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AD FONTES

A JOURNAL OF PROTESTANT LETTERS

JOHN EHRETT

Postliberal Gods and Monsters

BRUCE GORDON

Calvin and the Resignification of the World

JACKSON GRAVITT

In Darkness, Light: Francis of Assisi, Proto-Reformer

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About

AD FONTES IS A QUARTERLY JOURNAL PUBLISHED BY THE DAVENANT INSTITUTE.

Ad fontes, "to the sources," was a rallying cry of the Reformation. The Reformers bequeathed to us a heritage, rooted in the Scriptures and their wide-ranging humanistic studies, which sought to address the hard questions of theology, philosophy, and culture in a way that was true to the revelation of God's word and God's world. *Ad Fontes* channels this ethos into a modern context, seeking to explore our questions alongside the great cloud of witnesses and the many exemplars who have gone before us.

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The Light That Gives Us Heaven

A Greek Epigram on Paul

ANONYMOUS

TRANSLATED BY E. J. HUTCHINSON



Παῦλος, ἐπεὶ θεῖον σέλας οὐρανοῦ ἔδρακεν ἄντην,
φωτὸς ἀπειρεσίου γαῖαν ἔπλησεν ὅλην.

When Paul had seen the Light of God, the Light
That shines in heaven, face to face,
He filled with boundless light the earth, the light
That gives us heaven, face to face.

In Darkness, Light: Francis of Assisi, Proto-Reformer

JACKSON GRAVITT

It is an unfortunate fact that Protestants usually have a low view of the medieval Church. Of course, this is understandable to a degree: during the Middle Ages, the Church became increasingly corrupt, and there were plenty of theological developments which Protestants later deemed unbiblical. This negative view of the medieval Church has been so pronounced in certain Protestant circles that the phrase *post tenebras lux* (“After darkness, light”), etched on the Reformation Wall in Geneva, has become something of an outline for church history: the Middle Ages were dark, but the Reformation pierced them with light.

Of course, this overlooks the fact that there was a fair amount of *lux* not only *post tenebras*, but also *in tenebras*.¹ Immense light was cast by the Church upon the doctrine of God, Trinitarian theology, ethics, and science. Even as the Church lapsed into significant errors, there was a steady stream of leaders advocating for reform and orthodoxy, often seen as proto-Protestants, such as Peter Waldo, John Wycliffe, and John Huss. We may consider another who perhaps outshone the rest,

a man that Dante described as “seraphical in ardour”: Francis of Assisi.²

Francis (c.1181-1226) was a reformer. He shared many of the same concerns of the later Protestant Reformers, although his efforts and approach differed, as we shall see. By comparing Francis with the Protestant Reformers, we can begin to gain a deeper respect for the medieval Church. Such a study can also hopefully demonstrate that, as much as the Reformation did bring light after darkness, it was not the first light to shine. And indeed, without the likes of Francis, the light of the Reformers may never have come.

FRANCIS ON TRANSLATION AND PREACHING

Before we begin, it is important to note that Francis was a devout churchman of his time; he took vows not only of poverty and celibacy, but also of obedience to the Church. However, he did unashamedly take issue

1. Indeed, the motto on the coat of arms of the Waldensians, a proto-Protestant group who originated in the late 1100s, was “*Lux Lucet In Tenebris*”.

2. Dante, *Paradiso*, Canto XI.37. Interestingly, Dante chose to have Thomas Aquinas sing Francis’ eulogy. Dante’s *Divine Comedy* was greatly influenced by Thomas’ *Summa Theologica* (even being nicknamed “the *Summa* in verse”). By having his favorite theologian sing Francis’ praises, Dante showed what a high opinion he had of Francis.

with certain questionable practices in the Church, and his complaints would come to be shared by Reformers such as John Huss and Martin Luther.

Francis lived during a time when many clergy were corrupt. Priests would often neglect the poor and sick in order to minister to the rich and powerful, seeking comfort and security in a world which lacked them. Francis' entire life and ministry was a rebuke to such a mentality. Famously, not long after Francis' conversion, his father demanded that he choose between serving his family or serving the Church. Francis responded by publicly disowning his father, renouncing his sizable inheritance, social status, and any sort of familial care or protection.³ Turning his back on the world, he busied himself with the work of the Lord.

Eventually, Francis and his initial twelve followers felt compelled to start a new Order within the Roman Catholic Church. Together, they traveled to Rome and eventually won the approval of Pope Innocent III.⁴ The Franciscan Order began to send its friars out as itinerant preachers.⁵ Having taken vows of poverty, they escaped the temptation towards material possessions to which many clergy had fallen prey, and they began ministering to poor communities that had typically been neglected by the church.

Francis' *Rule* outlines the standards to which he and his friars were held when they preached. Their sermons were to be short, simple, and focused on four topics: "vices and virtues, punishment and glory" (Chapter IX).⁶ Early biographies of Francis (most notably *The Little Flowers*) emphasized that Francis always preached his sermons in the common vernacular, being careful to translate the Scriptural text from Latin to the language of the common people as he taught.⁷

3. Paul Sabatier, *Life of St. Francis of Assisi* (New York, NY: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1902), 58-62.

4. Sabatier, *Life of St. Francis of Assisi*, 88-102.

5. Though far from being the first Monastic Order, the Franciscans were the first Order to use friars. Unlike monks, friars did not remove themselves from the world by cloistering themselves in monasteries. Though they lived together, friars would stay near the cities where ordinary people lived in order to minister and preach to the masses more readily.

6. Francis of Assisi, "Regula Bullata," in *The Writings of St. Francis of Assisi*, edited by Kajetan Esser (Franciscan Archive, 1999), 80.

7. *The Little Flowers of St. Francis*, edited by Raphael Brown (New York, NY:

Such preaching was not unheard of, but its prevalence increased significantly with the rise of the Franciscans and Dominicans.⁸

Francis further pushed for the *Rule* of his Order to be written entirely in Italian—including any Scriptural quotations in it—so that the common people could benefit from its instruction. The Church vetoed his request.⁹ Francis was apparently ready to fight back on this point, before one of his friends humbly reminded him that the Waldensians, a group originating in France, had recently translated the Scriptures. Rome viewed the Waldensians as schismatics, so, if the Franciscans had begun to involve themselves in Scriptural translation, it might have damaged their reputation among faithful Roman Catholics throughout Europe.¹⁰ Reluctantly, for the good of his Order, Francis relented.

From this, we can discern some obvious initial similarities between Francis and the likes of Huss and Luther. The Reformers emphasized the importance of vernacular Scripture and worship. Huss' persecution and martyrdom largely centered around the fact that he had translated the Vulgate into the Czech language, and Luther—after working through the writings of Huss—turned to translating the Bible into German. Yet almost two hundred years before Huss' Czech Bible became available, Francis saw the benefits of Bible translation.

FRANCIS ON INDULGENCES

Francis' *Rule* strictly barred any of his friars from accepting money from anyone as they went about preaching the Gospel. Francis tried to make this command even stricter in his *Rule*, but a few of his guidelines were ultimately vetoed by Rome. Hugh of Digne, who lived

DoubleDay, 1958).

8. Pope Innocent III endorsed preaching in the common vernacular. The Fourth Lateran Council (1215) emphasized the importance of giving the word of God to congregants in a way that they could understand (see Canon 10). Undoubtedly, though, this work was greatly furthered by Francis and his friars.

9. Adrian House, *St. Francis of Assisi: A Revolutionary Life* (Mahwah, NJ: HiddenSpring, 2001), 87.

10. Shortly after Francis' death in 1226, the local Council of Toulouse (1229) expressly forbade the possession of vernacular Scripture in the region (except the Psalms and snippets in breviaries). Though this ruling was not made during Francis' lifetime, the Church was already leaning towards this type of ban while the Franciscans were trying to get their *Rule* ratified.

in the generation after Francis, recorded a few of the statements that did not make it into the *Rule*, claiming that Francis taught them to his friars nonetheless. One is of particular note:

Francis used to endure the fact that the friars would seek alms for the lepers in times of great necessity, yet in such manner that they would beware much of money. And although they loved the pious places, in which friars used to be guests and linger, he would not suffer them to seek money on behalf of any place or that they cause it to be sought, or that they go with those seeking it.¹¹

The friars would often travel from place to place, and as they traveled, they would be given shelter in monasteries or churches. These other holy men, having not taken vows of poverty, would often solicit offerings from the townspeople for the upkeep of the buildings. According to Hugh of Digne, Francis banned any of his friars from participating in such solicitations. Hugh does not explain why Francis had an aversion to this practice—he may have simply wished for his friars to avoid money unless it was absolutely necessary to handle it. However, his displeasure towards this practice could have run much deeper.

The practice of granting indulgences officially began in 1095, when Pope Urban I launched the first Crusade. By the time Francis lived (around a century later), the doctrine of Purgatory had developed and become ingrained in the medieval psyche. While the relationship between indulgences and Purgatory took time to mature, and was debated by theologians throughout the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, there is evidence to suggest that indulgences were being abused by some clergymen to raise funds for the Church as early as the beginning of the thirteenth century (the time when Francis was alive). In fact, Pope Innocent III used indulgences to fund his crusading efforts and to encourage men to join his ranks.

11. Francis of Assisi, "Fragments of Other Rules" in *The Writings of St. Francis of Assisi*, recorded by Hugh of Digne, edited by Kajetan Esser (Franciscan Archives, 1999), 116.

While we cannot be certain that Francis kept his friars away from money because he feared them abusing indulgences to raise money for the holy places, it seems likely. If that is the case, we can see another clear connection between Francis and later Reformers. At his trial, Huss complained that indulgences hurt the poor:

Is it right that the Princes of the Church order their subordinates to see that everybody, be it in days of health or such spent in sickness, but especially when on the deathbed, makes a last testament in favor of the church or of a monastery, disregarding even the poor orphans and then demand the teaching of this creed: "The larger the gift, the shorter the stay in the grave!" and: "The more magnanimous the stipend, the better the position in heaven!" "The richer the estate, the colder the fires of hell!"¹²

Luther likewise saw indulgences as a threat to the poor. In Thesis 43 of his *Ninety-Five Theses*, he wrote, "Christians should be taught that one who gives to the poor, or lends to the needy, does a better action than if he purchases indulgences." Perhaps Francis, a champion of the poor, was witnessing a similar practice. Knowing how the practice adversely affected the poor and robbed people of the opportunity to be charitable towards those in need, Francis taught his friars not to participate in collecting indulgences from the townspeople.

FRANCIS ON ORDINARY CHRISTIANS

We will note one final similarity between Francis and the Reformers: a respect and admiration for ordinary Christians.

Francis lived in an ecclesiastical climate that drew a hard line between the clergy and the laity. He, to some degree, blurred that line when he created his Third Order. The Third Order followed the Order of Friars Minor and the Poor Clares (an all-female Order). Typically, religious orders involved substantial removal from society into monastic life. Francis' Third Order was entirely different. It was made for ordinary laypeople who could not responsibly lay aside their families or busi-

12. Poggius the Papist, *Hus the Heretic* (Albany, OR: Ages, 1997), 35.

nesses, being created especially for Christians who were already married and could not join celibate monastic communities. Members of the Third Order met regularly and followed a rule of life similar to that of the Friars Minor. In creating this Order, Francis endowed ordinary Christians with a sense of dignity and worth. He validated their normal, “secular,” endeavors as work that glorified and pleased the Lord.¹³

THE REFORMERS...ULTIMATELY STRESSED THE IMPORTANCE OF DIRECTLY OBEYING GOD RATHER THAN MEN...FRANCIS, HOWEVER, STRESSED OBEEDIENCE TO GOD VIA OBEEDIENCE TO THE CHURCH AUTHORITIES.

G. K. Chesterton summarized the Third Order’s goal: “It was designed to assist ordinary men to be ordinary with an extraordinary exultation.”¹⁴ At its heart, the Order was meant to encourage the laity that they too could live their lives in dedication and service to the Lord, even if they could not responsibly forsake all that they possessed like Francis and his friars had done. Chesterton noted that even though Francis had sacrificed so much for the sake of Christ’s kingdom, he never seemed to give in to the prideful urge to feel superior to ordinary laypeople. Chesterton described Francis as “the world’s one quite sincere democrat.”¹⁵ Francis was deeply egalitarian, understanding that in the sight of God the greatest clergymen and the humblest layperson were equals.

This can be seen to anticipate the Protestant doctrine of the priesthood of all believers. Protestantism upholds a great egalitarianism between the clergy and laity. The clergy have a special vocation in leading and teaching

God’s people, but this does not elevate them over the normal person in the pew.¹⁶ Luther commented,

“There is no true difference between laymen and priests...between religious and secular, except for the sake of office and work, but not for the sake of status. They are all of the spiritual estate, all are truly priests, bishops, and popes. But they do not all have the same work to do.”¹⁷

Every Christian works on God’s “spiritual estate” and, therefore, has important work to do in the service of the Lord. All can interpret Scripture; all have direct access to the Lord. The Third Order and the doctrine of the priesthood of believers extraordinarily celebrate ordinary Christians.

A TALE OF TWO REFORMS

For all their similarities, Francis and the Reformers approached the task of reform very differently. It is worth noting that neither Huss nor Luther wanted to leave the Roman Catholic Church: they sought *reform*, not *revolt*. However, when push came to shove, they were willing to stand their ground and say, “We must obey God rather than men” (Acts 5:29).

Francis took a very different route. In his *Admonitions*, he writes to his friars,

“The Lord says in the Gospel: ‘He who will not renounce all that he possesses cannot be my disciple’ (Luke 14:33); and: ‘He who will have wanted to save his soul shall lose it’ (Luke 9:24). That man abandons all that he possesses, and loses his own body, who offers himself whole to obedience in the hands of his prelate. And whatever he does and says... which is not contrary to [the prelate’s] will, as long as what he does is good, is true obedience. And if at any time the

13. “Secular” originally referred not to that which had nothing to with religion, but to non-monastic and non-beneficed clergy. It was specifically life outside the monastery which was “secular”, not life outside the Church.

14. G. K. Chesterton, *St. Francis of Assisi* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1923), 74.

15. Chesterton, *St. Francis of Assisi*, 5.

16. Mark Noll helpfully provides some balance on this point: “Luther, Calvin, and the other early Protestants wanted laymen and laywomen to read the Bible themselves, but they still expected biblical interpretations from learned, pious clergy (like themselves) to be accepted by the faithful” (*Turning Points: Decisive Moments in the History of Christianity*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2012), 229).

17. Martin Luther, “To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation,” in *Luther’s Works*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut T. Lehmann (St. Louis, MO: Fortress Press, 1955-86), 44:129.

subject sees better and more useful things for his own soul than those which the prelate precepts him, let him sacrifice these (good things) willingly to God; but those which are the prelate's, let him strive to fulfill."¹⁸

In other words, if the friar sees a way to serve the Lord, but his superior tells him not to do it, the friar should recognize that God put that authority figure in his life. He should obey God by obeying men, doing the good work of submitting to authority rather than whatever good work he had hoped to do.

Such considerations probably tempered Francis' reform-minded temperament, restraining a more Hussite or Lutheran polemic (though I would recommend reading Francis' short *Letter to Clerics* if you want to see him be a bit more fiery).¹⁹ The Reformers—whilst broadly upholding the priorities of submission to authorities and maintenance of good order and stressing their continuity with the historic church over-and-against the papacy's novel inventions in the Middle Ages—ultimately stressed the importance of *directly* obeying God rather than men. If one saw something good (e.g. translating Scripture), and Rome forbade it, then one should disobey the Church in order to obey God. Francis, however, stressed obedience to God *via* obedience to the Church authorities: if one saw something good (e.g. translating Scripture), but one's superiors said not to do it, then one should obey God by submitting to his divinely instituted authorities.

A PROTESTANT ASSESSMENT OF FRANCIS' APPROACH TO REFORM

Francis and the Reformers both had biblical grounds for their approaches to reform. Both wanted to honor the Lord by obeying his word. For Francis, this meant: obey the Church, submit to authority, and pipe down when told. Honoring God meant honoring authority, even when the authority was dangerously wrong. Huss and Luther felt they could not stay silent in the face of

clerical abuse and error. Is it possible to see both responses as admirable in their own ways?

Francis' willingness to submit to the Church drew harsh criticism from some early Protestants. For example, the Italian Reformer Pier Paolo Vergerio (1498-1565) called for the destruction of Francis' works and biographies, claiming that they were filled with "blasphemous and ridiculous fables," complaining that they were instruments of popery.²⁰ Other early Protestants were more mild, however: the Lutheran *Book of Concord* listed Francis among the "holy men," though they critiqued a number of Franciscan practices.²¹

This latter response to Francis seems far more appropriate. Looking back on the centuries of Christians who have gone before us, we will find plenty of people like Francis—godly men, earnestly desiring to serve the Lord, but with whom we might disagree on significant matters. It is quite possible to critique and appreciate such people simultaneously. Indeed, the study of church history pushes us towards such appreciative critique. And, as we come to appreciate such figures, we will find that the Lord cultivates within us grace and thankfulness towards modern-day Christians who belong to different traditions. Particularly in this study, comparing Francis with Huss and Luther gives Protestants and Catholics alike an insight into each other's desire to obey Scripture. It highlights how the Bible informs both groups' convictions and ethics, even when we find ourselves at odds with each other. This consideration, ideally, leads us to show grace and patience towards believers with whom we differ significantly.

Even as a Protestant, I can appreciate Francis' aims and motivations. I do not fully agree with his approach, but I find myself encouraged by his humility. How much did Francis have to trust the Lord to hold his tongue, and quietly work and pray for change? How much did he have to trust that God would use his quiet, lowly obedience to bring about his desired reforms? Francis trusted in God's sovereignty and lived a life of incredible faith. And, as we will see in our final section, history

18. Francis of Assisi, "The Admonitions" in *The Writings of St. Francis of Assisi*, edited by Kajetan Esser (Franciscan Archives, 1999), 21.

19. Francis of Assisi, "Letter to Clerics," in *The Writings of St. Francis of Assisi*, edited by Kajetan Esser (Franciscan Archives, 1999), 33-35.

20. See Raphael Brown's "Introduction" to *The Little Flowers of St. Francis*, 32.

21. "Apology of the Augsburg Confession," *Book of Concord*, III.90.

evidences that God used Francis to bring about remarkable, though short-lived reform among the clergy.

THE IMPACT OF THE FRANCISCAN REFORMATION

Francis' efforts to reform the Church were successful in the short term. To explain how, it is helpful to consider how the clergy in Francis' days approached the poor, sick, and dying. Two years before Francis was born, the Third Lateran Council (1179) was held. The Council dealt with a plethora of topics, and its 23rd Canon is of special importance. It addressed how priests should go about ministering to lepers. Although affirming the personhood and potential piety of lepers, the Canon also stated, "We do not wish that what is granted them on the score of piety should result in harm to others." The Canon dictated that lepers "cannot dwell with the healthy or come to church with others." It also suggested that lepers should "have their own churches and cemeteries" and, most noteworthy of all, "their own priests." Leprosy was thought to be a highly contagious disease, and, at this point in history, it was incurable. The Third Lateran Council exempted priests from ministering to lepers, protecting them from contracting leprosy themselves.

Francis went against this decision. More than merely serving the poor and sick, he made one of his main ministries the care of lepers. And, according to the *Rule* of his Order, if one of the friars returned from the leper colony and fell ill, the other friars were bound to serve him, no matter the danger of contracting the disease themselves (Chapter VI).²²

Francis died in 1226 after a lifetime of ministry. Through his travels and the spread of his Orders, he had become well known throughout Europe by the time of his death.²³ He knew three Popes personally: Innocent III, Honorius III, and Gregory IX. The coming generations of Christians would write a combined two biographies on these three men—one for Innocent, none for Honorius, and one for Gregory. Francis, on the other

hand, was honored with at least eight biographies within two hundred years of his death. His missionary journeys into at least seven different countries made him a household name throughout Europe.²⁴ His Third Order soon dwarfed any other Order in the Roman Catholic Church. Other Orders began to utilize friars, following the example of the Franciscans. And, within two years of his death, Francis was canonized. His friend Dominic, founder of the Dominicans, was canonized six times slower.

All this highlights that Francis quickly became a central figure in the thought lives of European Catholics in the 13th and 14th centuries. And it seems that the radical, selfless lives of Francis and his friars made quite the impact on the clergy that Francis had so desperately wanted to reform. In the mid-1300s, the Black Death ravaged Europe, eventually killing around 30% of the population. Pope Clement VI declared that the dying could make their confession to anyone who was with them, and that this uncommon type of confession would still lead to salvation. The priests were essentially free from going to the sick and dying in hopes of preserving their own lives.

However, a vast majority of the clergymen laid aside this privilege, electing to go boldly to the dying. Compassionately, they laid down their own lives to minister to plague victims, even though it likely meant they would contract the disease as well. Scholars estimate that 42-45% of the clergy in Europe died in the plague, seemingly influenced by the sacrificial ministry of Francis and his friars.²⁵ Within a century-and-a-half, the clergy went from avoiding sick people to risking their lives to pray with people on their deathbeds.

What stands between these two poles? The life and ministry of Francis of Assisi. In many ways, the Black Death was the end of the Franciscan Reformation, but other "Franciscan" movements were just around the corner.

22. Francis of Assisi, "Regula Bullata," in *The Writings of St. Francis of Assisi*, edited by Kajetan Esser (Franciscan Archives, 1999), 78.

23. House, *St. Francis of Assisi*, 243.

24. House, *St. Francis of Assisi*, 3. See also *the Little Flowers of St. Francis*, 100.

25. John Kelly, *The Great Mortality: An Intimate History of the Black Death, the Most Devastating Plague of All Time* (New York, NY: Harper Perennial, 2006), 224.

After the plague ended, Europe budded back to life with the Renaissance.²⁶ The Black Death had left the same amount of resources in Europe, but now shared among fewer people. This meant that the wealth of the average person in Europe (and especially Italy) was much higher after the plague than before. More of the common people thus had access to education, which spelled trouble for the Roman Catholic Church. Nearly half of the clergy had died in the plague, causing the church to quickly ordain individuals unfit for the job. Soon, the Church began to look like it had prior to Francis' reform efforts, with clergy sliding back into corruption as well as being poorly educated (many could not even read Latin). The European populace was now more confident, more individualized, better educated, and more demanding. Before long, they began to feel that the clergy were not their intellectual superiors. If the clergy could read and interpret Scripture, why not them?

In many ways, the Renaissance made the Reformation inevitable. It is worth quoting from Alistair McGrath's *In The Beginning*:

Christians became dissatisfied with approaches to their faith that stressed its external aspects – such as just attending church. They demanded a form of Christianity that was relevant to their personal experience and private worlds. They didn't want just to be told what the Bible said – they wanted to own and read it for themselves. Religion was about personally appropriating the Christian faith, and making it a living reality in the experience of the individual lay person. A new confidence surged within the ranks of the laity. Why should the clergy have such power and

26. It should come as no surprise that the Renaissance began in Italy, not far from Francis' hometown, in the area in which he most frequently preached and ministered. While irreligious in some senses, it was throughout "Franciscan" in others, celebrating the inherent dignity and beauty of ordinary people. One way historians have connected Francis to the Renaissance is to explore his influence on the poet Dante. Dante was rumored to be a member of the Third Order, and he was buried in Franciscan garb. Equally interesting, Dante decided to write the *Divine Comedy* in Italian rather than Latin. This work of theological poetry was one of the first major works written in the Italian language. Dante followed in Francis' footsteps in making this decision. Francis' "Canticle of Brother Sun" was the first poem ever written in Italian (see Esser's editorial notes on page 29 of *The Writings of St. Francis of Assisi*). Dante followed in Francis' footsteps by writing his poetry in the Italian language.

influence, when the laity were now just as well educated as the former?²⁷

Soon, the Reformers, armed with the printing press, would arrive on the scene, and the rest would be history.

We see from this survey of history that not only did Francis share many of the same concerns as the Protestant Reformers, but his work of ministering to ordinary people, preaching in the common language, and reforming the clergy (even for a single generation) helped set the stage for their movement. His life and ministry put into motion a whole host of events that shaped European identity and prepared the way for the work of men like Luther. Of course, Francis would probably have never joined the Reformation himself—he valued obedience to the Church too much—but we can see thoroughly Franciscan themes within the movement. Without him, it is hard to imagine the Reformation would have ever occurred—certainly not in the way it did.

Protestants owe a great debt to Francis of Assisi, yet Francis was not the only medieval Christian who shone as a great light during the Middle Ages. God has always caused his light to shine into dark places. The history of the church catholic is our family history. Moreover, it is the history of how God has spoken, acted, and providentially cared for the world since the coming of Christ. And so we should all go to the sources, study these lights, and thank God for men like Francis of Assisi.

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27. Alistair McGrath, *In The Beginning: The Story of the King James Bible and How It Changed a Nation, a Language, and a Culture* (New York, NY: Doubleday, 2001), 39.

ESSAYS

Postliberal Gods and Monsters

JOHN EHRETT

Few terms today are more contested than “Western civilization.” For some, the moniker captures the intellectual legacy bequeathed by Socrates, Aristotle, Aquinas, and countless others—a chronicle of human beings’ struggle to grasp the world in its elemental principles, a world which found itself profoundly transfigured by the rise of Christianity. For others, the phrase stirs thoughts of technology, prosperity, and scientific progress, a project of ever-expanding knowledge driving out the darkness of superstition. And for a growing number, the phrase evokes centuries of technocratic oppression of other peoples, whether in the name of God or capital.

The shadow of this question looms large in recent intellectual debates over the relationship between traditional religious faith and contemporary politics. At one pole has emerged an increasingly vocal contingent of Roman Catholic writers and theologians, all seeking to revive a vigorous “political Catholicism” over against the fragmentation of modern culture; at the other are the heirs of Enlightenment liberalism, who would push theological claims further and further to the margins of public debate. And yet the gulf between them may not be so wide as it appears. Despite their mutual acrimony, many of these thinkers are united by a common under-

lying conviction: that the destiny of the West is, truly, the destiny of civilization as a whole.

From the “secular” perspective, this claim is straightforward enough: values like democracy, equality, and universal human rights (never mind about their metaphysical grounding) have their roots in the Western tradition, and societies around the world will embrace them as they inevitably modernize. And while failed efforts at exporting Western norms around the globe have undoubtedly set the project back, among secular classical liberals, these general principles have still not lost their luster as normative—or, perhaps, *regulative*—ideals.

Right-wing critics of liberalism have long rejected that premise, though they are little read today. Writers like Oswald Spengler (1880-1936) and Julius Evola (1888-1974) do not appear on university syllabi, nor do modern scholars bother to confront their arguments even in passing. Indeed, those willing to academically engage this anti-modern thought have quickly found that the topic is radioactive. At the University of Toronto, graduate student Michael Millerman faced pervasive departmental blowback over his work on German existentialist Martin Heidegger (1889-1976) and con-

temporary Russian geopolitical philosopher Alexander Dugin (b. 1960).¹ And recently, student editors of law journals have requested that scholars excise even footnote references to controversial jurist Carl Schmitt (1888-1985)—a merciless critic of liberal proceduralism who, notoriously, collaborated with the Nazi regime.² In the minds of their critics, theorists like Dugin and Schmitt present arguments too radical, too incendiary, for a modern liberal-democratic society to countenance at all. And indeed, that concern makes a certain amount of sense because very little common ground for engagement exists.

**IF ROSE'S CASE IS TO BE BELIEVED,
SPENGLER WAS THE PROPHET OF
A MOVEMENT THAT INEVITABLY—
DESPITE SPENGLER'S OWN
INTENTIONS—BOTTOMS OUT IN
GROSS RACISM.**

But for all the efforts of the mainstream to suppress them, versions of anti-liberal thinking refuse to die. In its Calvinist iteration, this current of thought looks like the theonomy of Rousas Rushdoony (1916-2001) and Greg Bahnsen (1948-1995), who argued for applying Old Testament laws directly to modern civilization. In its Catholic form, it looks like efforts to resuscitate the arguments of Enlightenment critics like Pope Pius IX (1792-1878), Joseph de Maistre (1752-1821), and Juan Donoso Cortes (1809-1853), among others. And on the contemporary internet, it manifests in the Nietzschean musings of a pseudonymous figure who goes by the moniker “Bronze Age Pervert.”

Those altogether unsympathetic to this anti-liberal mood often lump all these thinkers into an undiffer-

entiated reactionary mass which can then be assigned various names like “the Far Right” or “Christian nationalism.” But this, of course, occludes profound theoretical differences: besides their rejection of modern liberal dogmas, what exactly do these thinkers have in common? Schmitt would have had no patience for Calvinist appeals to the authority of written biblical texts; de Maistre would never have countenanced the contempt of the “Bronze Age Pervert” for institutional religion and so forth. How, then, is one to assess these critiques of contemporary life?

One possible dividing line, naturally, is overt theological commitment, or rather the lack thereof. In *A World After Liberalism: Philosophers of the Radical Right*, scholar Matthew Rose considers a cross-section of the twentieth century’s anti-modern thinkers—namely Spengler, Evola, Francis Parker Yockey (1917-1960), Alain de Benoist (b. 1943), and Sam Francis (1947-2005)—who in Rose’s account are united principally by their formal rejection of any Christian affiliation. Rose’s slender volume is structured similarly to Helen Andrews’s *Boomers* and Sohrab Ahmari’s *The Unbroken Thread*, examining a broad intellectual phenomenon through biographical sketches of notable thinkers. Whether there *is* such a unitary trend, of course, is the critical question, and on that front Rose’s selections are somewhat surprising. Yockey is a fairly marginal figure to include; the pantheistic Hindu fascist Savitri Devi, while largely unknown, would have at least been a more philosophically interesting subject. And the French Sufi mystic René Guénon, whose writings have inspired esoteric right-wing thought for generations, is an odd omission from the list of key players (though Rose has more recently sought to address him).³ Principally, the book is an extended development of a 2018 *First Things* article entitled “The Anti-Christian Alt-Right,” in which Rose characterized this “post-Christian” intellectual right as, principally, committed to the claim that “Christian teachings have become socially and morally poisonous to the West.”⁴ While that characterization is perhaps an overstate-

1. Joseph Brean, “Naive Philosopher or Far-Right Propagandist? U of T Awards PhD to Translator of Sanctioned Russian Neo-Fascist,” *National Post*, November 2, 2018, <https://nationalpost.com/news/toronto/university-of-toronto-controversially-awards-doctorate-translator-of-sanctioned-russian-neo-fascist>.

2. Joseph Weiler, “Cancelling Carl Schmitt?,” *EJIL:Talk!*, August 13 2021, <https://www.ejiltalk.org/cancelling-carl-schmitt/>.

3. Matthew Rose, “The Imagined Citadel,” *First Things*, March 2022, <https://www.firstthings.com/article/2022/03/the-imagined-citadel>.

4. Matthew Rose, “The Anti-Christian Alt-Right,” *First Things*, March 2018, <https://www.firstthings.com/article/2018/03/the-anti-christian-alt-right>.

ment, it is certainly true that none of Rose's subjects appear to have held conventionally Christian beliefs.

Rose's study begins with a lengthy discussion of Spengler, whom Rose describes as the "intellectual godfather of the radical right."⁵ And indeed, despite the presence of overt fascists like Yockey, it is indubitably Spengler who forms the central antagonist of *A World After Liberalism*. If Rose's case is to be believed, Spengler was the prophet of a movement that inevitably—despite Spengler's own intentions—bottoms out in gross racism. And yet a reader familiar with the relevant literature cannot help but notice that Rose's study does not quite do justice to a thinker whose arguments, at the very least, warrant a more careful treatment. For all the flaws of those who have claimed his mantle, might Spengler himself perhaps have something valuable to add to contemporary conversations about the future of the West?

In the wake of the devastation of World War I, Spengler published the two-volume *The Decline of the West*, a sprawling, genre-transcending *opus* that offered a radical reinterpretation of human history and culture. Contra Hegel, in Spengler's view, human history is not progressing toward an ever-more-perfect realization of the Absolute Spirit; instead it is permanently characterized by inescapable cycles of rise and decline. The proper subjects of rise and decline are not individual political regimes, but *Cultures*: comprehensive paradigms held together by background metaphysical ideas about the structure of reality. Human beings in developed societies are always products of one or another distinct Culture. Throughout *Decline*, Spengler refers to nine such cultures—the Babylonian, Egyptian, Mexican, Classical, Arabian, Indian, Chinese, Russian, and Western—but considers only the Classical, Arabian, and Western in close detail.

On Spengler's account, each Culture's governing metaphysical idea can be encapsulated in a single "prime symbol," an abstract pattern or scheme that underpins individuals' sense of reality and value. In the minds of the ancient Egyptians, the prime symbol was the Way

or Path leading to death and eternity; for the Classical Culture, the prime symbol was the formed body extended in space; for the Western Culture, it is infinite space, and the concomitant "feeling of a loosing, *Er-lösung*, solution of the Soul in the Infinite."⁶ According to Spengler, "the prime symbol does not actualize itself; it is operative through the form-sense of every man, every community, age and epoch and dictates the style of every life-expression."⁷ That is to say, art, architecture, worship, mathematics, and science are all subconsciously informed by the prime symbol of a given Culture. So it is no coincidence, for Spengler, that the Western Culture produced elaborate music; music always echoes and resounds throughout the seemingly infinite Gothic halls that exemplify the Western world-feeling.

No Culture, for Spengler, can possibly hope to endure forever. A Culture that has fully exhausted its internal intellectual resources inevitably becomes a "Civilization," tending toward ossification and collapse in the face of younger, groundbreaking Cultures coming to awareness of themselves. A Civilization's traces may survive in intellectually moribund form—such as within communities of "fella-peoples," those who cling to Civilizational ways of being that the surrounding world has largely moved beyond—but its creative reservoirs will have run dry. And for Spengler, the Western Culture had reached such a stage: the resultant Civilization might have a hundred years or so left in it before its decline would be felt keenly, but the laws of history would inexorably assert themselves. As the final and decidedly authoritarian political stage of this regime draws nigh—as, in Spengler's words, "the Caesarism that is to succeed approaches with quiet, firm step"—Western man now confronts "the freedom to do the necessary or to do nothing."⁸

The remaining four thinkers in Rose's volume, in his telling, all pressed elements of this broadly Spenglerian vision into the service of specific antidemocratic causes. Writing both before and after World War II, Italian fas-

5. Matthew Rose, *A World After Liberalism: Philosophers of the Radical Right* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2021), 11.

6. Oswald Spengler, *The Decline of the West, Vol. 1—Form & Actuality* (London: Arktos, 2021), 235.

7. Spengler, *The Decline of the West, Vol. 1*, 231.

8. Oswald Spengler, *The Decline of the West, Vol. 2—Perspectives of World-History* (London: Arktos, 2021), 648.

cist mystic Julius Evola agreed with Spengler's declinism, but critiqued Spengler for his emphasis on immanence over transcendence—preferring instead, for his part, to seek after a “perennial” philosophical tradition beyond all contingent culture-forms. Evola sketched out an elaborate mytho-history of a “Hyperborean” Aryan civilization originating from the far north, custodians of a primordial Tradition committed to participation in the transcendent through sacral kingship.⁹

ROSE'S GOVERNING THEOPOLITICAL PARADIGM HINTS AT A KIND OF WHIG THOMISM—ONE THAT TREATS THE ASSUMPTIONS OF WESTERN LIBERAL POLITICS AS LARGELY NORMATIVE, WHILE ACKNOWLEDGING THEIR VULNERABILITIES IF LEFT UNBAPTIZED.

Continuing in that vein, American white nationalist Francis Parker Yockey penned the self-consciously Spenglerian tome *Imperium* as an overtly racialized call to arms. For Yockey, the days of the West were, quite literally, numbered: “Since a Culture is *organic*, it has a life-span. We observed this life span: it is about thirty-five generations at highest potential, or about forty-five generations from its first stirrings in the landscape until its final subsiding.”¹⁰ The *Imperium* urged a campaign of “redemptive” violence in the name of Cultural purity: “The soil of Europe...will once again stream with blood until the barbarians and distorters have been driven out.”¹¹ By “distorters,” Yockey meant the Jewish people.

Rose's book concludes with a lengthy discussion of what he terms “the Christian question”; namely, the challenge

posed to orthodox Christian faith by this “radical right” current of inquiry. Here, Rose principally argues for the universalizing claim of Christianity as a function of divine transcendence, which rules out any crude ethnocentrism; in his telling, the “radical right” errs by “understand[ing] Christianity as something that originates from *within* a people, as an expression of their identity, rather than something that comes to it from without.”¹² Equally wrongheaded, according to Rose, is “the idea that Christianity is an inheritance a people possesses as its own, rather than a gift they share with others.”¹³

Rose—himself a Catholic—seems to have an uneasy relationship with those contemporary Catholic integralists who would seek a radical “integration from within” and a reorientation of the modern state's machinery toward premodern ends. (Early on, he promises that a volume examining such ideas is in the works.) Instead, judging from the framing with which his book opens and closes, Rose's governing theopolitical paradigm hints at a kind of Whig Thomism—one that treats the assumptions of Western liberal politics as largely normative, while acknowledging their vulnerabilities if left unbaptized. He notes that “[l]iberalism aspired to order society around a vision of human beings, abstracted from all attachments, whose fundamental needs are for prosperity, peace, and pleasure... If liberalism is in crisis, it is because this picture of human life has proven to be impoverished.”¹⁴ The point is well taken. So too is Rose's observation that while “[o]ur loyalties to a nation, culture, or people can . . . become dangerous when severed from truths that transcend them,” such commitments “are not parochial loyalties that need to be exchanged for more cosmopolitan ones” but rather are “essential aspects of every human life”—such that “to ask people to apologize for what they are right to value, and to be ashamed for what they are right to need, is to tempt political catastrophe.”¹⁵

But a crucial ambiguity—perhaps *the* crucial ambiguity—haunts Rose's position: how should the universal

9. Julius Evola, *Revolt Against the Modern World*, trans. Guido Stucco (Rochester, VT: Inner Traditions International, 1995), 7–11, 190–92.

10. Francis Parker Yockey, *Imperium* (Wentzville, MO: Invictus Books, 2011), 23.

11. Yockey, *Imperium*, 567.

12. Rose, *A World After Liberalism*, 148.

13. Rose, *A World After Liberalism*, 148.

14. Rose, *A World After Liberalism*, 154.

15. Rose, *A World After Liberalism*, 155.

claim of Christianity be understood? Does the faith require allegiance to a unitary earthly power instantiated in the Holy See, its development conditioned by the demands of a particular sociocultural history? Or do the boundaries of the Church exceed altogether such limitations? To embrace the former is necessarily to intertwine the destiny of Christianity with the history of the “West” itself—a version of the same historical genealogy that liberalism tells about itself.

Some traditionalists have leaned openly into the difficulty, reconfiguring traditional claims about “Athens and Jerusalem”: why not take the juridical forms and universalizing ambitions of Rome, the historically dominant “Western” regime, as valid for all time? After all, much of Christianity itself survived and grew strong in the womb of that regime. In the words of one prominent “postliberal” writer, “Christianity is, in sum, a transformative synthesis of the Jews, the Greeks, and the Romans, and we fundamentally distort its meaning if we remove any one of these essential elements... [R]egarding world history, Christianity offers... the horizontal pole of (Roman) political history.”¹⁶ On this framing, Christianity *qua* Christianity is inextricably bound up with the Roman Empire and its legacy. The fight for that legacy, for the West as the West, is thus a battle for the Christian faith itself. Thus a fascinating paradox emerges. Catholic integralists and their fellow-travelers find themselves deadlocked with their philosophical rivals over the *direction* of the West, but both sides agree that the West must be the fulcrum of the great struggle for Christian truth.

But what if that premise is wrong? Answering that question requires, first and foremost, that some argumentative detritus be cleared away. Rose posits early on that “[Spengler] did not argue that there is no Western civilization without Christianity. He argued that there is no Christianity without Western civilization.”¹⁷ But this claim badly misstates Spengler’s argument. Specifically, Spengler theorized that Christianity first appeared within the “Arabian Culture,” was profound-

ly impacted by the dominant Classical Civilizational milieu into which it emerged (via a process Spengler terms “pseudomorphosis”), and then was transformed *yet again* with the rise of the Western Culture. At each stage, Spengler contended, the underlying world-picture changed while the overarching theological grammar remained the same. Early on, while Classical “names and figures and outward forms” were retained, the mystical “feeling” associated with them was quite different—as was the “feeling” of the “Germanic-Catholic Christianity of the West” which came to succeed the first “Jesus-religion,” notwithstanding the fact that “the stock of tenets and observances was taken over in its entirety.”¹⁸ But significantly, this precise pattern was not followed across the entire Christian tradition. For example, “Aramaic-speaking Christendom... resisted the pseudomorphosis, so that finally it broke away in the form of the Nestorian Church.”¹⁹

One can agree or disagree with Spengler’s historical claims here (and no doubt many have disagreed). But strictly speaking, this argument need not be read in the inherently secularizing direction that Rose implies. For the Christian committed to a metaphysics of divine transcendence, it is no scandal that Christian belief emerged out of the Jewish tradition and into a world dominated by the thought-forms of the Classical Civilization. Indeed, through the eyes of faith, such an intervention in the “fullness of time” might even be characterized as positively providential. And while Rose rightly desires to dissociate Christianity from any blood-and-soil identitarianism, he perhaps goes too far in attempting to reject the language of origination and inheritance altogether: to *deny* the Judaic roots of Christian thought, and to treat the faith as a creed that comes exclusively “from without,” has an unpleasantly supersessionist undertone—a curious blind spot in a volume otherwise sensitive to historical antisemitism.

It is also worth adding that Spengler’s treatment of the divine in *The Decline of the West* is less of a formal denial of transcendence than simple neglect of the subject. Spengler’s engagement with fundamental metaphysics

16. D.C. Schindler, *The Politics of the Real: The Church Between Liberalism and Integralism* (Steubenville, OH: New Polity Press, 2021), 11–12 (emphasis mine).

17. Rose, *A World After Liberalism*, 33.

18. Spengler, *The Decline of the West*, Vol. 2, 294.

19. Spengler, *The Decline of the West*, Vol. 2, 287.

THE GRAMMAR OF CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY...ECHOES ACROSS DIVERS CULTURES AND CIVILIZATIONS, FROM THE FRENCH CHURCHES OF SAINT-CHAPPELLE AND CHARTES TO THE NESTORIAN CHURCHES OF CHINA AND THE MAR TOMA CHURCHES OF INDIA.

is cursory at best; while he “with Goethe, distinguish[es] as final elements ‘becoming’ and ‘the become,’”²⁰ generally absent here is any conception of what Nicholas of Cusa reverently termed “absolute maximumness, to which nothing is opposed and with which the minimum coincides”²¹—the absolute One in which “becoming” and “the become” are reconciled.

The omission is unfortunate because the reality of such a One is implied throughout Spengler’s argument. Indeed, the very recognition of Cultures’ prime symbols as prime symbols is to admit the possibility of analogy between them within a common metaphysical horizon—which is precisely what Christians should expect given a God who reveals Himself in nature. And this would seem to belie the claim that major Cultures are *absolutely* incommensurable, completely epistemically inaccessible one to another. Rather, such parallels suggest that Cultures are united by their apprehension of, and encounter with, the genuine Absolute—the One God—albeit under different symbolic forms.

In short, while Spengler aims at demythologization, his *implicit* metaphysic is not so alien that Christian theology cannot make constructive use of it, at least in some fashion.²² Surely one can find insights similar to these in a host of other sources, though.²³ So why, in the

end, are Spengler’s bleak prophecies of Western decline worth engaging in depth?

For one thing, many of Spengler’s core philosophical arguments hit home, whether or not one accepts his bigger-picture view of Cultures as in some sense “organisms.” Spengler-inflected discussions of Civilizational decadence—and the exhaustion of intellectual and artistic possibility—have proliferated in recent years. Writing from the right, one has conservative columnist Ross Douthat’s gloomy meditations on *The Decadent Society*;²⁴ writing from the left, there is Marxist novelist Sally Rooney’s dissection of the unending, constantly “rebooting” Marvel Cinematic Universe.²⁵ There is undoubtedly *something* to Spengler’s insight that, after a long period of creative fecundity, the expressive wellsprings of a Civilization seem to dry up, and mere repetition of the past takes over.

But more importantly, Spengler’s work gestures in the direction of what, from a Protestant standpoint, might be described as the redemptive possibilities of a history *not* committed to either the Whiggish view of social progress or to the traditionalist Catholic ideal of a single global *ecclesia*. *Decline*, in the end, captures the oddly reassuring insight that no history-bound form of Culture is truly ultimate. Change and becoming are inevitable—and from the vantage point of the transcendent, one might even dare to call such transformations *beautiful*. A life, after all, is inexhaustibly enriched by encounters with Cultures not its own. Accordingly, one need not languish in nostalgia for medieval Christendom or the Founding generation; those Culture-forms

20. Spengler, *The Decline of the West*, Vol. 1, 69.

21. Nicholas of Cusa, “On Learned Ignorance,” in *Selected Spiritual Writings*, trans. H. Lawrence Bond (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1997), 92.

22. The tension between the confidence with which Spengler writes and the inevitable “situatedness” of his own set of historical claims is a tension at the very heart of *The Decline of the West*—a paradox not lost on commentators. See, e.g., Gregory Morgan Swer, “Timely Meditations?: Oswald Spengler’s Philosophy of History Reconsidered,” *Prolegomena* 17 no. 2 (2018): 138–39.

23. To name one example, the idea of the incommensurability of competing intellectual paradigms echoes through later works as diverse as Thomas Kuhn’s *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* and Alasdair MacIntyre’s *After Virtue*. As MacIntyre wrote of modern moral philosophy, “[f]rom our rival conclusions we can argue back to our rival premises; but when we do arrive at our premises argument ceases and the invocation of one premise against another becomes a matter of pure assertion and counter-assertion.” This is a version of the same claim as Spengler’s argument for the general difficulty in translating, across different Cultures, ideas grounded in fundamental metaphysical intuitions.

See Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 3rd ed. (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007), 8.

24. See Ross Douthat, *The Decadent Society: How We Became the Victims of Our Own Success* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2020).

25. Sally Rooney, “Sally Rooney on Superheroes and the Myths of American Power,” *Literary Hub*, May 27, 2016, <https://lithub.com/on-superheroes-and-the-myths-of-american-power/>.

do not (and cannot) demand ultimate allegiance. (Interestingly enough, there is also an antidote here to the racism of writers like Yockey who claimed Spengler as inspiration: recognition of the incoherence of treating any contingent biological grouping as the custodian of final truth.)

Conversely, the grammar of Christian theology—wholly apart from whether it is ever possible to imaginatively reconstruct the past or to psychologically enter into the life-worlds of those who first put doctrines to parchment—echoes across diverse Cultures and Civilizations, from the French churches of Sainte-Chapelle and Chartres to the Nestorian churches of China and the Mar Thoma churches of India. Herein is found a continuity that extends across the shifting historical landscape of world-feelings, over and above the diverse world-pictures that structure the thoughts of individuals. But what, then, is the orienting center of this continuity?

At the heart of Christian thought is a singular individual around whom the world-pictures of the ages swirl, as Ethiopian Lutheran theologian Gudina Tumsa—who witnessed the violent transformation of the Ethiopian social order from premodern feudalism to a Marxist dictatorship—well knew. Gudina reasoned that since, as an ontological matter, “Christ is the living Lord who was raised from death by God the Father”, and “[a] living person cannot be identified with any impersonal system,” no finite instantiation of a given Culture could ever be absolutized.²⁶ Rather, for Gudina, a Christian “can work in any system, and the living Lord Christ commands us to go out and proclaim his presence, the good news.”²⁷

And it was, in fact, this same mysterious person that Spengler himself found oddly compelling in the Christian tradition. “The incomparable thing which lifted the

infant Christianity out above all religions of this rich [Arabian] Springtime is the figure of Jesus,” he wrote, stressing that “Christianity is the one religion in the history of the world in which the fate of a man of the immediate present has become the emblem and the central point of the whole creation.”²⁸ The Christian story, it so happens, is one of eternity embedded *within* time—not over against it. And if the Christian story is in fact correct, while Civilizations may wither and collapse, the individual who is himself the *axis mundi* will never fade or perish.

In the end, to take Spengler seriously is to confront the possibility that “Western civilization” does not represent the end of history—a possibility which neither liberals nor Catholic traditionalists are particularly keen to confront. It is a step Rose himself is loath to take. But how else are Christians to live faithfully in a future that has passed beyond this particular paradigm? For the Christian dwelling within a particular Culture, the core question is whether one will acknowledge the transcendence that conditions the very possibility of their existence, and that relativizes any particular Cultural order’s claim to finality—as well as the inbreaking of that transcendence into the cycles of historical time in the person of Christ.

If Spengler’s predictions prove accurate, “a world after liberalism” is simply an inevitability; precisely what kind of world it will be, though, remains to be seen. It will, however, still be God’s.

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26. Gudina Tumsa, “The Role of a Christian in a Given Society,” in *The Life, Works, and Witness of Tsebay Tolessa and Gudina Tumsa, the Ethiopian Bonhoeffer*, eds. Samuel Yonas Deressa and Sarah Hinlicky Wilson (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2017), 127.

27. Gudina, “The Role of a Christian in a Given Society,” 127.

28. Spengler, *The Decline of the West*, Vol. 2, 264–65.

Resembled

BY RHYS LAVERTY

To call them ghosts or the resurrected,
those summoned at once by new life? I am
nose-to-nose with them in an infant's face.

With fitting epic peril you were plucked—
our golden bough, our shade, our dark oarsman,
our own dear lane to the land of the dead.

It's the nose— neither your mother's nor mine,
but family property, no question;
held in trust, hidden in a code of bones.

And we will never know the forgotten
peasants in your blood who'd call you the spit
of some proud son, maiden aunt, or black sheep,

and might, in some vision up the river,
run cold at you, as if they'd seen a ghost.

ESSAYS

Gentle Discipline: Spenser's *Faerie Queene* and Christian Elites

JOSHUA PATCH

INTRODUCTION

Edmund Spenser's *Faerie Queene* remains a celebrated work that no one seems to read. Like *War and Peace*, it looks majestic in cloth binding, a solemn monument to high culture, yet carries the reputation of tedious difficulty, even dryness. Spenser's epic has not enjoyed the contemporary cachet of Homer's *Odyssey*, or *Beowulf*, both recently appearing in new watershed translations by women scholars.¹ Shakespeare, Milton, and John Donne remain perennially sexy, but *The Faerie Queene*, when thought of at all, seems a work that only a specialist—a C.S. Lewis—can enjoy.

I would like to argue that Christians ought to take an interest in Spenser, and especially *The Faerie Queene*. Careful readers have always found wisdom in it. Gordon Teskey has said that *The Faerie Queene* “comes clos-

er to thinking—to speculative reasoning about the human—than any other work of literature known to me.”² C.S. Lewis's love of Spenser is a far cry from some donnish passion for “long, boring books” (a charge I once heard a tenured professor of literature make). In his paean to *The Faerie Queene*, he gushes that “the experience of reading it is like living,” and that “To read [Spenser] is to grow in mental health.”³ John Milton even spoke of “our sage and serious poet Spenser, whom I dare be known to think a better teacher than Scotus or Aquinas.”⁴

These blurbs perhaps explain why Spenser remains revered but not popular. He seems more of an edifying mental exercise than a delight. Milton placing him alongside the Scholastics is not inaccurate: as we shall

1. *The Odyssey* was translated by Emily Wilson in 2017 (W.W. Norton & Company), and *Beowulf* by Maria Dahvana Headly in 2021 (Scribe UK). The latter proudly bears the subheading “A New Feminist Translation of the Epic Poem”.

2. Gordon Teskey, *Spenserian Moments* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2019), 314.

3. C.S. Lewis, *The Allegory of Love*, (New York, New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2013), 447–448.

4. John Milton, *Areopagitica*, accessed April 8 2022, <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/608/608-h/608-h.htm>.

see, Spenser definitely saw himself as a teacher. And therein lies the reader's discomfort: we don't want our poets to try to teach us. It's not that we don't want to learn from a poem or novel, but the lesson should come as if by accident. Poets should show, not tell.

However, Spenser does have something to teach us; and, perhaps more importantly, his poetic *mode* of teaching holds unique value for today's readers.

THE PURPOSE OF THE FAERIE QUEENE

Spenser states his purpose for *The Faerie Queene* in a letter to Walter Raleigh: "The generall end of all the booke is to fashion a gentleman or noble person in vertuous and gentle discipline: Which for that I conceived shoulde be most plausible and pleasing, being coloured with an historical fiction, the which for the most part men delight to read, rather for variety of matter, then for the profite of the ensample."⁵ The poem is intended to form the reader into a noble person (whether man or woman). This is not merely an intellectual goal; Spenser does not seek merely to explain what virtue or "gentle discipline" is, but to train the reader in it. The fiction of the poem is designed to render this daunting training "plausible and pleasing", sweetening an edifying pill. According to Spenser this was the method of other poets, including Homer, Virgil, Xenophon, and the Italian epic poets Tasso and Ariosto. All these aimed to set forth in fiction the perfect model of "a good governour and a vertuous man."⁶

Spenser's moral lesson is aimed at his context: Protestant England in the late reign of Elizabeth I. Elizabeth herself is, of course, the real Fairy Queen, and the "good governour" Spenser intends to memorialize. She is also, however, an intended reader, and so Spenser's student. This is one reason why Spenser includes both sexes in his audience. England already had a female ruler, so clearly women can govern, and therefore need formation in moral and political virtue. While not a "feminist" text in any modern sense, *The Faerie Queene* features

an array of important and powerful female characters. Spenser seeks, through his fiction, to offer counsel to the monarch as well as to all men and women who hold sway in the kingdom.

This means the poem also has a religious purpose. As a Protestant kingdom on a world stage still partly hostile to Protestantism, England needed to be strengthened in its spiritual identity. So, though he tells Raleigh that he is allegorizing Aristotle's twelve virtues, Spenser begins with "the Legend of the Knight of the Red Crosse, or Of Holinesse." Holiness is not an Aristotelian virtue, but it is Spenser's ethical starting point.

**BOOK I OF THE FAERIE QUEENE, THEN,
IS INTENDED TO TRAIN ITS READERS IN
HOLINESS, BY WAY OF DELIGHT.**

Book I of *The Faerie Queene*, then, is intended to train its readers in holiness, by way of delight. Spenser sees this as the first task in ennobling and fortifying a Protestant nation under a pious queen. Spenser intended to cultivate what we might today call "Christian elites." The educated reader, privileged with status and influence, was in the best position to edify the commonwealth by bringing holiness to bear on the life of a nation.

In order to appreciate his work today, even if we are not Protestant subjects of a pious queen, readers must submit to Spenser's "gentle discipline" and consider how we might be of benefit to our own commonwealths. With this in mind, we should consider the poem's plot. Book I follows the Redcrosse Knight, later revealed as a young St. George, future patron saint of England. In the opening stanzas, he rides across the plain on his first quest, wearing borrowed armor and followed by a young woman. The woman is Una, embodiment of Truth, whose parents' kingdom is threatened by a dragon. Redcrosse is on his way to help. His first combat is against a serpentine monster called Errour, which vomits up books, ink, and blind toads. This fiend vanquished, he and his party stop to rest at the house of

5. Edmund Spenser, *The Faerie Queene* (London: Routledge, 2013) 714-715.

6. Spenser, *Faerie Queene*, 14.

IF THE COMBATANT AND CAUSE ARE GOOD, THEN EVIL LOSES ITS POWER TO BEGUILE. THE STANZA'S DIALECTIC RAISES A QUESTION: IS VIRTUE A SUFFICIENT PROTECTION AGAINST ERROR?

Archimago, a seemingly wise hermit who turns out to be a very popish sorcerer. To steer Redcrosse astray, he first sends a seductive sprite disguised as Una. When Redcrosse resists, a second sprite appears and seems to fornicate with the false Una. Redcrosse, outraged and distraught, abandons the real Una, only to fall into the grips of an evil hag disguised as a beautiful maiden—the deceitful Duessa. Duessa leads Redcrosse to the House of Pride, a kind of gaudy McMansion ruled by the demonic Lucifera and her counselors, the Seven Deadly Sins. Impressed with the house, Redcrosse lingers and wins glory in a duel, but soon discovers a dungeon full of skeletons and departs, horrified. He meets a giant named Orgoglio—the embodiment of pride—who imprisons him. Una, however, comes to his rescue, aided by none other than a young Prince Arthur. Redcrosse and Una reconcile and continue their quest, narrowly missing death in the cave of Despaire, before finding rest and healing in the palatial House of Holinesse. Equipped with spiritual wisdom, Redcrosse comes to Una's country—a kingdom called Eden—and defeats the dragon on the third day of combat. A betrothal feast is held, and Redcrosse is required to leave his lady temporarily to return to his patroness Gloriana, the Fairy Queen.

With this brief overview in mind, a few sample scenes will suffice both to offer a taste of Spenser's verse and to convey a sense of his way of teaching.

THE ERROR OF FIGHTING ERROR

Redcrosse's encounter with the monster Error is a fascinating beginning to an allegory about holiness. Una embodies Truth. Redcrosse himself is "the Patrone of true Holinesse" (I.i.arg.1). So the meaning of this first battle seems obvious: the truly holy knight or courtier must protect truth by suppressing error. Yet the episode itself undercuts this interpretation. For one thing, Una

warns Redcrosse to think carefully before he decides to advance into Error's Den:

Be well aware, quoth then that Ladie milde,
 Least suddaine mischief ye too rash provoke:
 The danger hid, the place unknowne and wilde,
 Breedes dreadfull doubts: Oft fire is without smoke,
 And perill without show: therefore your stroke
 Sir knight with-hold, till further tryall made.
 Ah Ladie (sayd he) shame were to revoke,
 The forward footing for an hidden shade:
 Vertue gives her selfe light, through darkenesse for to
 wade. (I.i.12)

Una's aphorism about fire without smoke highlights an important aspect of the literal situation: the knight himself is prone to error. Attacking at the wrong time, in the wrong way, or, worst of all, with the wrong target, can render courage fruitless. Redcrosse responds with his own pithy aphorism: "Virtue gives herself light." He believes that, if the combatant and cause are good, then evil loses its power to beguile. The stanza's dialectic raises a question: is virtue a sufficient protection against error?

Una tries to admonish Redcrosse that she knows the region and its dangers from experience and he should be wary (13.1-8), but in vain:

But full of fire and greedy hardiment,
 The youthfull knight could not for ought be staide,
 But forth unto the darksom hole he went,
 And looked in: his glistring armor made
 A litle glooming light, much like a shade,
 By which he saw the ugly monster plaine,
 Halfe like a serpent horribly displaide,
 But th'other halfe did womans shape retaine,
 Most lothsom, filthie, foule, and full of vile disdaine.
 (14)

What stands out most here is the imagery of the gleaming armor. Redcrosse has boasted that his virtue will provide its own light. His armor does glow in the cave, but its light is “litle” and “glooming.” The latter word puns on “gloom” and “gleam,” evoking darkness and light at once. The light is “much like a shade”—a faintly glowing ghost or wisp. The armor gleams, but its light is *like darkness*, so that it obfuscates rather than illuminates. Having ignored the counsel of Truth, Redcrosse sees Error erroneously, in a hazy half-light. By entering into Error’s den, the knight actually falls prey to the monster he intends to destroy. Redcrosse’s eventual triumph can easily make us forget that his entry into the battle was itself an error. To approach Error, even intending to overcome her, is to be *implicated* in her—caught in her coils. Redcrosse is tricked into abandoning Una in the very next scene. Blinded by error, he is cut off from Truth.

We can see here Spenser’s sensitivity to the logic of poetic imagery. A knight wrestling with a serpent may be trying to kill it, but from another angle he is also embracing it. Can the Christian gentleman attack error head-on, whether by legislation or education, without doing likewise? In this scene, it is apparently more important to talk to Truth and listen to her than to jump to her defense. The fiery zeal of the young apologist, or the young politician, needs to be checked by Truth’s most vital service: learning. So the Christian gentleman, for Spenser, must be a careful student of the truth, not just a spirited watchdog. Other virtues like honesty and courage are not sufficient to keep us out of error’s coils—better to withdraw and avail oneself of wisdom than rush headlong into debate. We might go further and note that Error was not the dragon Redcrosse was recruited to fight. If he had gone straight for the serpent tyrannizing Una’s kingdom, perhaps this other dragon might have been nullified in the process. In the soul as well as in the commonwealth, spiritual tyranny is the great threat; wrong thinking is only a symptom. Christian “elites” should be led by a pious devotion to truth and a hatred for the devil’s works, not by an obsession with rooting out bad opinions. Such an obsession only leads deeper into confusion.

A PROPERLY PROTESTANT PIETY

Now, any reader of Spenser knows that his notion of spiritual tyranny includes the scourge of Roman Catholicism. Each villain in Book I (Archimago, Duessa, Corcera, Lucifera, the dragon) is redolent of papistry. Take, for instance, the satirical description of the blind Corcera:

[T]hat old woman day and night did pray
 Upon her beades devoutly penitent;
 Nine hundred *Pater nosters* every day,
 And thrise nine hundred *Aves* she was wont to say.
 (I iii 13.6-9)

Corcera and her daughter Abessa live in isolation, praying penitently and apparently encountering hardly anyone, except for Kirkrapine, a church robber to whom Abessa prostitutes herself in exchange for stolen sanctuary ornaments (iii 17).

The satire here is multifaceted, but the anti-monastic invective is clear. For Spenser, the blind devotion of medieval religion had opened the door for impious interlopers to pillage the Church and abuse the faithful. Corcera, caught up in endless ritual, turns a literal blind eye to the corruption of her daughter by a blasphemous rogue. As an attack on monasticism (Abessa’s name suggests “abbess”), this passage is of course retrospective—there were no functioning monasteries or abbeys in Elizabethan England. It is also a conventional satire, with a well-trodden satirical message: pious practice, isolated from ethical and social concerns, is not genuine holiness. As an Elizabethan Protestant, Spenser is typical in attributing this empty piety to the ever-present specter of popery.

But as an attack on popery, Book I is quite idiosyncratic. The Redcrosse Knight encounters a kind of foil to Corcera’s cottage toward the end, in the House of Holiness. The mistress of this house is Caelia. She is

a matrone grave and hore;
 Whose onely joy was to relieve the needes
 Of wretched soules, and helpe the helpless pore:

All night she spent in bidding of her bedes;
 And all the day in doing good and godly deedes.
 (I x 3.5-9)

In contrast to Corcera, Caelia spends her days in works of charity. But what about the beads? Commentators have long been puzzled by this detail, reiterated a few stanzas later (8.3). Why does Spenser include such an obviously Catholic note?

**BY CONTEMPLATING HEAVEN,
 REDCROSSE REDISCOVERS HIS EARTHLY
 TASK. IT SEEMS NECESSARY TO LONG FOR
 THE PURELY SPIRITUAL LIFE, TO DESPISE
 EARTHLY WARFARE, BUT TO ACCEPT
 ONE'S DUTY HUMBLY.**

This is not the only such detail we find in the House of Holiness. While there, the Redcrosse Knight has to undergo an elaborate process of repentance to clear himself of his sins and consummate his holiness. This process, far from being “by faith alone,” involves penance by flagellation and red hot pincers (x 26.8, 27.1), as well as fasting and mandatory works of mercy, guided by “seven Bead-men” (36.3). Spenser passes up an obvious opportunity to ridicule medieval asceticism and advance a simpler, more Protestant poetics of salvation.

Lewis says the Catholic furniture of the scene is unproblematic, because Protestants only object to literal beads and whips, not allegorical ones—something of a dodge.⁷ Other commentators, such as Paul McLane, have concluded from the same evidence that Spenser was himself a “Catholic-leaning,” rather than Puritan, sort of Anglican.⁸ For our present purposes, what is most interesting about these details is their context. The House of Holiness is not a monastery,

but a private home. Caelia oversees it with the aid of her three daughters, Fidelia, Speranza, and Charissa—the theological virtues. Fidelia and Speranza are virgins, though betrothed, but Charissa, the emblem of Christian love, is married with many children (I x 4). We also know that their house employs a porter (5), a groom (17), and an in-house doctor (23). The site of Redcrosse’s spiritual healing is not a monastery or church, but the estate of an aristocratic family. It seems that Spenser inserts conventional ecclesiastical imagery into the scene in order to highlight its distinctly non-ecclesial setting. The sanctifying role formerly assigned to religious orders is taken up by pious laypeople, whose homes become spiritual hospitals.

Whether Spenser really approved of beads and whips, these objects signify the passing of that mantle. Caelia and Charissa balance prayer and charity, as medieval satirists encouraged their readers to do. But Spenser adds a third component: by engaging in marriage and childrearing, his holy women have a stake in the natural life of the commonwealth. Redcrosse, too, is destined for marriage and family after defeating the dragon. These characters signal Spenser’s ideal of Christian “elites” as the spiritual lifeblood of their nation—linked to society through family, and sanctifying society by prayer and charity.

There is considerable tension implicit in this ideal. How can a gentleman or lady, bearing the demands of the family and the commonwealth, reconcile such demands with the life of holiness? Spenser is aware of the problem. At the end of his period of convalescence in the House of Holiness, the Redcrosse Knight is led up a hill by a sage called Contemplation, to view from afar the city of New Jerusalem. After Redcrosse marvels at the city’s beauty, the sage tells him that he must journey there after his knightly career is complete: “Thenceforth the suitt of earthly conquest shonne,/And wash thy hands from guilt of bloody field:/For blood can nought but sin, and wars but sorrows yield” (60.7-9). Shockingly, Contemplation claims that the necessary bloodshed of knight-hood leads only to sin and sorrow. This makes for

7. Lewis, *Allegory of Love*, 403.

8. Paul E. Maclane, *Spenser’s Shepherdes Calender: A Study in Elizabethan Allegory* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1968), 117-118.

THE UNIQUELY PROTESTANT CONTRIBUTION OF *THE FAERIE QUEENE* IS THAT IT IMAGINES THE LOST MONASTIC CLASS OF ENGLAND REPLACED BY A CLASS OF SEMI-MONASTIC NOBILITY.

puzzling allegory. Must the public virtue required of the noble Christian be an occasion of sin? The question seems to occur to Redcrosse as well, because he asks to be allowed to give up knighthood:

O let me not (quoth he) then turne againe
 Backe to the world, whose joyes so fruitlesse are,
 But let me heare for aie in peace remaine,
 Or streight way on that last long voiage fare,
 That nothing may my present hope empare.
 That may not be (said he) ne maist thou yitt
 Forgoe that royal maides bequeathed care,
 Who did her cause into thy hand committ,
 Till from her cursed foe thou haue her freely quitt.
 (I x 63)

Redcrosse's desire is not to die and hasten to heaven, but to trade the active for the contemplative life. His hope of heaven is impaired by the dangers of moral striving. The peaceful and saintly life seems the surer road. But Contemplation himself corrects this error. In fact, Redcrosse's pledge to help Una and his duty to destroy the satanic dragon are the first directives of holiness. Allegorically, we may say that, by contemplating heaven, Redcrosse rediscovers his earthly task. It seems necessary to long for the purely spiritual life, to despise earthly warfare, but to accept one's duty humbly.

But how is the Christian to engage in warfare without incurring the stains of bloodguilt? Contemplation's answer might not sit well with us today. The sage tells Redcrosse that, while the Fairy Queen's court may not compare to the glory of the New Jerusalem, it is yet the greatest seat of power on earth, and it is no wonder that knights flock there to "[do] their service to that soueraigne Dame,/That glory does to them for guerdon graunt:/For she is heuently borne, and heauen may justly vaunt" (59.7-9). The Fairy Queen gives glory as a

"guerdon" or reward to faithful knights. But the glory she grants is not identical with the mere praise of men. Being "heavenly born," the Fairy Queen offers a glory that mirrors heavenly glory. A godly sovereign, who receives her majesty from God, may rightly accept earthly honors. Likewise the godly knight who excels in the sovereign's service may rightly accept earthly honors, since he derives glory from the sovereign, who avowedly derives it from God. The noble Christian avoids the vanity of earthly pursuits by serving a godly ruler. For Spenser, this is Elizabeth Tudor.

We may recoil from the apparent suggestion that all acts done in service of a Christian magistrate receive the stamp of God. Spenser does not press the point, and this comment about the Fairy Queen actually precedes Contemplation's pronouncement that Redcrosse must eventually wash his hands of war. There is still the great difficulty of sifting just and unjust works, and the reality remains that earthly duties are never perfectly coterminous with one's duty to God. One must walk the narrow path to the New Jerusalem. But Spenser would have us look meanwhile to the God-given outposts of righteousness on earth. Marriage is one; selfless public service, especially under a godly prince, is another. In these spheres we can live out a genuine—if penultimate—earthly holiness, prevailing over sin by faith and daily combat. The vision granted by contemplation stirs the holy mind to action.

CONCLUSION

Our brief survey has illuminated how *The Faerie Queene* is, despite first appearances, a pertinent book for today. The beauty of Spenser's allegorical approach is that the concrete problems of his day—corrupt courtiers, the Church of Rome, ignorant clergy—appear as images that transcend their real context. Spenser's fairyland is an at-

tempt to universalize Elizabethan England, to abstract from its national struggles the great spiritual struggles of humanity. For Spenser, the responsibility to meet these struggles falls primarily to rulers, gentlemen, and noble persons. His poem is a course in moral wisdom for Christian elites.

How can Spenser's ideal inform our own practice? Above all, we may find in him an exhortation to take spiritual responsibility for our respective societies. The uniquely Protestant contribution of *The Faerie Queene* is that it imagines the lost monastic class of England replaced by a class of semi-monastic nobility. Consider Caelia, engaged in both household affairs and charitable acts by day, steeped in prayer at night. Her daughter Charissa is both a busy mother and a spiritual teacher for pilgrims. Their home looks like a spiritual commune, open to the whole gamut of pious practices from charity to study to contemplation. In order for Redcrosse Knights to arise in our world and fight evil, we may infer, it is first necessary for the homes of privileged Christian families to become Houses of Holiness. Communities ordered toward piety and civil service are the best instrument with which to sanctify a nation. Spenser imagines such communities founded not on celibacy but on marriage, the natural institution whereby God binds human beings together. In our day copious advice is heaped on young Christian families, but how much of it advises couples to convert their homes into spiritual retreat centers? Spenser's vision begins with the family, but the family must be open to the broader Christian community and ultimately remember that it serves the spiritual good of the commonwealth. The image of the House of Holiness is that of grace repairing nature.

Just as family life overlaps with religious and political life for Spenser, so the life of contemplation mingles with the life of action. Much of *The Faerie Queene* Book

I can be read as a warning not to allow one to eclipse the other. How can you wage war with Error if you've spent no time learning at the feet of Truth? On another allegorical level, however, the same scene could also be read as a warning against frivolous learning. Redcrosse indulges his curiosity about a monster who vomits paper and ink instead of attending single-mindedly to his knightly duty. In the 2020s, the serpentine monster of Error might be the endless chain of hyperlinks or the endless scroll of social media, distracting from active virtue. We need Spenser's reminder that our duty involves both study and work—that one is incomplete without the other. We need more leaders chastened by thinking, and more scholars emboldened by conviction.

Embedded in all this is a slightly tragic outlook on earthly life. Although Spenser thought highly of his nation, his Christian knight wages war in an imperfect society that is only a shadow of the kingdom above. In this earthly kingdom, moral striving often produces collateral damage; differing duties run crosswise; loves and loyalties compete. It is no wonder that the Redcrosse Knight's greatest temptation, before he reaches the House of Holiness, is despair. *The Faerie Queene*, in its immense length and complexity, manifests the tensions present in every virtue, and this is part of the point. Through his poem, Spenser manifests vigorous *thinking* about the task of life. He does not give us the formula, but asks that we follow his example and think along with him. Our Christian elites could do much worse than to join Spenser in this—what he called his “endless work.”

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Lockdown

BY MALCOLM GUYE

I make another circuit of the lawn,
And pad through shadows at my own slow pace,
Watching and waiting for the coming dawn.

Depressed and restless, yawning and forlorn,
I follow my self-beaten path's faint trace
And make another circuit of the lawn

Along the narrow way my steps have worn
Around and round again to the same place,
Watching and waiting for the coming dawn.

Somewhere the valleys still stand thick with corn,
Somewhere a field is fringed with Queen Anne's lace,
I make another circuit of the lawn.

Somewhere a mother cries, a child is born,
Somewhere a worried woman lifts her face,
Watching and waiting for the coming dawn.

The last grey rags of night are rent and torn,
There steals upon my heart some secret grace,
I make one final circuit of the lawn
And stand my ground, to face the coming dawn.

BOOKS AND ARTS

*Calvin and the Resignification of
the World: Creation, Incarnation,
and the Problem of Political
Theology in the 1559 Institutes*
by Michelle Chaplin Sanchez

REVIEWED BY BRUCE GORDON

At the opening of the final Latin edition of his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, John Calvin writes that his purpose is to “persuade” his readers. Language can be deceptive. He certainly did not mean that his intention was merely to convince the students for whom he wrote of fixed theological affirmations—he was not writing a textbook. “*Persuasio*,” as Calvin employed the classical term, meant a conversion of the whole person, body and soul, to a new form of life, that is, to the sanctified life. The oft-rehearsed clichés that have Calvin as the progenitor of a cerebral, intellectual form of Christianity have wholly overlooked his deeply incarnational assumptions. The Genevan Reformer did not like the term “*theologia*”; he preferred “*doctrina*”, that is, *teaching* for the Church, rather than just the God-talk of theologians. For Calvin, the work of interpretation revolved

wholly around making the Word manifest in the world. Interpretation was about shaping lives. Although he was a careful reader of the Scholastics, he flatly rejected speculative theology as being like Icarus flying too close to the sun—it could not answer the questions it posed and the effort was hubris. All that men and women need to know has been revealed in Scripture and creation. They required only spectacles to see.

Historians of early modern religion have often been as far from the mark in understanding Calvin as Calvin felt the Scholastic were in understanding God. Much of the recent, and welcome, attention to the study of emotions and imagination has assumed that Calvin and his followers lacked both. Unlike Lutherans and Catholics, Calvinists, or, better, the Reformed, are held to have had

no aesthetic of beauty, no place for visual culture. Scholars such as William Dyrness have argued otherwise, but until now we have not had a full theological/historical account of the signified world in which Calvin lived and which he sought to reorient.

In *Calvin and the Resignification of the World: Creation, Incarnation, and the Problem of Political Theology in the 1559 Institutes*,¹ Michelle Chaplin Sanchez does much more than deconstruct old orthodoxies such as this. She provides a fresh way of understanding Calvin on his own terms, as well as in conversation with modernity. In so doing, she dislodges the assumption of many (including students of theology): that premodern texts such as the *Institutes* express a world from which we have been (thank goodness) emancipated. Through a brilliant reading of the 1559 *Institutes*, Chaplin Sanchez provides us with a text that is alive, protean, and often ambiguous. Its tensions are not simply inconsistencies of the author, but reflections of the enormity of the questions being addressed and the contingency of their answers. Theology exists not in the abstract, but in material, contextual and embodied forms that ebb and flow.

Calvin was both a liminal and a central figure in his world. In his native Noyon and in Paris and Bourges he received a superb education in the arts and law; his teachers were among the luminaries of the French Renaissance. Yet the payment for his religious convictions was exile, ending up for more than twenty years in Geneva, where he never felt wholly welcome or at home. He was at once an embodiment of elite and privileged culture as well as a man who spoke to exiles and refugees as one of their own, and the appeal of his sermons and writings for the dislocated of the sixteenth century is well known. Chaplin Sanchez provides us, however, with a deeper understanding of exile in his thought and his life. In particular, she focuses on providence and incarnation as expressed from the margins.

1. *Calvin and the Resignification of the World: Creation, Incarnation, and the Problem of Political Theology in the 1559 Institutes* by Michelle Chaplin Sanchez. Cambridge University Press, 2019, \$105, pp. 378.

The book takes us away from the stolid image of Calvin carved in the Reformation Wall in Geneva. Calvin inherited from his beloved Augustine an understanding both of the world as signified and of our need to be oriented through it. Humans, in spirit and in body, are taught through signs and are active in that formation. Therefore, for both Augustine and Calvin, writing is both learning and teaching, a crucial part of the path to wisdom, which is knowledge of God and self. The *Institutes*, therefore, is a living and, above all, participatory text. Not only is Calvin active as author, but the reader participates in the resignifying of the world through the text and its effect on the body, and the divine is encountered through the materialization of signs in the world.

CALVIN INHERITED FROM HIS BELOVED AUGUSTINE AN UNDERSTANDING BOTH OF THE WORLD AS SIGNIFIED AND OF OUR NEED TO BE ORIENTED THROUGH IT. HUMANS, IN SPIRIT AND IN BODY, ARE TAUGHT THROUGH SIGNS AND ARE ACTIVE IN THAT FORMATION.

The interpretation of the Word, for Calvin, was precisely about how to relate to creation. The *Institutes* are performative, but so are the readers, who inhabit a world described by the Reformer as the theater of God's glory. The daily lives of those who are transformed are played out on its stage, suffering depredations just as Calvin was wracked with bodily pain. In many respects, Calvin's own diseased body was the location of his theological beliefs; he made no distinction between them. Just as, in his 2017 biography, Lyndal Roper has given us Martin Luther the embodied theologian, Chaplin Sanchez directs our eyes to much the same in Geneva.

When Brad Gregory's *The Unintended Reformation* appeared in 2012, much of the ensuing debate coalesced around the question of how to read pre-modern authors. Should we, as Gregory maintained, only seek to understand them on their own terms? Or, as his critics countered, do modern theorists offer us a better way

to understand the past? Chaplin Sanchez undoes this binary in her book by demonstrating its harmfulness. In her chapters on the *Institutes* she offers a lucid and compelling analysis of the work in its theological, literary, and historical aspects, offering a persuasive guide to navigating the four books. At the same time, and not simply afterwards, she keeps us in dialogue with a broad range of contemporary thinkers, demonstrating that a brilliant text like the *Institutes* is fully capable of sustaining readings far from the worldview of the early modern author. Indeed, Calvin wove together the writings of the ancients with the pressing concerns of his audience. We learn much about the strategies of language and the porous boundaries between words and things that are so central to Calvin's writing. Chaplin Sanchez enables us to understand the multiple means by which theological writings can shape the lives of people through attention to the details in which they exist. They create intimate connections between the self and those particularities. The Word is not simply imposed in a formulaic manner; rather, it creates selves in the world that are responsive to its dynamic force, opening possibilities for action in the form of resistance, or, in our time, activism and protest.

Perhaps the most exciting aspect of this beautifully argued and powerfully written book is the radicalness of Calvin. The “tyrant of Geneva” of popular imagination gazed far beyond the walls of his adopted home. Calvin the lawyer well understood institutions and their legal

frameworks, but that is not where the story ends. The true site of God's work and human response is in creation, not in structures of authority, whether temporal or ecclesiastical. The true measure of all things is creation, God's self-manifestation. As Chaplin Sanchez tells us, Calvin is a profound critic of forms of sovereignty: they are legitimate only when measured against the reality of creation. Sovereign powers have no independent authority or entitlement. When found in error they can be resisted. We are reminded of Allan Boesak's account of reading John Calvin in the context of resistance to Apartheid: the man he thought a foundation for racial segregation turned out to be its most radical opponent.

To see Calvin in this way through Chaplin Sanchez's book is not to indulge in nostalgia for the sixteenth century. Much in Calvin is genuinely troubling, such as his views on suffering. But the French refugee, writing from “the site of the inglorious”, espoused an embodied resignification that offers much for a world desperately in need of redirection.

Dr. Bruce Gordon is Titus Street Professor of Ecclesiastical History at Yale Divinity School. He is the author of numerous books, including John Calvin's Institutes of the Christian Religion (Princeton 2016) Calvin (Yale, 2009), The Swiss Reformation (Manchester, 2002), and most recently Zwingli: God's Armed Prophet (Yale, 2021).

COMING JULY 2022

IT'S TIME FOR A REFORMATION IN CLASSICAL EDUCATION.

As the great educational movement known as “classical Christian education” enters its third generation, it is time for its practitioners to consider what has been achieved and what work remains to be done. Originally delivered at the eighth annual Davenant Convivium Irenicum, this work both poses searching questions to classical Christian education, and proposes constructive steps toward a renewed Protestant vision of learning.

Featuring essays by Gene Edward Veith, Brad Littlejohn, Colin Redemer, Michael Lynch, & more.

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REFORMING CLASSICAL EDUCATION

Toward A
New Paradigm

PROCEEDINGS FROM
THE 8TH ANNUAL
CONVIVIVM IRENICUM

EDITED BY RHYS LAVERTY

*Living In Union With Christ:
Paul's Gospel and
Christian Moral Identity*
by Grant Macaskill

REVIEWED BY JOSHUA HEAVIN

Though confusion afflicts the Church in every age, ours is one especially prone to misunderstand the basic nature and purpose of the Christian life. When forced to answer questions about personal identity and self-understanding, many within the Church rely far more on individualistic self-determination than anything distinctively Christian. Then, when suffering accosts us unexpectedly, our sense of self is shattered. Our sense of identity consists in the things we know or the things we do. This might impress others temporarily, but it crumbles when we next err, receive heartbreaking news, or experience real evil or malice. But the Christian life is not only (or not even primarily) about us, our happenings, and our doings.

Grant Macaskill's 2019 book, *Living in Union with Christ*,¹ contributes powerful resources for understand-

ing how and why union with Christ informs the whole of the Christian life. Macaskill, the Kirby Laing Chair of New Testament Exegesis at the University of Aberdeen, has tackled the subject previously in his 2013 book *Union with Christ in the New Testament*, tracing the doctrine's reception history from the Church Fathers to the magisterial Reformers and modern theologians, before offering a careful exegetical account of the New Testament data. *Living in Union with Christ* is based on lectures delivered at Reformed Theological Seminary, but it is not merely a condensed popularization of his prior book. New material particularly focuses on the contribution of the Pauline epistles to our understanding of how union with Christ informs Christian identity and moral agency. Macaskill's prose is inviting, and reminds the reader throughout why all of this matters. The book's tone is not light, but nor is it dense or inaccessible to non-scholars. For instance, Macaskill throughout introduces his interlocutors with

1. *Living In Union With Christ: Paul's Gospel and Christian Moral Identity* by Grant Macaskill, Baker Academic, 2019, \$24.99, pp. 179.

brief descriptions of their views, particularly on matters familiar to Pauline specialists but less well-known to non-specialists and lay readers.

Macaskill states that “the core claim of this book is that all talk of the Christian moral life must begin and end with Paul’s statement ‘it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me’ (Gal. 2:20), and must understand the work of the Holy Spirit rightly in relation to Christ’s presence. This assertion is the *sine qua non* of the Christian moral life, which is rendered void in its absence” (1). Macaskill’s own summary of his basic claim and its significance is worth quoting at length:

The key point explored in some detail through the body of this book can here be summarized in terms of the prepositions that govern it. Jesus Christ is not represented simply as the one *through* whom we have forgiveness, or even as the one *by* whom the moral life is exemplified, but as the one *in* whom the life of discipleship takes place. Christ himself is present *in* the life of the disciple as the principal moral agent. We are not simply saved *by* him, nor do we merely follow *after* him – though both of these continue to be true – but we participate *in* him. This is why Paul so frequently specifies that the realities of the Christian life are “in Christ.” ... The Spirit, meanwhile, who is so important to Paul’s account of the moral life, is represented not as helping us to fulfill our frustrated potential but as realizing with us the identity of the Son, and he does this because he himself is the Spirit *of* the Son (Gal. 4:6) (2).

According to Macaskill, for Paul, Christ himself is the acting subject of the Christian life as the Spirit of God manifests Christ’s presence in us (66). The Christian life is not merely something we undertake as discrete individuals, acting in various degrees of success and failure on the basis of our own potentialities. Yet, neither is it the case that in Christ we cease to exist as our particular selves, as if only Christ himself is ever the acting subject amidst our ongoing failures. Rather, we who have been crucified with Christ no longer live, but *Christ lives within us, as we live by faith* in the Son of God who loved us and gave himself for us.

Macaskill explicitly builds upon Calvin’s reading of union with Christ in Paul, in which the “double grace” of justification and sanctification are apprehended distinctly but inseparably as the Holy Spirit unites us with Christ by faith. Macaskill develops a reading of Paul that accounts for what traditional Protestant dogmatics referred to as the “alien righteousness” of Christ, but in a way that challenges how modern people tend to conceive of the self as discrete and buffered from external influences. Drawing on the work of Susan Eastman, Macaskill describes how, for Paul, the self can be indwelt by the controlling power of sin (Rom 7:20), or the risen Christ (Gal. 2:20).

MACASKILL OFFERS A BETTER PATH FORWARD, ARGUING THAT A PROPERLY CHRISTIAN ACCOUNT OF MORAL AGENCY WILL HOLD THAT CHRIST HIMSELF LIVES AND ACTS WITHIN THE SELF AS IT IS RECONSTITUTED IN UNION WITH CHRIST.

Macaskill first sketches recent attempts to revise our understanding of justification and sanctification in Paul, narrating roughly the last fifty years of New Testament scholarship. He expresses both appreciation and criticism towards the readings of Paul from the 1970s and 1980s which laudably sought to correct prejudices and caricatures about his Second Temple Jewish context, but involved less sustainable accounts of Paul’s Christology (e.g. Dunn and Wright) (20).

Finally, Macaskill is concerned that the popular practice of contemporary churches, sometimes in unintended but nonetheless real contradiction of their own theological traditions, displays an inadequate grasp of union with Christ in Christian moral agency, in a variety of mutually exclusive ways (3). For example, routinely, in popular piety, Christ is reduced to a moral exemplar for imitation; or, conversely a right emphasis on the incongruity of God’s grace becomes a license to sin. Elsewhere churches and their members might clearly un-

derstand that Christ died and rose for our justification, but then conclude that he gave us the Holy Spirit so that, from here on out, we can grow in obedience apart from our union with him.

Macaskill offers a better path forward, arguing that a properly Christian account of moral agency will hold that Christ himself lives and acts within the self as it is reconstituted in union with Christ. Put another way, although the revival of virtue theory in the past few decades in theology and Protestant ethics has been salutary in many respects, its explanatory power for moral agency in Paul is limited, because the existence we have in Christ shatters the mold of the gradually improving self (25).

Chapter two especially focuses on Paul's claim in Galatians 2:20; chapter three clarifies how Paul uses baptismal and clothing language to locate Christian existence within Christ himself; chapter four explores Paul's Christological re-working of covenantal and exodus traditions from Israel's scriptures, especially the *Shema* of Deuteronomy 6:4. A powerful and unique contribution in this regard are Macaskill's arguments for the priority of divine unicity and divine simplicity as informing Paul's Christological and participatory reading of scripture. Chapter five outlines how the Holy Spirit is crucial to Christian moral agency and Christ's indwelling of his members, particularly focusing on Paul's arguments in Galatians 3–4 that the Holy Spirit is the Spirit *of the Son*, received through our adoption.

Chapter six is perhaps the most pastorally rich, clarifying how Christian hope is determined by our union with Christ as the Spirit realizes Christ's life and victory in us, even as we suffer and struggle. Macaskill writes:

“By linking Jesus's past and future to Christian moral identity and understanding that identity as constituted by the acting presence of Christ in our lives now, we see it in terms very different from the ones in which it is often cast. We do not only look back at a past event from which we benefit, a transaction made on our behalf, and we do not only look forward to a future in which we will be definitely better. We look back to a past that is ours now, and as with all backstories, it de-

fines who we are. At the same time, we look forward to a future that will bring to its perfect realization what we genuinely are, as we are in Christ” (115).

Each small act of obedience is the Spirit's work manifesting Christ's presence in our lives and our world. But particularly amidst suffering, bewilderment, and lack of assurance, “we have the Spirit of the Son in us, and when our own spirits have nothing to give and no hope in themselves, his Spirit lifts us up and helps us to trust and testify that we are children of God” (123). A final, brief chapter offers a panorama of the new horizons that unfold upon rightly apprehending life in union with Christ. Our sense of our own selves, our outlook on how people change, our obligations of love amidst contemporary divisiveness in the bonds of unity established by Christ himself, what exactly the problem with legalism really is, our notions of virtue, and how the doctrine of the Trinity relates to the Christian life are all refracted through our union with Christ.

Overall, Macaskill has contributed a theologically informed and exegetically sustainable account of moral agency in Paul's epistles, filled with rich pastoral implications. A matter of clarity that might improve the argument of this book concerns the place of Galatians 2:20 as the key to the whole of Christian moral agency. In his prior book Macaskill helpfully established how participatory motifs are used throughout the entire New Testament. But, as stated, Macaskill writes that “all talk of the Christian moral life must begin and end with Paul's statement ‘it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me’ (Galatians 2:20)” (1). If by this Macaskill only wishes to indicate that Galatians 2:20 is a crucial and often neglected passage for reflecting on Christian moral agency, then this is true enough. But necessary, too, is further development of the canonical and dogmatic principles outlining how Paul's declaration relates to non-Pauline passages of Scripture that bear on theological ethics.

I want to suggest four reasons why I hope Grant Macaskill's *Living in Union with Christ* receives a wide hearing. First, this book represents a masterful example of historically-informed theological interpretation rendered in engaging prose. It is unsurprising when critical

historians are indifferent or outright hostile towards Christian theological interpretation, but it is always disappointing when Christian scholars working in biblical studies are unaware of why historic doctrines such as divine simplicity matter. Macaskill charts a rare course, drawing not only upon his expertise in apocalyptic and early Jewish literature but further showing how classical trinitarianism and conciliar Christology are crucial for reading the New Testament today.

Second, there are significant ethical and even political implications to an account of Christian moral agency informed by union with Christ. At a bare minimum, our pervasively individualistic tendencies in the modern West must be challenged by realizing that we have put on Christ in baptism, and we belong not only to ourselves but to God and others. To that end, Macaskill’s book is a welcome aid.

Third, Macaskill contributes a resourceful account of Christian hope. It can be difficult to sense that Christ is truly living within us in the suffering and drudgeries of daily life, let alone in the seemingly constant moral failure we encounter, both in the Church and in ourselves. Macaskill’s account of the Holy Spirit manifesting Christ’s presence in our lives in even the smallest victories shines light into the darkness experienced by those who desire to change but despair at what can feel like constant or inevitable failure.

Finally, any serious reckoning with Christ himself will be a word that cuts us and heals us. Are our churches—

are *we*—known for the Spirit of God realizing Christ’s presence in us through love for God and neighbor? Routinely, while reading and re-reading Macaskill’s Pauline exegesis, I had to put the book down and reflect on the default understanding of moral agency not only “out there” among others but also in myself. I was forced to examine the notions of moral agency with which I consistently operate. It is tempting to imagine myself as an autonomous unit, in control of my life, safe from moral contagion, master of my own destiny before God and others—but this is all a lie. Our only comfort in life and in death is in our belonging to and participation in Christ. We need this fresh reminder that the hope of glory, “Christ in you,” is put in weak and fragile vessels to show that the all-surpassing power of the gospel belongs to God and not to us (Col 1:27, 2 Cor 4:7). Even those who already believe union with Christ is important—perhaps especially such persons—tend on a daily basis to regard ourselves as the primary acting subjects of our moral lives. We need to be slain and enlivened afresh by the Word of God, again and again, whose apostle teaches us, “it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me.”

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My Brother's Friends

for Justin, Fathers Day 2016

BY COLIN CHAN REDEMER

My brother's friends with carnies
he gets corndogs, dozens, free.
He's also friends with babies,
and the fans of Eazy-E.

He befriended his teachers
leaving me to disappoint.
He's even friends with creatures
who say, "moo" and "bah" and "oink."

He's befriended Companies
like the Raiders, IBM,
struggled with the Cantonese
but he got them in the end.

My brother's friends with friends of
friends. And friends of their friends too
and friends of friends of friends of
friends. He'll soon be friends with you.

BOOKS AND ARTS

*Jordan Peterson, God, and
Christianity: The Search for a
Meaningful Life*

by Christopher Kaczor & Matthew R. Petrussek

REVIEWED BY ANTHONY G. CIRILLA

Christianity in Jordan Peterson is for many a source of fascination, edification, and frustration, sometimes by turns and sometimes at the same time. To the Christian exploring his work and looking for a direct statement about the nature of Peterson's faith, Christianity can seem like a playful but mischievous will-o-wisp that flashes out brilliantly and grabs your attention, and then skitters away like a Neverland sprite. To the committed atheist, Christianity can seem to stretch elastically from old-fashioned metaphors propping up practical wisdom to dangerous polemic potentially leading his readers back into superstition (precisely Sam Harris's concern in their debates). As someone who was familiar with Peterson's work well before his controversial emergence into a greater sphere of public scrutiny with Bill C-16 in 2016, I have watched Peterson's discourse on Christianity with great interest because, somehow, he seems to be able to move the ball on the line between atheists and theists in a way YouTube-comment-section

debates have long made seem impossible. What makes him so gripping and compelling to both sides is that he gets the hero's journey of one of his predecessors, Joseph Campbell, and the archetypal qualities of interpretation of another, Northrop Frye, in a way that taps into the heart of the search for meaning that runs deeper than ideological postures. But when the question, "Do you believe in God?" is posed to him, he offers the frustrating, "I act as if I believe God exists," to the exasperated sighs of theists and atheists alike. Kaczor's and Petrussek's *Jordan Peterson, God, and Christianity: The Search for a Meaningful Life*¹ serves, in my view, as an excellent and rich dialogic engagement with Peterson that can help people navigate a nuanced catholic response to Peterson's thought.

1. *Jordan Peterson, God, and Christianity: The Search for a Meaningful Life* by Christopher Kaczor & Matthew R. Petrussek: Word on Fire, \$29.95, 240 pages.

WHERE KAZCOR EMPHASIZES FRUITFUL ENGAGEMENT, PETRUSEK BRINGS A MORE AGONISTIC (RATHER THAN ANTAGONISTIC) VOICE TO THE TABLE, EXPLICITLY WORKING TO DELINEATE WHERE PETERSON'S IDEAS REQUIRE THE ROBUST METAPHYSICS THAT, AS HE ARGUES, CHRISTIANITY CAN PROVIDE.

Misunderstanding and mischaracterization beset discourse around Peterson. But Peterson talks about ultimate questions, and discourse about ultimate questions will inevitably offend or unsettle many. So I have developed three criteria that I think should mark any Christian writing about him: 1) it should try to fairly and accurately depict where Peterson is coming from, and not let challenges of language justify easy or hasty critique; 2) it should engage how Peterson can be profitable to the Christian from an informed understanding of both special and general revelation; 3) it should firmly and lovingly delineate how Peterson's engagement with Christianity falls short of, but also invites defense of, traditional Christian theology, philosophy, and metaphysics. Blessedly, I found similar criteria set out by Petrusek, who set out with three goals in mind: 1) understanding Peterson, 2) learning from Peterson, and 3) critiquing Peterson with an evangelical eye—meaning to show how Christian orthodoxy (what C.S. Lewis called “mere Christianity”) provides a more comprehensive and accurate accounting of, and solution to, the problems Peterson so brilliantly diagnoses (79). Of course, a single book cannot begin to exhaust this discussion, but I hold this book as an excellent step forward in promoting that discussion.

The respective sections of the book meet these goals with different emphases, and so readers will, if they share my criteria, respond with different levels of satisfaction. The more Rogerian reader who is interested in how Christians can learn from Peterson will find Kaczor more to their liking, where for the most part he focuses on conceptual overlap between Peterson's Biblical series and biblical theologians both ancient or medieval (such as Augustine, Aquinas, and Hugh of St. Victor), and modern (Barron, Prager, Ratzinger). At times these chapters will strike those more strictly interested in critique as

sometimes perhaps too irenic—as with the chapters on Creation and the Fall for example. Differences between Catholic and Protestant models of interpretation will emerge here, though Kaczor is for that reason probably a better entry voice for the agnostic wary of eager apologists. Kaczor's “ecumenical” posture with Peterson (for lack of a more precise word) truly shines in the chapter on Cain and Abel, the flood narrative, the Tower of Babel, and Abraham, where he intersects Peterson's archetypal reading of the passage with rigorous biblical and theological voices to craft a call to heroic life appealing to pagan and Christian alike, thus reading very much like a Christian presentation of the Petersonian call to responsibility. Kaczor's tantalizing chapter on C.S. Lewis and Peterson, where he broaches the debate between the Petersonian “the Christian myth is true enough to live by” perspective and the Lewisian “Christianity is myth become fact” view, is a discussion managed well but too briefly. I find it puzzling, however, that even as he appeals to Eleonore Stump's masterpiece, *Walking in Darkness: Narrative and the Problem of Suffering*, he does not engage the Catholic voice who most informed Lewis's own Protestant take on mythopoeia, and one much discussed by Peterson: J.R.R. Tolkien.

Where Kaczor emphasizes fruitful engagement, Petrusek brings a more agonistic (rather than antagonistic) voice to the table, explicitly working to delineate where Peterson's ideas require the robust metaphysics that, as he argues, Christianity can provide. This difference may be due to Petrusek engaging *12 Rules for Life* rather than the Biblical lectures. He does a masterful job treating the twelve rules under three subheadings: “The Problem of Meaning and Its Pursuit” dealing with rules seven and one, “The Problem of Pain and Its Antidote” dealing with rules eight, nine, and ten, and “The Problem of True Love,” considering rules two, three, and five

(79).² Among these, the first provides one of the most satisfying, punctiliar explanations of where Peterson cannot supply a satisfying metaphysics of meaning given his present stance: “If there is no ontological or even rational content to the existence of absolute goodness, then everything else in the system of meaning breaks down because its foundation, its touchstone, dissolves into sand” (93). Peterson calls us to the adventure, but the next stage of that adventure is to be found in Augustine and Aquinas, not Jung and Campbell (97). Peterson’s detractors often exaggerate the perception of pride and Darwinian self-advancement in his work, but Petrusek illustrates in the chapter on pride that there is an epistemic need for humility that the Christian theological tradition offers that can step in where Peterson’s own rules get muddled: if we cannot say that God exists but only that we must act as if he does, then human access to final truth is undermined, “and the cost of *that* is to obliterate Peterson’s truth-telling rules: if there is no truth, then it’s impossible not to lie because there is no truth (and thus no lies to tell either)” (110).

Chapter 9 provides a Christian response to a sort of Manichean angst in Peterson, an endless battle between order and chaos, pointing out that the Christian belief in cosmic love is a legitimate basis for optimism which Peterson desperately needs. The final chapter stands to my mind as an antidote to what can become a kind of psychological Pelagianism for the Christian immersed in Peterson: “Rather, where Christianity fundamentally departs from Peterson is in *how* following these rules is possible in the first place... We can be a worthy opponent to death perhaps (and that is a big perhaps), but not a victor. Nobody beats death. Well, almost no-

body... Jesus Christ creates the conditions for redemption. He establishes himself as the bridge to the fullness of life” (154-157).

CHAPTER 9 PROVIDES A CHRISTIAN RESPONSE TO A SORT OF MANICHEAN ANGST IN PETERSON, AN ENDLESS BATTLE BETWEEN ORDER AND CHAOS, POINTING OUT THAT THE CHRISTIAN BELIEF IN COSMIC LOVE IS A LEGITIMATE BASIS FOR OPTIMISM WHICH PETERSON DESPERATELY NEEDS.

The co-authored section on *Beyond Order* integrates those Rogerian and Toulminesque models of argumentation, balancing an obligation to afford Peterson earnest consideration with a necessary critique of the ultimate gulf between his views on suffering and those of Christianity. Although a short chapter, it underscores the fact that the relationship between Christianity being “psychologically correct” and the literal, forensic claims of the New Testament is not merely an academic discourse. Instead, “the difference between the two is as vast and relevant as the differences between reading a great love story and falling in love yourself” (177).

The transcript between Dr. Peterson and Bishop Barron which concludes the book was originally a YouTube video, one which I watched the day it went live. The living energy between two premier public intellectuals, one the ambassador between psychology and pragmatic life and the other one of the great Catholic apologists of our day, is real, and it is worth both listening to the video and reading the transcript to get the full impact of how much both interlocutors can pack into a breath. Indeed, one could say that the desire for this book was born in that lecture, where Peterson again and again exalts the *idea* of the *logos* and Bishop Barron responding each time by pointing to the need for that *logos* to be *real*. It is particularly interesting to see how the discussion on evil develops between them, where they both agree on

2. Peterson’s rules, for the unfamiliar, are:

1. “Stand up straight with your shoulders back.”
2. “Treat yourself like you are someone you are responsible for helping.”
3. “Make friends with people who want the best for you.”
4. “Compare yourself to who you were yesterday, not to who someone else is today.”
5. “Do not let your children do anything that makes you dislike them.”
6. “Set your house in perfect order before you criticize the world.”
7. “Pursue what is meaningful (not what is expedient).”
8. “Tell the truth — or, at least, don’t lie.”
9. “Assume that the person you are listening to might know something you don’t.”
10. “Be precise in your speech.”
11. “Do not bother children when they are skate-boarding.”
12. “Pet a cat when you encounter one on the street.”

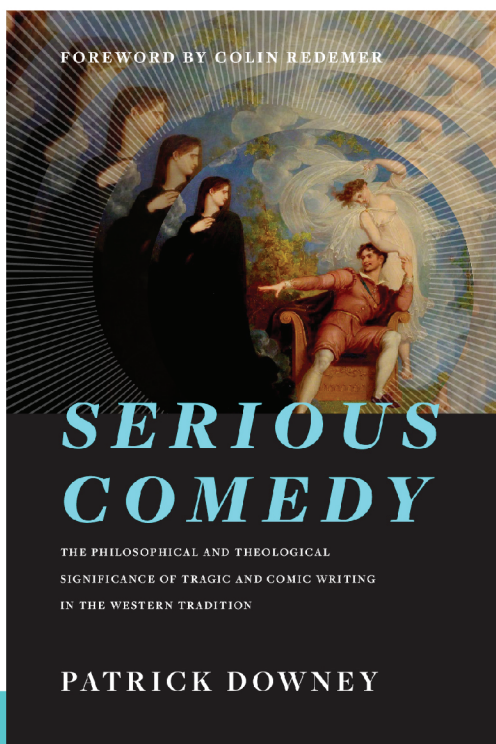
a lack of the Church's discourse on evil and damnation. Bishop Barron says, "We've become just too much of a mercy Church, in a way," and Peterson replies, "That's what I think. I don't think that you guys ask enough of your people. You're not giving them hell." A classic Petersonian pun. But more so than the "Jordan Peterson phenomenon," this book is an encouraging sign that humanity's search for meaning is being addressed by capable writers from a learned, sophisticated, and sober Christian perspective. No Christian would feel ashamed to hand this book to a friend who identifies as an agnostic Peterson fan.

One lacuna in the book is a lack of response to *Maps of Meaning*. That absence is understandable, given that Peterson's first book lacks the currency of his more recent work. Yet a chapter on it would have better grounded the book in a fuller picture of Peterson's perspective, rooting his popular discourse in his academic one. But

this is a quibble. The book is eminently readable, professional, and poised. Those who find Peterson's "rule books" accessible will find this book approachable and worthy of consideration. Worthy because the monsters of chaos, nihilism, and malevolence are not going away. As Peterson writes, "We think: if we're careful and we're quiet, the monster will avoid us completely. And everyone knows that's a lie" (214). And this book will aid Christians and non-Christians in contemplating how Peterson and the history of Christian theology alike seek to equip us to face those monsters of the heart.

Dr. Anthony G. Cirilla is a Visiting Fellow at Davenant Hall and teaches writing and literature courses at College of the Ozarks. He has published widely on a variety of topics and serves as associate editor of Carmina Philosophiae, the journal of the International Boethius Society.

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