of ads
glowing, its song
caging eyes, promises, promises
broken, gone.

Streetlights peering down,
still witnesses
watching, transfixed, unblinking,
silent, considerate.

And the deep longing of things,
stirring of leaves,
eagerness of stars, tremulous,
waiting, waiting. ■

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wife Christina.

Scott Schuleit is the associate pastor at Taft Street Baptist Church. He enjoys preaching, the arts, theology, good conversation, and spending time with his dear



Above the Avenue, 2016, copyright © Karen Woods ■



and can be viewed and purchased at karenwoods.com.

Karen Woods is a full time artist working in Boise, Idaho. She earned a BFA at the California College of the Arts after studying in Florence, Italy. Her work and her book, *The Way to Wilder*, are discussed in this issue of Critique

RESOURCE: *SCRIPTURE'S KNOWING*

A Study in Biblical Epistemology

by Jennifer Asp



Perhaps now more than ever, in a year filled with a pandemic, economic upheaval, racial reckoning, and an upcoming election, the choices we make in daily life are driven by who we believe as much as what we believe. Dru Johnson's *Scripture's Knowing* is helpful in this moment when many people are questioning authorities, sources, and institutions.

Johnson examines biblical texts through a philosophical lens in order to glean a pattern of "knowing" in scripture. He shows how biblical authors portray the process of knowing and broadly defines "knowing" as "skill gained through a guided process in order to see" (p. 5). To know well, we must "trust authorities and embody their directions in order to know" (p. 32). Johnson argues that this biblical process is meant to be applied to all of life from "knowing" in matters of faith to "knowing" in matters of the physical world. The only difference between good

biblical knowing and good scientific knowing "is the way in which trusted authorities gain our trust" (p. 17).

The process of discerning who Christians trust is at the heart of Johnson's book. He identifies a repeated pattern in scripture of the struggle to recognize proper authority, beginning with Adam and Eve in the garden: Who do you trust, your creator or the snake? Johnson works his way through parts of the Bible—Creation, the Exodus, and the Gospel of Mark—and extracts principles on the relationship between knowledge and trust in authority. These themes are helpful as we attempt to navigate through a multiplicity of voices in today's world, as many discount the value of authorities.

Johnson shows there is a choice between good authority vs. bad authority, rather than between good authority vs. non-authority. Stated differently, scripture offers no examples of a "neutral position of independent learning" (p. 104). In deciding who to believe, Johnson shows that every individual submits to some authority. Knowing is a fundamentally relational process. In highlighting the relational dynamic, Johnson leads us in asking, "Who or what do we trust in the process of knowing?"

The biblical pattern of knowing reveals our tendency toward individualistic patterns of knowing—often rooted in a desire to "do our own research" or objectively uncover the truth on our own. But biblical knowing is always meant to be done in the community of the church and actually is in conflict with the idea that Christians should simply figure out knowledge for ourselves. Not only is individualistic knowing problematic, but knowing primarily on a social media platform or within a political party is fundamentally different than

the practice of knowing as the church. *Scripture's Knowing* is valuable in assessing our current struggles in this area in the way it sheds light on both the right and wrong ways of knowing.

Particularly relevant to this moment in history, Johnson asserts that the pattern of knowing in scripture is not about finding a unique fact or piece of data. Rather,

Examining the event without process can create problematic knowledge. Problematic because they have little regard for the human body, community, and process in which they are bound up. For those interested in biblical discourse, the ancient authors of scripture regularly maintain the connection of the embodied person in her community struggling to understand reality over the course of time (4).

Scripture's Knowing can be read in community—discussion questions are provided at the end of each chapter. Johnson shows the scriptural pattern of knowing to be slow and difficult and rarely clear. It is the opposite of a deep dive into the internet. Rather, it is a call to learn together in community and to form better habits of trust and action. ■

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Book recommended: *Scripture's Knowing: A Companion to Biblical Epistemology* by Dru Johnson (Eugene Oregon: Wipf & Stock; 2015) 152 pages.



Jennifer Asp is the Women's Coordinator at Church of the Cross in Hopkins, Minnesota, and is pursuing her Master of Art's of Theological and Biblical studies at Covenant Seminary. She loves serious Bible study, laughing with friends, and cheering on the MN Twins with her husband and two kids.

Briefing on the World of Religious Nones

by David John Seel



To love and respect someone requires understanding their world. This is especially true of those who are spiritually unaffiliated with institutional religion—the religious nones, the spiritual-but-not-religious, the deconstructing, and the ex-evangelical. Berkeley professor Kaya Oakes suggests, “Instead of haranguing and guilt tripping nonbelievers about the loss of their immortal souls, we might treat them with compassion and respect. What if we took the time to actually sit down with them, look them in the eye, and listen? Perhaps we would find that, in their provoking us to examine our own faith, these nonbelievers are actually among our soul’s best companions.”¹ To this end, we have been given a gift in Tara Isabella Burton’s new book, *Strange Rites: New Religions for a Godless World*. This is a book that should be read and absorbed by all who are

seeking to spiritually engage with the coming generations. It has been a useful corrective to my own thinking about missional outreach to millennials. I cannot recommend a book more highly.

Burton is a religious journalist with a doctorate in theology from Oxford University. She is also a New York bohemian and a former neo-pagan witch. Her analysis of the emerging, open, immanent world is not academic but comes from personal experience and loving friendship with her fellow spiritual seekers and sojourners. She would have felt comfortable as a member of the Bloomsbury Set—the group of associated English writers, intellectuals, philosophers, and artists in the first half of the twentieth century. So, her overview of what Charles Taylor calls the “nova effect”—the explosion of different options for belief and meaning in our secular age—has the authenticity and sensibility of a participant observer. Like a good cultural anthropologist, she does not overlay her analysis with judgment or critique, she simply allows these various spiritually longing voices to speak. Nor does she wrap up her analysis with a pretty optimistic bow. She remains solidly within a descriptive social scientific posture.

This fact will be inevitably frustrating to Christian readers of her book, particularly among those who know that she had subsequently come to genuine Christian faith. But her discipline of listening without comment is actually evidence of her respect and compassion for her many friends who remain within the bohemian world of her immediate past. It lends itself to the gravity of her message about the spirituality of this world.

Burton speaks of young people within this space as engaging in a “remixed

spirituality.” The story of the religious sensibilities of a whole generation aren’t rejecting religion, but rather remixing it. She writes, “Today’s Remixed reject authority, institution, creed, and moral universalism. They value intuition, personal feeling, and experience.... They prioritize intuitional spirituality over institutional religion.”² Her “Remixed” are those I previously described as “New Copernicans.” This is a world filled with spiritual longing and eclectic religious pilgrimages. “It is about the Americans who don’t know if this is all there is, or what *all* means, or *there*, or even *is*. It is about our quest for knowing, for belonging, and for meaning: the pilgrimage none of us can get out of.”³ This is not a group or sensibility that the church can meaningfully ignore, as it represents 40 percent of young people today. But more to the point, everyone is today influenced by this remixed sensibility. She concludes, “We may not all be Remixed, but we all live in a Remixed nation.”⁴

Christian colleges may want to attract “convictional Christians,” but they will find both that this a shrinking market and that even “convictional Christians” are going to be influenced by the remixed sensibility. Increasingly, the church is going to have to engage the spiritual-but-not-religious, faithful nones, and religious hybrids. At least half, if not more, of Americans fall into one of these categories.

A central characteristic of this remixed spiritual sensibility is its commitment to intuition. External authority is replaced by personal authenticity. A question that could have easily fallen off the lips of Zarathustra is “When we are all our own high priests, who is willing to kneel?” People make up their own personalized spirituality.

Oakes observes, "Instead of cleaving to one particular way of believing, many younger people engage in a kind of spiritual mix and match, blending many traditions and adhering strictly to none."⁵ The epistemological spiritual trump card here is authenticity, personal feeling, and lived experience. This is a pretty widespread core tenant among remixed spirituality.

In Burton's analysis this is not a uniquely postmodern phenomena, as it has its roots in America's religious past. American religious history shows a pendulum swing from the institutional to the intuitional. Throughout American history we have had two strains of intuitional religion: the pluralistic bohemian and the evangelical. The left had Leary and Ginsberg and the right Billy Graham and Pat Robertson. The individualized, subjective, experiential faith expressions of Christian evangelicalism generally reinforce this intuitional/anti-institutional approach toward religion. But it may be that the "pendulum" has now gotten stuck in the intuitionist mode.

There are cultural and structural factors that explain why today's godless world may be different from the past. There is no social support for institutionalism as a consequence of pluralism, travel, and decline of marriage and children. So there is little to get the pendulum to move in the other direction.

In addition to this, there is widespread acceptance of consumer capitalism with its assumption that I can create reality on my own terms. Burton writes, "Meaning, purpose, community, and ritual can all—separately or together—be purchased on Amazon Prime."⁶

And finally, there is the internet,

which has enabled everyone to find a community with their own personalized tribe. "The internet has made it possible to transcend old identity markers—institutionalized religions, national, ethnic, or parochial identities—in favor of the new."⁷ So the pressure against institutionalized religions is likely to remain a constant for some time. This shift is about climate, not weather.

Burton explores the fan culture, wellness movement, the rise of witches, and the ways all of this shows up sexually. Together they reinforce the themes of self-care, self-empowerment, and embodiment.

She ends by outlining three dominant social imaginaries of the Remixed shift: social justice, techno-utopian, and atavistic masculinity. She frames all as serving in a religious function, and all ultimately reinforcing the self and meaninglessness. We have spiritualized the experience of longing, but not the object of our longing. She concludes, "We do not live in a godless world. Rather, we live in a profoundly anti-institutional one, where the proliferation of internet creative culture and consumer capitalism have rendered us all simultaneously parishioner, high priest, and deity. America is not secular but simply spiritually self-focused."⁸ The result is a paganism of spiritualized narcissism. The open immanent spiritual search turns out not to be a spiritual pilgrimage across a liminal space as much as an inward-directed paralysis of self-divination. Of this, Chesterton warned, "Of all conceivable forms of enlightenment the worst is what the people call the Inner Light. Of all horrible religions, the most horrible is the worship of the god within.... That Jones shall worship the god within him turns out ultimately to mean that Jones

shall worship Jones." Our spiritual answers are not to be found down and in, but up and out. "Christianity came into the world firstly in order to assert with violence that a man had not only to look inwards, but to look outwards, to behold with astonishment and enthusiasm a divine company and a divine captain."⁹ In the end, we need to worship something more than Jones, something more than self.

This book is a snapshot of a much longer movie about its author. It ends just prior to the end of the second act. Act two ends the moment your character suffers the worst loss imaginable. Blake Snyder calls it "the dark night of the soul," but I prefer to just classify it as the "Oh crap" moment. For some it comes on suddenly, for others it is a slower gnawing realization. The second act is super important in a film script and does your story's heavy lifting. It's where you get answers that you pose in act one and get to ask more questions that can pay off in act three. And so, the incompletion of act two in Burton's narrative will leave the reader with a haunted sense of wanting more. Whether this is by design or because of the vicissitudes of life are unclear. It is clear that a sequel to *Strange Rites* is needed.

For Burton found that her longing is a sign, not the destination. She would later point to her "dark night of the soul," "I wanted to outrun the Nothing. There was nothing I would not have sacrificed—friendship, relationships, the blood from the heel of my foot—to get it. I sacrificed all of myself. I emptied myself out. I hit bottom, in a thousand different ways, and got what I wanted, in a thousand more, and somewhere in the middle of my seeking a vague and generic sense of Poetry, I found

a specific one.... The faith I found proclaimed a sanctified world, and a redeemed one—an enchanted world, if you want to call it that—but one where meanings were concrete.”¹⁰ She moved from magic to Magic, from myth to myths that are true, from Joseph Campbell to Jesus Christ, from teenage Wiccan maenad to a broken human being being remade in the image of God. In the bohemian world of Manhattan spiritual seeking, she stands today as a beacon of hope, as a trophy of grace, as a point of light in a sea of meaninglessness. I only mention this because this fact may make more Christian pastors and youth leaders take this book more seriously. We are promised that serious seekers find. She writes, “Nor do I mean that I decided to become a Christian, which would imply more agency on my part than I experienced. I mean only that somewhere, between the running and the raging, the trans-Atlantic crossings and the reconfiguring of names, I had something to hold fast to.”¹¹ There is so much we can learn from Burton. We dare not turn her into a contemporary, postmodern, celebrity Christian. It is unlikely because she is inevitably more progressive politically, feminist, occult sympathizing that most evangelical Christian could tolerate. But she would be a welcome member of Lewis and Tolkien’s conversations over a pint at the Oxford’s pub, The Eagle and Child. Our gift to her would be to buy this book, take it seriously, and learn how to spiritually navigate these alien waters. ■

Endnotes:

1. Kaya Oakes, “The ‘Nones’ Are Alright: What We Can Learn from a Generation of Seekers,” *America: The Jesuit Review*, June 17, 2013.
2. Tara Isabella Burton. *Strange Rites: New Religions for a Godless World* (Public Affairs, 2020), p. 10.
3. *Ibid.* 13.
4. *Ibid.* 25.
5. Oakes, “The ‘Nones’ Are Alright.”
6. *Ibid.* 58.
7. *Ibid.* 61.
8. *Ibid.* 242.
9. G.K. Chesterton. *Orthodoxy* (Image Books, 1959), p. 76.
10. Tara Isabella Burton. “I Spent Years Searching for Magic—I Found God Instead,” *Catapult*, October 1, 2019: <https://catapult.co/stories/i-spent-years-searching-for-magic-i-found-god-instead>.
11. Burton, “How I Learned to Love my Christianity,” *America: The Jesuit Review*, December 9, 2019: <https://www.americamagazine.org/faith/2019/12/02/how-i-learned-love-my-christianity>.

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David John Seel Jr. is a cultural-renewal entrepreneur and social-impact consultant with expertise in the dynamics of cultural change. He lives with his wife on a historic farm in Pennsylvania.

Book recommended: *Strange Rites: New Religions for a Godless World* by Tara Isabella Burton (New York, NY: Public Affairs, 2020) 320 pages.

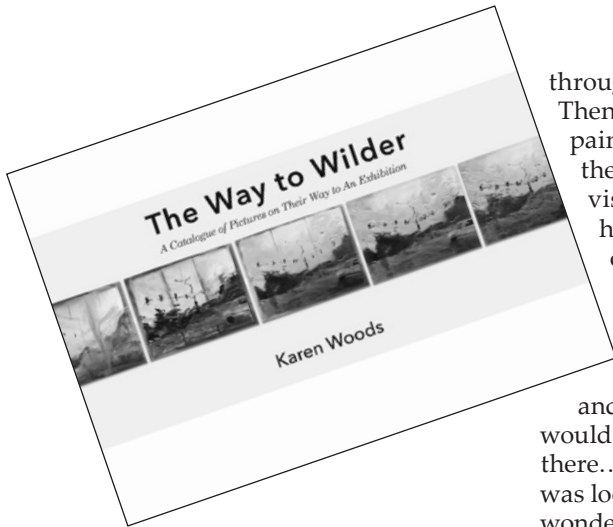
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Seeing in the Rain



I first met Karen Woods in May 2006 when Margie and I were invited to lead a weekend retreat at her church, All Saints Presbyterian, in Boise, Idaho. It was a lovely time. She showed us the little studio where she painted, and we wondered together over the glory of human creativity.

In 2015 she and her husband drove the thirty miles from Boise to Wilder, Idaho, in a rainstorm. She snapped pictures through the car's rain streaked windows and later turned them into a series of paintings. Her work is collected in a lovely full-color, large-format catalogue, *The Way to Wilder*. It is a journey into creativity. Wood's paintings are beautiful, well crafted, and multi-layered, and the catalogue is produced with the same level of care and creativity. It depicts not only finished works inspired by a road trip, but also depicts them as works in progress, allowing us to catch an inside glimpse into her creative process.

The catalogue tells the story of a road trip, and a process for each work.

The layout of *The Way to Wilder* is simple. In two or four-page spreads the original photographs Woods took

through the car window are displayed. Then a series of partially completed paintings are depicted, leading to the finished work. Not being a visual artist, this invitation into her studio and imagination, her craft and process, was like seeing behind a curtain that is usually drawn tightly to keep me out. The unfinished works are fascinating in their own right and, for each, I wondered why she would do that... add that... sweep color there... make that change... and then I was looking at the finished piece... still wondering how she got there.

The Way to Wilder is a visual exposition of abstraction and realism. We've all been in cars during heavy down-pours, and so each image is realistic. And yet, in the swirling raindrops and streaks of water on the glass, everything we see is distorted. Headlights are blurred, trees and passing cars simplified and imprecise, street signs are elongated. In "Sweet Stop," a stop sign morphs into candy on a stick. We know we are seeing ordinary things and that the distortion of the rain is natural. Yet the ordinary becomes strangely garbled. A reminder that abstraction is not an artistic conceit of modernity but a part of a good creation.

This vision is also a metaphor, for here truly we see through a glass darkly. We are not blinded, and the glass is not opaque, and yet our sight is subtly corrupted so that we are forced to struggle to make sense of what we see. We see, but in part. In "Medallion" we focus on a tree along the side of the road. More accurately, we focus and can't quite get it into focus, and yet we know it is a tree. It is the streaks of water on the glass that are fully in focus, something we would likely never focus

on intentionally as we rode along on the way to Wilder.

There is a lovely playfulness in these paintings coupled with a serious devotion to beauty in a broken world. I felt rather like a child without a care, in the backseat, looking out the windows as it rained, free to look and wonder, amused that a bit of water on glass can so transform our perspective.

The pandemic, civil unrest, and political and economic uncertainty means art has added significance. Beauty is not an optional thing for human flourishing but essential to Christian faithfulness. Scripture speaks more of glory than beauty, an expansive term that embraces beauty but goes beyond it to remind us that we are not speaking of some abstract quality that we like in things and people; we are speaking of the stunning majesty of God.

The best way to enjoy *The Way to Wilder* would be to travel to Boise, stand before Woods' exquisite collection, and be glad. The second-best way is to order a copy of the book, pour a glass of wine, and in an easy chair leisurely ride in a car during a rainstorm.

I recommend *The Way to Wilder* to you. ■

To order: Signed copies of *The Way to Wilder* can be ordered from Woods' website at karenwoods.com.



