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AD FONTES

A JOURNAL OF PROTESTANT LETTERS

JOHN WALNUT

The Faith of Agatha Christie

NATHAN TARR

Retrieving Teleios-ity: Matthew 5:48 in the History of Interpretation

C. STEPHEN EVANS

The Sickness Unto Death by Søren Kierkegaard, Translated by Bruce H. Kirmmse

Also featuring Daniel Goodman on Kierkegaard and repentance, Brad Littlejohn on Richard Hooker, and more

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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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From the Editor's Desk

“Nothing is so beautiful as Spring”—so wrote Gerard Manley Hopkins. I must confess that, for many years, I felt rather differently about the season. In a 2021 piece in this journal, my colleague Eric Hutchinson captured my feelings:

When I was younger, fall was my favorite season, in part because of its apparently Romantic-emo aesthetics, as the time when, in Shakespeare's phrase, the trees are “bare ruin'd choirs, where late the sweet birds sang.” “Isn't it,” I thought, “like, *po-etic*—the death and decay? A symbol of, like, life?”

But something has changed for me—as indeed it did for Eric. Now, in the winters, I long for spring. It might be my getting older. By that, I don't mean some sense of my mortality brought on by the relentless turning wheel of the seasons. It's quite the opposite—a sense of my own *vitality*. And by that, I don't mean being impressed by my own energy levels. I am past thirty now, and a father of three—already past the peak age of most athletes, and being outfoxed regularly by small, wakeful children.

No, I mean the sheer sense of the fact that *there is life here*. It was a wet and cold Spring in England this year, but when those warmer, greener days broke through,

bits of poetry from “the three Thomases” came to mind, as they do every year: Dylan Thomas's “The force that through the green fuse drives the flower” and “And death shall have no dominion”; Edward Thomas, who rued the cat in Spring which “ate blackbirds, thrushes, nightingales” and who mourned over “The flowers left thick at nightfall in the wood” during the Great War; R.S. Thomas who told us to “stay green./Never mind the machine” and who turned aside in a sunny field, like Moses, “to the miracle/of the lit bush.” These lines are meet and right for an Englishman as he sits in his deck chair in late Spring, trousers rolled, having just planted beans under the trellis (although admittedly two of these poets are Welshmen, but we'll forgive them that).

Almost all the poems I allude to here, however, feel the chill of the valley of the shadow at their edges. The Augustinian falling away from life into death is inescapable; entropy will out. Yet another writer who always comes to mind as soon as I spy the sun and smell the dirt of a warm English day, J.R.R. Tolkien, knew that the valley is always, in the end, passed through. It is remarkable how often Tolkien returns to an insubstantial passing shadow as his image for evil. Most famous, perhaps, is this moment:

There, peeping among the cloud-wrack above a dark tor high up in the mountains, Sam saw a white star twinkle for a while. The beauty of it smote his heart, as he looked up out of the forsaken land, and hope returned to him. For like a shaft, clear and cold, the thought pierced him that in the end the Shadow was only a small and passing thing: there was light and high beauty for ever beyond its reach.

Light and high beauty; life and bright greenery—these are the things. The shadow, however hard it presses, has (per Augustine once again) no substance. It is a nothing.

My chief hope is that *Ad Fontes*, by planting readers' feet in the great historic texts of the Protestant tradition, serves to plant their feet on a rock and establish their goings such that light and high beauty come within closer reach. This issue's essays, I think, all achieve this. John Walnut explores the faith of Agatha Christie, and the surprising presence of death-defying Christian hope in one of her less-known works. Nathan Tarr then gives a thorough survey of the interpretation of Matthew 5:48, "*Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect*"—a call to light and high beauty through the shadows if ever there was one. Hamish Stirling offers a political theological meditation on the Book of Jonah (something I have been

hoping someone who write for me for a long time!), considering the real possibility of national repentance in the postliberal age. And Daniel Goodman brings us an essay exploring the oft-misunderstood Kierkegaard, and how he can lead us to a clearer understanding of repentance and, through it, a firmer grasp of our selves.

Elsewhere, in our reviews section, Brad Littlejohn weighs up an important new study of the eminent Richard Hooker. We are then honored to have the renowned C. Stephen Evans reviewing a landmark new translation of Kierkegaard's *Sickness Unto Death* (and I make no apologies for a double dose of Kierkegaard in these pages). Finally, William Collen assesses a welcome new study on the vision of Dostoevsky—perhaps bringing us round again to the theme of finding light and high beauty within the shadow of death. We are also glad, as ever, to publish original poetry, this time from Sarah Reardon and D. A. Cooper.

This Spring 2024 print issue of *Ad Fontes* is late coming to you—indeed, it will be summer when you receive it. This was caused by some production delays, for which we apologize. We anticipate being back on track with our Summer issue coming to you in August.

Rhys Laverty
Senior Editor
May 2024



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The Faith of Agatha Christie

BY JOHN WALNUT

It seems unnecessary to introduce Dame Agatha Christie—the most popular author of all time, outsold by only William Shakespeare and the Bible. Her work as a nurse in the First and Second World Wars, her life as an archaeologist in the Middle East, and the countless adaptations of her stories for stage and screen, are mentioned on every dust cover. What is less commonly discussed (and of more interest to her Christian readers) is her Protestant faith, and the influence of that faith on her writing. Christie was a lifelong member of the Church of England, and kept a copy of Thomas a Kempis' *The Imitation of Christ* by her bedside throughout her life. She was not a theologian like her contemporaries and fellow mystery authors Dorothy Sayers or G.K. Chesterton, and she spoke little publicly about her Christian faith; nevertheless, the comments she did make on religious matters reveal a thoughtful and serious contemplation of Christ and the Gospel—a contemplation which emerges subtly, but clearly, in her literature.

Christie's faith is particularly evident in an early work entitled *The Mysterious Mr. Quin*, in which she wrestles with questions of suffering, sacrifice, love, and death—questions she had wrestled with herself. In her autobiography, Christie recalls a speech by one of her school teachers, which stayed with her throughout her life.

'All of you,' she said, 'every *one* of you - will pass through a time when you will face despair. If you never face despair, you will never have faced, or become, a Christian, or known a Christian life. To be a Christian you must face and accept the life that Christ faced and lived; you must enjoy things as he enjoyed things; be as happy as he was at the marriage at Cana, know the peace and happiness that it means to be in harmony with God and with God's will. But you must also know, as he did, what it means to be alone in the Garden of Gethsemane, to feel that all your friends have forsaken you, that those you love and trust have

turned away from you, and that *God Himself* has forsaken you. Hold on then to the belief that that is *not* the end. If you love, you will suffer, and if you do not love, you do not know the meaning of a Christian life.¹

The Mysterious Mr. Quin is, in many ways, an exposition of this moment, contemplating what it means to live a life in conformity with Christ. The book is an anthology of twelve short stories, most of which were published individually in the mid and late 1920s, and later compiled into one volume in 1930. Each story follows two characters: Mr. Satterthwaite, a late-middle-aged bachelor with a penchant for the theater, and many friends throughout England with large estates to visit; and Mr. Harley Quin, a mysterious gentleman who always seems to appear immediately before some great drama. Over the course of each story, Mr. Satterthwaite, with a quick eye and an unusually refined social sense, is placed among a cast of individuals with secrets to hide, passions to control, and histories to resolve. Satterthwaite observes the working of these unseen forces like the opening acts of a play until, as if on cue, Mr. Quin steps into the picture. He gently spurs Mr. Satterthwaite to take an active role in the proceedings, inevitably leading to the sudden discovery of hidden truth, resolution of buried conflict, and aversion of impending disaster. Often he saves someone from a fast-approaching demise; always he brings together young lovers who otherwise would have been torn apart.

In the adventures of Quin and Satterthwaite, Christie uses the vehicle of romance to address the desire for God latent in the human heart. In her stories, this desire is reflected in the relationship between a man and a woman—a lover, and a beloved. This romantic longing is personified in the figure of Harlequin, a traditional pantomime character who acts as the archetype of the perfect lover. Because the thing longed for—eternity and peace with God—is so great, there is a commensurate danger in pursuing it. Sin and selfishness lead men and women to do terrible things attempting to grasp it, damning themselves and dooming those around them

to misery. But such danger only highlights the surpassing worth of the thing pursued. And as love is the end of that pursuit, so love—a Christlike, humble love—is also the means of achieving it. Such love, Christie asserts, has two requirements. Firstly: God is the Great Producer, and history is his drama. He has a role for each of us, and we can choose to take his cues and submit to our parts, or not. A cruciform love requires that we embrace the role we have been given. And secondly, because the story to which we are submitting is ultimately Christ’s story, conformity with it requires our conformity with Christ in his suffering and death. Death is present wherever love is present, and therefore achieving the ultimate good of love—union with God—requires us to die to ourselves.

IN PUTTING MARRIAGE CENTER-STAGE WHEN CONTEMPLATING THE DESIRE FOR GOD, CHRISTIE SHOWS THE PROTESTANT INFLUENCE ON HER THINKING.

These themes appear with greatest clarity in the final story of *The Mysterious Mr. Quin*, titled “Harlequin’s Lane.” Mr. Satterthwaite is staying with his friends Anna and John Denman at their country home. Anna is a former Russian ballerina, whom John rescued from the Bolsheviks during the First World War. Satterthwaite describes his friends as “Philistines, and dull Philistines at that,” and yet finds himself strangely drawn to them. There is something more to their relationship than meets the eye. In one scene, the older man sits down with Anna as she reflects on her former life:

“A great dancer—she can have lovers, yes—but a husband, that is different.”

...

“I see,” said Mr. Satterthwaite. “I see. So you gave it up?”

She nodded.

“You must have loved him very much,” said Mr. Satterthwaite gently.

“To make such a sacrifice?” She laughed.

“Not quite that. To make it so lightheartedly.”

“Ah, yes—perhaps—you are right...Always one

1. Agatha Christie, *An Autobiography* (New York: HarperCollins, 2012), 150; emphasis original.

looks for one thing—the lover, the perfect, the eternal lover...No lover ever satisfies one, for all lovers are mortal.”²

Here Christie presents her principal theme: the longing of every heart for God. It is a desire for peace, for a home, for the belonging that comes from knowing and being known. Anna recognizes that her love for her husband reflects a longing for a love more permanent, invulnerable, and eternal. It is not a stretch to hear echoes of Augustine’s observation that the heart is restless until it finds its rest in God. The same theme reappears through different images in other stories. One young woman sees a vision of the country of her dreams, “shining and beautiful” on the other side of a forest, and it produces in her an expectation for happiness that is almost superhuman, and even frightening. A man and woman, both given what they consider to be good lives, still desire the joy of a family. That desire draws them toward one another mysteriously, without their knowledge. Finally, Mr. Quin himself sums up all of these depictions in the simple image of a cottage on a hill: “the house of one’s dreams.” Christie’s characters recognize, even implicitly, the final good to which their earthly goods point.

As noted, in *Mr. Quin*, Christie chooses to represent this longing as a romantic longing. Each plot centers around a couple whose intimacy—and often whose lives—are somehow in peril. Sometimes the couple is married, and some secret threatens to pull them apart. In other cases the couple’s chance at matrimony is impeded by a wrongful accusation or a misunderstanding. It is through the pursuit of these relationships that the characters pursue the “house of their dreams.” In putting marriage center-stage when contemplating the desire for God, Christie shows the Protestant influence on her thinking. In her stories, marriage, and not a vowed celibacy, is the normative institution through which the ultimate good of union with God is seen and pursued. This counter-emphasis against monasticism echoes the reformed character of Thomas Cranmer’s *Form of Solemnization of Matrimony* in the English Prayer Book with which Christie would have

2. Agatha Christie, *The Mysterious Mr. Quin: A Harley Quin Collection* (New York; HarperCollins) 301-303

been familiar. His choice to add “to love and to cherish” to the marriage vows of the old Sarum rite reflect the Protestant insistence that marriage is a “holy estate.”³ This emphasis does not imply that marriage is exclusively necessary, but that the intimacy and self-giving required for a healthy marriage tends toward the sanctification of the heart.⁴

In addition to the image of the “house,” Christie personifies this longing for peace and home in the character Harlequin, the eponymous protagonist of traditional Harlequinade plays which were performed all over England into the early twentieth century. Each production portrayed Harlequin wooing his beloved Columbine away from her evil caretaker Pantaloon.⁵ Mr. Quin is identified with the pantomime character (his name is perhaps a giveaway), and over the course of their acquaintance Mr. Satterthwaite learns to expect his appearance wherever masked figures or motley patterns are on display. In *Harlequin’s Lane*, Anna describes Harlequin as the man she had always imagined she was dancing with when on stage:

Supposing, then, that to carry on one’s...trade, one’s profession, one were to make use of a fantasy—one were to pretend to oneself something that

3. Alan Jacobs, *The Book of Common Prayer: A Biography* (Princeton; Princeton University Press) 39-41

4. For additional reflection on the Protestant association between marriage and holiness, see Joshua Patch, “Gentle Discipline: Spenser’s *Faerie Queene* and Christian Elites” in *Ad Fontes*, Spring 2022, 17-23

5. The Harlequinade originated in late medieval Italy as a comedy pantomime, with a basic romance plot and slapstick comedy. Each character underwent development across the centuries, deepening and evolving until they reached their final instantiation in the production with which a young Agatha Christie would have been familiar. The primary characters were Columbine, a beautiful young woman kept under the oppressive hand of her overbearing caretaker Pantaloon; Harlequin, Columbine’s romantic counterpart, who with his charm and cleverness seeks to deliver her from Pantaloon’s grasp; Pierrot, Pantaloon’s servant who is deeply infatuated with Columbine; and the Clown, whose chaotic antics complicate the lives of the characters and hinder Pantaloon’s attempts to keep Columbine under his control. Harlequinades all followed a similar pattern, and were often tacked onto the end of other, more serious productions, with the actors changing in an elaborate “transformation scene” into the characters of the well-known “Harlequin” tale. The Clown would stride forth onto the stage and announce “Here we are again!” and so introduce the new story. By the 1930s, the Harlequinade had been fading in popularity for many decades, and was mainly an antiquated curiosity. In including the pantomime in her story, Christie is marking the end of an era.

did not exist—that one were to imagine a certain person...It is a pretence, you understand, a make believe—nothing more.

...

Always one looks for one thing—the lover, the perfect, the eternal lover...It is the music of Harlequin one hears.⁶

Having revealed the universal desire for home and permanence—for God—Anna identifies Harlequin as that lover for whom all other lovers long. When Mr. Quin appears, she recognizes him as that fantasy she had kept all her life, not believing that it could ever be real. Christie sets up Harlequin as a kind of icon, representing and personifying the object of the desires of every lover, and by extension every person. The dance of Harlequin, in every production pursuing and saving Columbine from her wicked master, is presented as a meta-narrative. It is the story that is reflected in every couple, in every dance between lover and beloved. Christie reinforces this image in the closing scene of the book by placing her protagonists Quin and Satterthwaite at the head of a country lane. The sign at the entrance, like the title of the story, reads “Harlequin’s Lane,” but the locals call it the “Lovers’ Lane.” There is, observes Mr. Satterthwaite, one like it in every village; but this one belongs to Mr. Quin particularly. At the end of it, much to Mr. Satterthwaite’s indignation, is an old quarry filled with garbage, and the ruins of a cottage standing on the edge.

“What is this place?”

“I told you earlier today. It is *My* lane.”

“A Lovers’ Lane,” murmured Mr. Satterthwaite.

“And people pass along it.”

“Most people, sooner or later.”

“And at the end of it—what do they find?”

Mr. Quin smiled. His voice was very gentle. He pointed at the ruined cottage above them.

“The house of their dreams—or a rubbish heap—who shall say?”⁷

The Lovers’ Lane is Harlequin’s Lane, and every pair of lovers must pass down it eventually. Thus, every lovers’ journey is Harlequin’s journey, and every lovers’ story is Harlequin’s story. This typological use of the Harlequinade is established at the very beginning of the anthology. At their first meeting, Mr. Quin recommends the Harlequinade to Mr. Satterthwaite. “It is dying out nowadays,” he says, “but it repays attention, I assure you. Its symbolism is a little difficult to follow—but the immortals are always immortal, you know.”⁸

But as the house at the end of the Lovers’ Lane stands perched above a rubbish dump, so the pursuit of home is not without danger. Indeed, the beauty of the “house of one’s dreams” drives some to try to grasp it at others’ expense. After discovering that her husband has been unfaithful to her, Anna reflects on the fact that human weakness means the heart’s longing for that “eternal lover” can never be fulfilled. “It is the music of Harlequin one hears. No lover ever satisfies one, for all lovers are mortal. And Harlequin is only a myth, an invisible presence...”⁹

And in *The Mysterious Mr. Quin*, this danger does not stop at broken hearts. Time and again the selfish actions of one person trying to capture the music of Harlequin cause or risk their own or another’s death. Sometimes this death is literal—this is Agatha Christie, after all—and sometimes it is figurative, but it is always there.

Finally, by setting up Harlequin as the icon of love, and the archetypal lover in whom all other lovers participate, Christie makes him to be a kind of Christ figure. This connection is not explicit in her writing, but the step to reach it is not a large one. The typology of a man as the perfect and immortal lover, the object and fulfillment of every desire, and the reality of which all mortal lovers are imperfect images, clearly parallels Christ. In the light of the speech of Christie’s school teacher to “be as happy as he was at the marriage at Cana,” the Harlequin pattern cast on the Lovers’ Lane takes on a

6. Christie, *The Mysterious Mr. Quin*, 291, 302

7. Christie, *The Mysterious Mr. Quin*, 306; emphasis original

8. Christie, *The Mysterious Mr. Quin*, 21

9. Christie, *An Autobiography*, 302

decidedly Gospel hue.¹⁰ With this context, it is easy to see the themes of that impromptu sermon—the pursuit of Christ in joy and in sorrow—echoed in Anna’s recognition of Harlequin as the object of her fantasies, and her lament that “no lover ever satisfies one, for all lovers are mortal.” Thus, Christie makes the mysterious drama of Harlequin and Columbine the narrative retelling of St. Paul’s mystery of marriage as an image of Christ and his Church. In every marriage, the story of Christ’s love is retold again and again, reflected in the individual lives and relationships of Christian men and women.

**CHRISTIE MAKES THE MYSTERIOUS
DRAMA OF HARLEQUIN AND COLUM-
BINE THE NARRATIVE RETELLING OF ST.
PAUL’S MYSTERY OF MARRIAGE AS AN
IMAGE OF CHRIST AND HIS CHURCH.**

Thus far, Christie has presented a problem. Every heart longs for eternity with God, as every lover longs for the music of Harlequin. The desire for the “perfect, the eternal lover” is the desire for Christ, who is love itself. But the pursuit of that love is fraught with danger. Human frailty and sinfulness mean that attempting to achieve our desires often leads us to disaster, and drags others along with us. How, then, can the object of the heart’s longing be achieved? Christie’s answer is: love. As love is the goal of our striving, so love—humble, self-sacrificing, Christlike love—is also the means of achieving it. She presents two necessary aspects of this kind of love: first, one’s willingness to submit to the role that God has given one in this life; and second,

10. It is not a leap to think that this very speech was consciously in Christie’s mind at the time of her writing *Harlequin’s Lane*. In her autobiography, Christie concludes the anecdote about her teacher by saying, “It is odd that those few words, more than any sermon I have ever heard, remained with me, and years later they were to come back to me and give me hope at a time when despair had me in its grip.” (Christie, *An Autobiography*, 150) In the year before *Harlequin’s Lane* was first published, Christie had gone through the death of her mother, the strain of clearing out her childhood home alone, and her husband’s announcement that he had fallen in love with another woman and wanted a divorce, all of which culminated in her infamous disappearance. “So,” she writes, “after illness, came sorrow, despair and heartbreak.” (Christie, *An Autobiography*, 353) It is difficult to imagine that this time was not what she was referring to when she spoke of despair having her in its grip.

one’s willingness to die. Ultimately, those two aspects are one and the same.

A recurring theme throughout *The Mysterious Mr. Quin* is that of the drama. Mr. Satterthwaite is introduced as a man who looks on life as one watches a play, but does not himself participate. “All his life, so to speak, he had sat in the front row of the stalls watching various dramas of human nature unfold before him. His role had always been that of the on-looker.”¹¹

Through his acquaintance with Mr. Quin, he is drawn progressively into life as a player, and a key player at that. Initially he is hesitant, but over the course of his adventures becomes bolder and bolder in his role. Finally, he comes to understand what it means to be a conscious participant in what he now recognizes as the Divine Story being told by God:

You say your life is your own, but can you dare to ignore the chance that you are taking part in a gigantic drama under the orders of a divine Producer? Your cue may not come till the end of the play—it may be totally unimportant, a mere walking-on part, but upon it may hang the issues of the play if you do not give the cue to another player. The whole edifice may crumble. You as you, may not matter to anyone in the world, but you as a person in a particular place may matter unimaginably.¹²

Christie presents human history as a drama, a living play being put on by God, the Great Producer. Each person is given a role, one they can choose to embrace or to reject. Such a role may not be large—to human eyes it may be trivial—but its significance is known to God. Here, again, Christie shows her Protestant influence in an affirmation of the doctrine of vocation. The importance of one’s work, one’s place in life, does not depend on its proximity to the Church, but on the hidden plans of the Author. It is for each person to play his part, whatever that may be.

11. Christie, *The Mysterious Mr. Quin*, 1-2

12. Christie, *The Mysterious Mr. Quin*, 144

Further, Christie's presentation of this drama is twofold. In God's grand production, the story is the story of history, and each person is given his small part in it. But also, as seen in the image of the Harlequinade, each individual story is a reflection of one story being played out through eternity. In "Harlequin's Lane," Anna, still mourning her husband's betrayal, dances the role of Columbine in the Harlequinade production, playing opposite Mr. Quin. It is worth taking time to summarize the production as Christie describes it.

The night is one of sublime beauty. Anna's Columbine and Mr. Quin's Harlequin dance "as they had danced through time immemorial." Then the mortal Pierrot appears, played by Anna's husband John, and sees Columbine dancing in the woods. He is entranced. Yet she dances away with her immortal lover, and leaves him alone. Next, the lovely Pierrette is introduced but Pierrot is unmoved. His mind is fixed on Columbine. Pierrot falls asleep, and in the night when the rest of the village have gone, the two eternal dancers, Harlequin and Columbine, return. He awakes and confesses his love to Columbine who, after a moment's hesitation, chooses to stay with him, and Harlequin dances away. The two are married, and live together for many years. Then, one dark night, Columbine is restless. Her dotting husband sits sleeping in a chair. Suddenly, Harlequin reappears in a doorway, the music of their dance filling the night. She leaps up, and rejoins her beloved, and dances away into the night with him, leaving Pierrot alone once again. In an instant, the play leaps forward decades. Pierrot has taken Pierrette as his wife at last, and now they are grown old together. It is another dark night, and the couple are asleep in their home. Suddenly, the music of Harlequin rises, and the two Immortals return, dancing, into the scene.

The door swings open and Columbine dances in. She leans over the sleeping Pierrot, kisses him on the lips...Crash! A peal of thunder. She is outside again. In the centre of the stage is the lighted window and through it are seen the two figures of Harlequin and Columbine dancing slowly away, growing fainter and fainter...A log falls. Pierrette

jumps up angrily, rushes across to the window and pulls the blind. So it ends, on a sudden discord...¹³

The play, symbolically, tells the story of Anna's life with her husband, first dancing with her imagined Harlequin, and then falling in love with John's Pierrot. He is unable to live up to the image of the perfect lover, and so loses her, and the play ends in tragedy. But the story belongs, not just to Anna, but to every pair of lovers. Harlequin and Columbine are "immortals," never dying, but recurring again and again, just as Christ's love for his Church is reflected over and over again in every Christian marriage. As every lover participates in the drama of Harlequin, so every Christian participates in the drama of Christ, with every life taking on a cruciform shape. The drama of life that Mr. Satterthwaite discovers is therefore twofold, made up of our own individual parts given as God's wisdom dictates, and simultaneously caught up into the one story of Christ's redemptive work on Calvary.

From this insight into the parity between the Christian's individual story with the story of the cross, comes a final insight: participation in the story of Christ means participation in His death. Christie has identified Harlequin with the perfect lover for which all lovers long. But Anna goes a step further.

"No lover ever satisfies one, for all lovers are mortal. And Harlequin is only a myth, an invisible presence...unless—"

"Yes," said Mr. Satterthwaite. "Yes?"

"Unless—his name is—Death!"¹⁴

In identifying Harlequin, the eternal Lover, with Death, Christie asserts that in every love, death is necessarily present. The Lovers' Lane along which all lovers must eventually walk is Harlequin's Lane, and Harlequin is Death. Therefore all lovers must walk with death, and eventually come either to "the house of their dreams—or a rubbish heap." Death is not optional, but the *kind* of death is up to the lovers. If one dies to oneself, sacrificing one's own interests, desires,

13. Christie, *The Mysterious Mr. Quin*, 300

14. Christie, *The Mysterious Mr. Quin*, 303

IF YOU LOVE, YOU WILL SUFFER, AND IF YOU DO NOT LOVE, YOU DO NOT KNOW THE MEANING OF A CHRISTIAN LIFE.

pride, for the sake of the beloved, and submitting to the part given by the Divine Producer, the reward is “the house of one’s dreams.” That is, if one is able to conform oneself to Christ, and live a life which reflects his sacrificial death, one will be able to reach that peace with God which is the end of all longing and all desire. This is the lesson of Mr. Quin, the perfect Lover who is also Death. It is the lesson given by a school teacher to a young Agatha that, “if you love, you will suffer, and if you do not love, you do not know the meaning of a Christian life.”

But Christie ends her story with a question for her protagonist. Mr. Satterthwaite has learned how to participate in the drama. But has he learned to die?

“A Lovers’ Lane,’ murmured Mr. Satterthwaite.
‘And people pass along it.’
‘Most people, sooner or later.’

...

Mr. Satterthwaite looked up at him suddenly. A wild rebellion surged over him. He felt cheated, defrauded.

‘But I—’ His voice shook. ‘I have never passed down your lane....’

‘And do you regret?’

Mr. Satterthwaite quailed. Mr. Quin seemed to have loomed to enormous proportions...Mr. Satterthwaite had a vista of something at once menacing and terrifying...Joy, Sorrow, Despair. And his comfortable little soul shrank back appalled.

‘Do you regret?’ Mr. Quin repeated his question. There was something terrible about him.

‘No,’ Mr. Satterthwaite stammered. ‘N-no.’

And then suddenly he rallied.

‘But I see things,’ he cried. ‘I may have been only a looker-on at Life—but I see things that other people do not. You said so yourself, Mr. Quin....’

But Mr. Quin had vanished.”¹⁵

Satterthwaite, through his friendship with Mr. Quin, has been drawn deeper into the drama of which he was once only an observer. But there is still something of the “looker-on” about him; something that desires safety and comfort. Mr. Satterthwaite has never passed down the Lover’s Lane, because he has never sought out love, never taken the time to find a wife and build a family, never stepped into the despair, sorrow, and joy that such love entails. He has been content to remain a perpetual bachelor, spending his time observing others. But the question goes deeper—or perhaps goes higher—than marriage. He has never taken the chance to sacrifice—to die. From Christie’s Protestant perspective, sanctification comes, normally, from married life, but it is not exclusive to it. So the question remains: can Mr. Satterthwaite be saved? Like the play they had just witnessed, Satterthwaite’s conversation with his friend ends with an unanswered question, “on a sudden discord.” It is up to him to answer whether he has sufficiently died to himself and submitted to the Divine Producer. And in this moment Christie uses her character as a mirror, which she turns on the reader, and invites us to ask whether we have submitted ourselves to the drama, and learned to die with Christ. In the end each of us, like Mr. Satterthwaite, will stand before the Judgment Seat and answer the question, “do you regret?”

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15. Christie, *The Mysterious Mr. Quin*, 306; emphasis original

Retrieving Teleios-ity: Matthew 5:48 in the History of Interpretation

BY NATHAN TARR

THE ODD QUESTION OUT

A recent commentator introduced the Sermon on the Mount with a side-long glance at the “literally dozens of interpretations” this section of Matthew’s Gospel has produced.¹ A similar lament could be entered over the leporine debates focused on just Matthew 5:48 as the crux and summary of the whole. These proposals distinguish themselves through their answers to what Ulrich Luz calls “the dominant question” in Sermon studies over the last half of the twentieth century, namely, its “fulfillability.”²

It is worth noting at the outset that such deliberation strikes many inside and outside the church as morally unserious. Bob Dylan personified this critique in

1974’s “Up to Me,” singing, “We heard the Sermon on the Mount and I knew it was too complex./It didn’t amount to anything more than what the broken glass reflects.” But how did Dylan come to “know” that the Sermon was too complicated to be taken seriously? The text itself does not suggest equivocation. A staple of the Sermon’s appeal—from civil rights leaders (many of whom adopted Dylan anthems) to Mahatma Gandhi—has been the power of its simple, straightforward, others-centered ethic. Dylan shed light on his lyric in a later interview. “The thing about rock’n’roll,” he said, explaining his own musical preference for American folk music, “is that...there were great catch-phrases and driving rhythms...but the songs weren’t serious or didn’t reflect life in a realistic way.”³

To transpose this insight onto the Sermon, what was delivered as a magnificent vision of life in the kingdom—the serious, super-natural, real Christian

1. Michael Wilkins, *Matthew: The NIV Application Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), 195. See, for example, no fewer than nineteen takes (and those all Continental) presented in Clarence Bauman, *The Sermon on the Mount: The Modern Quest for its Meaning* (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1985).

2. Ulrich Luz, *The Theology of the Gospel of Matthew*, New Testament Theology (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 46.

3. Bob Dylan, “Up to Me”, Track 5, Side 7, *Biograph* (Columbia: 1985), Vinyl. 1985.

life—has been fractured by competing attempts to domesticate its call to discipleship. Dylan, gazing at the Sermon through its common catchphrases, saw only complexity in the service of spiritual lethargy; a mosaic of religious language used to excuse disobedience rather than beholding, in the compelling character of Christ, a vision for full, true human life.

THE HISTORY OF THE INTERPRETATION OF MATTHEW 5:48 SUGGESTS THAT THE QUESTION OF FULFILLABILITY IS ITSELF THE OUTLIER.

It is also worth noting that this diminishment of the Sermon's intent is a relatively recent development. Luz himself puzzled, "Oddly, this question [of fulfillability] was almost never asked by the old church." In this chapter I want to trace the historical path that Luz frames but does not follow. The history of the interpretation of Matthew 5:48 suggests that the question of fulfillability is itself the outlier, and that it has been so for much longer than Luz acknowledged. There is, in fact, a cluster of four convictions regarding the interpretation of our text that remain remarkably consistent from the "old church" through the period of Reformed Orthodoxy. It is hoped that reseating the historical testimony around the interpretive table will aid in restoring the Sermon to its proper place at the head of a morally earnest, Christ-emulating, Spirit-empowered discipleship.

"BE TELEIOS" IN PATRISTIC THOUGHT

The foundation of patristic thinking about the dominical command, "be perfect as your Father in heaven is perfect," rests on our creation in the image and likeness of this God we are called to imitate. For Clement of Alexandria (c. 150–215), the *imago Dei* means that man is "naturally constituted for the acquisition of virtue."⁴ Origen (c. 184–253), likewise, identifies the

image of God in man, "not by any appearance of the bodily frame but...by the whole band of virtues which are innate in the essence of God, and which may enter into man by diligence and imitation of God."⁵ In Christopher Holmes' phrase, summarizing Gregory of Nyssa (c. 335–394), imitating God's perfection is "restorative;" it "restores our nature to us, which was originally divine in that there was nothing in us that was not of God."⁶

The Fathers all include caveats similar to that heard in Holmes. (1) Our participation in God's perfection never reduces the Creator/creature distinction, it is always, in Clement's words, "as far as permitted to human nature." (2) Believers will attain varying degrees of likeness to God; the *Didache* distinguishes between those who have matured to "bear the whole yoke of the Lord" and those who are still diligently, "do[ing] what they can."⁷ Even the apostles, Augustine reminds us in his *Retractions*, still experienced "the passion of the flesh resisting the Spirit."⁸ (3) This is not an instantaneous transformation but a process of sanctification, as Clement argued: "As one is righteous, so certainly is he a believer. But as he is a believer, he is not yet righteous—I mean according to the righteousness of progress and perfection."⁹ (4) Even the greatest degree of perfection possible in this life will be far surpassed when we behold him and are fully transformed into His.

Caveats accounted for, the dominant note sounded in patristic discussions of Christian perfection was that, because we have been made in the image of the perfect God, imitating God as Christ calls us here to do is a summons to true humanity; to full human flourishing. To be "perfect" does not limit or diminish us

4. Clement, *Stromata*, ch XII. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson eds., *Ante-Nicene Fathers Vol. 2 Fathers of the Second Century: Hermas, Tatian, Athenagoras, Theophilus, and Clement of Alexandria* (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 2004), 502.

5. Origen, *On First Principles*, trans. G.W. Butterworth (New York: Harper & Row, 1966), 327.

6. Christopher Holmes, *Theology of the Christian Life* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2021), 58. Citing Gregory of Nyssa, *Soul and Resurrection*, 267. Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Soul and the Resurrection*, in *Ascetical Works*, trans. Viriginai Woods Callahan, ed. Roy Joseph Deferrari, Fathers of the Church (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1967), 267.

7. *Didache*, 6.2. As Clement has it, "one applies less, one more, to learning training." Clement, *Stromata*, 502.

8. *Augustine, Retractions*, 202. (1.19.2).

9. Clement, *Stromata*, 504.

THE SUMMONS TO TELEIOS-ITY, THEREFORE, CALLS CHRIST'S FOLLOWERS INCREASINGLY TO LAY DOWN THEIR LIVES FOR THE GOOD OF OTHERS (ESPECIALLY THEIR ENEMIES).

but is rather, in Hilary of Poitiers's (c. 310–367) words, our “inheritance.”¹⁰ Augustine foregrounds this idea by identifying “perfection” in the Beatitudes not with the classes of people who receive blessing (as if perfection is found in our purity of heart) but the other way around, by the blessings themselves.¹¹ Perfection is found in seeing God, etc. As Holmes summarizes Nyssen, “we progress, becoming more ourselves in relation to God rather than less. To be perfect is a matter of being true to our essence as those made in God's image, and to achieve likeness to God, our beginning and end.”¹²

A second characteristic of Christian perfection in patristic thinking is that imitating God, after the incarnation, is achieved through the imitation of Christ. Hilary comments that the call to “imitate our perfect Father” is exemplified in the life of Christ, who shows us the character of the Father.¹³ Clement asks, “is it not the Savior, who wishes the [disciple] to be perfect as the heavenly Father, that is, as himself, who says, ‘come, children, hear from me the fear of the Lord?’”¹⁴ Clement's taxonomy would benefit, perhaps, from additional nuance. But the parallel is clear. Those who seek to live, in Nyssen's phrase, “the Christian mode of life,” imitate their Father by emulating the example of their elder brother.¹⁵

10. Hilary of Poitiers, *Commentary on Matthew*, trans. D.H. Williams (Washington D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2012), 73.

11. Augustine, *Commentary on the Lord's Sermon on the Mount with Seventeen Related Sermons*, trans. Denis J. Kavanagh (New York: Fathers of the Church, 1951), 26.

12. Holmes, *Theology of the Christian Life*, 55.

13. Hilary, *Commentary on Matthew*, 73.

14. Clement, *Stromata*, 546.

15. He also calls this “the God-loving life.” Nyssa, *The Christian Mode of Life*, 152. Elsewhere, he wrote, “If one can give a definition of Christianity, we shall define it as follows: Christianity is an imitation of the divine nature.” Nyssa, *On What it Means to Call Oneself a Christian*, in *Ascetical Works*, 85.

A third characteristic of patristic thinking on Christian perfection, therefore, is an almost exclusive focus on enemy love. It is true that the fathers, Origen and Clement among them, bundled “the whole band of virtues” together in our imitation of God. And yet, to claim merely that Christians strive to be “virtuous” was, in the cultural context of their day, not to say nearly enough. Certain classical virtues, such as fortitude or wisdom, had to be re-defined in light of the cross. And the Christian “philosophy” emphasized virtues like patience that lacked classical support.

And so, imitating God in Christ required a Christian to go beyond what was pagan (the hatred of one's enemy) and even what was human (the love of one's friends) to emulate the *mercy* of the Father who sends rain on the just and the unjust, and the *love* of the Son, who laid down his life for those who spitefully used him. And so, Origen places this kindness, mercy, and enemy-love in parallel with “be perfect as your Father in heaven is perfect.”¹⁶ Hilary, likewise, suggests that we are “perfected by this mandate of goodness toward everyone, just as we are to imitate our perfect Father in heaven.”¹⁷ And the *Didache* calls disciples, reflecting on Matthew 5, “if someone gives you a blow on your right cheek, turn to him the other as well and you will be perfect.”¹⁸

Finally, patristic thinking on perfection recognized the enabling presence of the Holy Spirit. Hilary reminds us that the merciful God who prodigally sends down sun and rain is our good Father, who also “confers the mystery of the Spirit” on those called to imitate Him. For Augustine, the final beatitude—“blessed are you when others persecute you on my account...rejoice and be glad”—not only summarizes and seals all the

16. Origen, *De Principiis*, 381.

17. Hilary, *Commentary on Matthew*, 73.

18. *Didache*, 1.4.

others, but it also corresponds to the call to “love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.” This joy in our heavenly reward, overflowing as it does in mercy toward our enemies, is patterned after Christ (see Heb. 12:2), emulates the perfection of the Father, and is empowered by the Spirit. As Augustine pictures it, “the perfect man [considered by blessedness]...is signified by Pentecost...the day when the Holy Spirit was sent. By Him we are...comforted and fed and rendered peaceful. When we are thus rendered perfect, we inwardly sustain all the afflictions brought upon us on account of truth and justice.”¹⁹

Patristic commentary on Christ’s summative command, “be *teleios* as your Father in heaven is *teleios*,” was worked out along these four lines. First, as the image of God, man was created for the purpose of imitating His Creator. Second, the incarnation (God the Son taking to Himself a true, full human nature) has concentrated our imitation of God on *Christ*-likeness. Third, as is clear from the immediate context of Matthew 5:48, a life patterned after God in Christ is particularly keen to shower love upon our enemies. Fourth, such a “contrast society,” to use Richard Hays’s term, walking “out of sync with the ‘normal’ order of the world,” is enabled in disciples of Christ by God the Holy Spirit.²⁰ The summons to *teleios*-ity, therefore, calls Christ’s followers increasingly to lay down their lives for the good of others (especially their enemies), according to the purpose of the Father, after the pattern of the Son, and in the power of the Spirit.

“BE TELEIOS” ACROSS THE MIDDLE AGES

In his historical sketch of the Sermon’s interpretation, David Crump notes that, “prior to the medieval period, the Sermon on the Mount was viewed as a straightforward presentation of Christian ethics.”²¹ But were the main contours of patristic interpretation irreparably altered after the rise of Islam? Or did they extend beyond the boundaries set for them here by Crump (and

the similar timeline set by Luz above)? In what follows I sketch a handful of medieval continuities with the preceding summary of patristic interpretation.

First, the aroma of Augustinian thought lingered long over the Middle Ages. In addition to the influence of his sermons, quoted above, Augustine’s *Confessions* inscribed a vision of the Christian life that acknowledged Christ as “the perfect man,” the example of what it looks like to be truly and fully human. Accordingly, Augustine sought the mercy of God, “until what is lacking in my defective state be renewed and perfected,” after this image. For Augustine, this transformation toward Christ-likeness centered around coming increasingly to love what God loved and in the way that He loved it. Significantly, this transformation was carried out through the agency of God’s gracious (Spirit-empowered) word. The Augustinian prayer, “perfect my imperfections,” exercised an influence far beyond those groups that came to follow Augustine’s rule.²²

Anselm of Canterbury (1033–1109), for instance, wrote in his *Cur Deus Homo* of his confidence that, “God will complete that which He has begun with regard to human nature.”²³ In Anselm’s moral theology, completion, or wholeness, is defined as a rational nature achieving the purpose for which it was created. Thus, reflecting on the argument of the *Monologion*, Thomas Williams argues that, for Anselm, “Since the purpose of the rational nature is to love God above all else and for his own sake, and to love other things for God’s sake,” human nature is perfect to the degree it loves in just this way.²⁴

As a pattern for this Christian perfection Anselm held up not a general *Christ*, but “the perfect image of *the Crucified*.”²⁵ The cross, for Anselm, is our salvation. It is also the mirror in which we behold the true man

19. Augustine, *Commentary on the Lord’s Sermon on the Mount*, 29–30.

20. Richard Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 1996), 97.

21. David Crump, “Applying the Sermon on the Mount: Once You Have Read It What Do You Do With It?” *Criswell Theological Review* 6.1 (1992): 3–14.

22. Augustine, *Confessions* trans. R.S. Pine-Coffin (New York: Penguin, 1961), 123, 145, 150.

23. Anselm, *Why God Became Man*, in Brian Davies and G.R. Evans eds., *Anselm of Canterbury: The Major Works* (Oxford, 1998), 268.

24. Thomas Williams, “God Who Sows the Seed and Gives the Growth: Anselm’s Theology of the Holy Spirit,” *Anglican Theological Review* 89.4 (2007): 621.

25. Anselm, *Book of Meditations*, CCEL, 128.

loving God as we are called to do and loving others, even enemies, for God's sake. Just as he "bore with gentle patience the insults put upon him," therefore, we also return for evil a "perfect love" which "loves no one other less than [ourselves]." The ability to imitate Christ, who models the moral end for which we have been made, comes from the Spirit. Williams again: "it is the Holy Spirit who energizes and makes fruitful the human nature that the Father has created and the Son has redeemed, so that rational creatures achieve their appointed end."²⁶ Thus Anselm joins Augustine in bowing "my whole self before" the cross and praying, "help my imperfection!"²⁷

ACROSS THE MIDDLE AGES, AS IN THE PATRISTIC ERA, THE CALL TO "BE TELEIOS AS YOUR FATHER IN HEAVEN IS TELEIOS" WAS MET WITH HOPE FOR CHRISTIAN COMPLIANCE.

Thomas Aquinas (c.1224–1274) served up his Augustinian theology with a dominant Aristotelian, rather than Platonic, mode.²⁸ Nevertheless, he retained a dominant Augustinian note. For example, he argued that the essence of Christian perfection consists in keeping the great commandments, the love of God and neighbor.²⁹ Bringing this conviction over to its application in Matthew 5, Thomas is chiefly concerned to demonstrate the right relationship between our two loves. He comments, "God is to be loved chiefly, and all men for the sake of God."³⁰

26. Williams, "God Who Sows the Seed and Gives the Growth," 614.

27. Anselm, *Book of Meditations*, CCEL, 124.

28. It will not do to style Aquinas as Aristotelean rather than Platonic. He was a synthesizer of the best from both. Sebastian Morello, *The World as God's Icon: Creator and Creation in the Platonic Thought of Thomas Aquinas* (Brooklyn: Anglico Press), 2020.

29. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, II.184.3–4. This was something that could be done, Thomas held, by those who had not taken vows of poverty, chastity, or obedience.

30. Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on Matthew*, 5.12.552. commenting on Matthew 5:48, trans. Jeremy Holmes and Beth Mortensen, available at <https://aquinas.cc/1a/en/~Matt.C5.L12.n552>.

Being "perfect as our father in heaven is perfect," therefore, would first require that we love God "chiefly," or "as much as He ought to be loved." But this is *absolute* perfection, a love appropriately responding to God's infinite goodness such that it is itself infinite. Perfect love is possible only for God. Nevertheless, made in the image and likeness of God, human nature is capacitated to imitate God's love for God to an appropriate, creaturely degree.³¹ For Aquinas, Jesus's analogical command, "be perfect *as also* your heavenly Father is perfect," embeds an acknowledgement of the Creator-creature distinction. It "convey[s] a likeness by participation."³² Analogy thus affords us the freedom to speak of perfect love as we love God according to *our* totality.

Imitating God, or being perfect, extends beyond our love for God to "loving all men for His sake." To say it another way, we "hold God as last end in all our doings."³³ With the Father's prodigal kindness and with the example of the Crucified before us, we recognize that the form God-like, or Christ-like love takes is often a bearing-with those who spitefully use us. Loving God with our totality and loving our (unworthy) enemy self-sacrificially is the appointed *telos* of our nature. It is this *teleios*-ity, therefore, which the gift of God's grace perfects.³⁴ Christopher Holmes sums up the Thomistic vision of *teleios*-ity with this hope: "The aim, in this life, is for there to be less and less in us that is incompatible with God. In so far as we obey the dominical precept to perfection we are more, rather than less, like God" and therefore more, rather than less, who we have been created to be.³⁵

Remaining for the moment in a Thomistic mode, we pause for an *Objection*. Augustine, Anselm, and Aquinas wrote as leaders of monastic orders. Does this context not belie any claim that obedience to the Sermon

31. This likeness is ontological as well as theological. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I.4.3.

32. Aquinas, *Commentary on Matthew*, 5.12.554.

33. Aquinas, *Commentary on Matthew*, 5.12.553.

34. Famously, for Thomas, grace does not destroy but "perfects nature," meaning that it enables men to accomplish their divine end (*telos*). *Summa Theologiae*, I.1.8.

35. Christopher Holmes, *Theology for the Christian Life*, 46; Aquinas, *Commentary on Matthew* 5.12.553, commenting on 5:48.

was seen as a “straightforward Christian ethic,” broadly applicable to (or fulfillable by) all believers? Was not monasticism, after all, the epitome of a two-tier Christianity, with monks elevated over pedestrian Christians as the athletes of Christ?

I answer that, while much of great value to the Christian life was recovered at the Reformation, we should nuance the relationship between monasticism and Christian obedience in at least these three ways. First, acknowledgement of varying levels of spiritual attainment in relation to the Sermon goes as far back as the *Didache*: “If you are able to bear the whole yoke of the Lord, you will be perfect, if not, then do what you can.” This recognition may have resulted *in*, but cannot be dismissed as the outcome *of*, the institutionalization of monastic life. Second, Anselm’s *Prayers and Meditations* is but one example of a monastic leader drawing on their *regular* practices in order to mature those outside the monastery in spiritual reflection. The membrane between spiritual life inside and outside the monastery was often permeable. Third, our assessment of monastic life needs to keep the self-understanding of the medieval world in view. The works of prayer (religious), protection (knights), and provision (peasant farmers), along with their attendant lifestyles, were seen as totalizing claims. Groups within society, therefore, divided these tasks between themselves and delivered dedicated effort for the good of the whole. The religious service provided by the monks, according to the logic of this system, benefited each member of society.³⁶

Across the Middle Ages, therefore, as in the patristic era, the call to “be *teleios* as your Father in heaven is *teleios*” was met with hope for Christian compliance (1) from the intent of our original design in God’s image, (2) narrowed onto the example of the “perfect man,” Jesus Christ, (3) specifically as he embraced suffering for the sake of his enemies, (4) all of which is empowered by God’s gift of grace.

36. See Georges Duby, *The Three Orders: Feudal Society Imagined* trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980).

“BE *TELEIOS*” AT THE TIME OF THE REFORMATION

As we move into the time of Reformation, we remember that Luther was, by education and intuition, a medieval man.³⁷ The humanistic education of men like Calvin, Bucer, and even Melancthon created some distance from Luther in this regard. Their intellectual posture was nevertheless furnished from a recognizable medieval milieu. Further, their proposals regarding the true nature of the church were prosecuted in a manner medieval minds would find persuasive.³⁸ This meant establishing alignment between Reformation claims, the biblical text, and the best of the Christian tradition. Their indices provide eloquent testimony to the depth and diligence of this commitment. It is, therefore, with the expectation of strategic discontinuities, accentuated within a broad continuity, that we turn to the Reformers and their heirs as they take up the Sermon on the Mount.

Luther preached through the Sermon over Wednesday evenings in Wittenberg from 1530 to 1532. The timing was significant. Luther here expounded Christ’s call to discipleship with the benefit of five-years’ further reflection on the ethical framework he established in *The Freedom of a Christian* from 1525. His earlier effort, to use Richard Lovelace’s term, had been one “to rebuild the understanding of the Christian life incorporating [his] insight of justification.”³⁹ The tool he chose for this renovation was the dialectic between freedom and slavery. A Christian is free, regarding his acceptance before God, from any necessity to do good works. We are justified by faith alone. With regard to others, however, that same believer is a slave, obligated to serve our neighbor with good works leading to his evangelism or edification.⁴⁰ We are justified by a faith that is not alone but pays itself out for the good of others.

37. See David Steinmetz, *Luther in Context* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002); Christine Helmer ed., *The Medieval Luther Studies in the Late Middle Ages, Humanism, and Reformation 117* (Tübingen, Germany: Mohr Siebeck), 2020.

38. See David Steinmetz, *Calvin in Context* 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010); Tony Lane, *John Calvin: Student of the Church Fathers* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1999).

39. Richard Lovelace, *Dynamics of Spiritual Life: An Evangelical Theology of Renewal* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 1979), 100.

40. Martin Luther, *The Freedom of a Christian* in Timothy Wengert

Luther has now to put further flesh on these bones. In preaching on Matthew 5:48, he makes three interrelated (and by now familiar) claims. First, he observes that Jesus is speaking “only about what Christians as Christians should do, and in particular what they should do on account of the gospel.”⁴¹ These qualifiers, “a Christian *as a Christian*,” and that “*on account of the gospel*,” do the heavy lifting. They exalt the cross and the character of Christ. Luther comments: “my reply to someone else’s hate or envy, slander or persecution should be...my love and my help, my blessings and my prayers...That is how our Lord Jesus is, and his heavenly Father himself, to whom he points here as the pattern.”⁴² The Geneva Bible glosses this text in a similar fashion, “We must labor to attain to the perfection of God, who of his free liberality doeth good to them that are unworthy.”⁴³ Luther, in fact, sees in the sun, grass, and bird-song a paternal rebuke; we do not provide half so much good to those who misuse us, though they insult us far less than their sin has dishonored God.

The fact that Jesus speaks here to “children of the Father,” not only foregrounds the pattern of God in Christ, but also anticipates the help of the Holy Spirit. “[Human] nature,” admits Luther, “finds it impossible to recompense evil with all sorts of good.” We are not limited, however, to natural resources. We are called to an “exceeding” or “different” righteousness; which has in view not the imputed righteousness of Christ but, resting on it and working out from it, a progressive Christ-likeness in the power of the Spirit. Calvin agreed that, “the same Spirit, who is the witness, earnest, and seal of our free adoption, corrects the wicked affections of the flesh, which are opposed to [God-like] charity.”⁴⁴

ed., *The Annotated Luther: The Roots of Reform* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2015), 488. Originally published in 1525.

41. Martin Luther, *The Sermon on the Mount and the Magnificat in Luther’s Works* vol. 12 ed. Jaroslav Pelikan (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1956), 119.

42. Luther, *Sermon on the Mount*, 119.

43. Marginal note on Matthew 5:48, *Geneva Bible*, 1560.

44. John Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists, Matthew, Mark, and Luke*, trans. William Pringle (Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1845), 307. Originally published 1559.

Second, if it is true that only Christians are *able* to imitate their Father in His enemy-love, it is also true for Luther that all believers are *obligated* to do so. The Roman relegation of “perfection” to the religious orders meant that, “the word becomes completely inapplicable to the ordinary Christian way of life, as if such people should not be called perfect or be perfect. But you hear Christ talking here not to bishops, monks, or nuns, but in general to all Christians who are his disciples, who want to be called sons of God.”⁴⁵ Calvin echoed Luther’s insistence on the categorical nature of *Christian* perfection: “Who shall dare to say that we are not bound to observe this doctrine?...it is an express command, and everyone who neglects it is struck out of the number of the children of God.”⁴⁶

Third, and significantly, Luther uses the language of “wholeness” to designate the fruit of Christian perfection. “How does it come about,” Luther asks, “that they [*all* believers] are perfect?” It does not mean that they have no sin.” Peter Martyr subpoenaed the apostolic testimony to head off any idea of sinless, or static perfection. At the end of his life Paul still wrote of “not having achieved” but “always pressing on toward” the upward call.⁴⁷ Instead, wrote Luther, “Here and everywhere in Scripture, to ‘be perfect’ means, in the first place, that doctrine is completely correct, and then, that life move and be regulated according to it.”⁴⁸ The English reformer William Ames developed this idea in the seventeenth century as an integral union of “faith and observance.”⁴⁹ Integrity between (right) belief and (devout) obedience is thus the principle of perfection. As such, it lends its unitive character to each of its concrete applications. Luther takes, as an example, the enemy-love of Matthew 5. He points to what he calls “the Jewish teaching” that we should love only our friends. This is not correct doctrine. To live out of this belief, therefore, is to suffer a love, “chopped

45. Luther, *Sermon on the Mount*, 129.

46. Calvin, *Commentary*, 306.

47. Peter Martyr Vermigli, *Commentary on Aristotle’s Nicomachean Ethics* The Peter Martyr Library Vol. 9, ed. Emidio Campi and Joseph McLelland (Kirksville: Truman State University Press, 2006), 350.

48. Luther, *Sermon on the Mount*, 129.

49. William Ames, *The Marrow of Theology* ed. John Eusden (Boston: Pilgrim Press, 1968), 79. Originally published in 1642.

up and divided. It is only half a love.” The link is clear between false doctrine and a fractured heart, or life. Instead, “what [our Father] wants is an entire, whole, and undivided love, where one loves and helps his enemy as well as his friends.”⁵⁰ Here is the example of our heavenly Father, “who does not split or chop up his love and kindness.” It is also a picture of the way wholeness for the human heart is regained as we mature (by discrete examples) in our perfection (as a principle)—living by the truth as it is in Jesus. Obedience to God’s commands, embodied in Christ, empowered by the Spirit, leads toward *teleios*-ity.

YOU HEAR CHRIST TALKING HERE NOT TO BISHOPS, MONKS, OR NUNS, BUT IN GENERAL TO ALL CHRISTIANS WHO ARE HIS DISCIPLES, WHO WANT TO BE CALLED SONS OF GOD.

“BE TELEIOS” IN REFORMED ORTHODOXY

In October of 2021, Tony Reinke posted a twitter poll asking whether “Explicitly applying divine simplicity to Christian living (sincerity/single aims) is: unwise, promising, or a solid move.” The question was prompted by anecdotal evidence that, “2 out of 3 old Reformed authors I read does something like this.”⁵¹ The “old Reformed authors” Reinke had in view were those writing between 1560 and 1760, the period known as Reformed Orthodoxy.⁵² These stewards of Reformation doctrine applied divine simplicity to Christian living in two steps. In the first place, they linked God’s perfection with his simplicity as a way of identifying his attributes with his essence. The Lutheran Johann Gerhard (1582–1637), for example, wrote that as “the cause of all perfections [God] is simply and absolutely perfect.”⁵³ The simplicity of God means that His per-

fections, as we perceive them, (i.e. goodness, wisdom, love, and power) are inextricable, unimprovable, and immutable. The language of Matthew 5:48b was a frequent proof text for this claim.⁵⁴

In Matthew 5, however, proof of the Creator’s perfection is prefaced with a creaturely analog: “as your Father in heaven is perfect.” Reformed Orthodoxy took the second step, therefore, of locating perfection and simplicity on a scale relative to the nature they had in view. Gerhard for example: “the more simple something is, the more perfect it is.”⁵⁵ The result was that simplicity in the creature, as we aspire to the absolute example of our heavenly Father, takes the form of an increasing integrity and an intensity among our various perfections. In the (unironic) words of Petrus van Mastricht (1630–1706), our “simplicity of heart” included “three distinct things...first, that the inward heart should be pure...second, that the heart, being pure, should aim at one goal, the glory of God and...third, that the pure and simple heart should strive for its simple goal with a constant and uniform endeavor as much as possible.”⁵⁶ This lack of division within our heart, this cohesion of our moral fiber, this emulation of Christ, is the end for which we were created.

Van Mastricht, something of a poster boy for Reformed Orthodoxy, was a vigorous advocate of the idea that creaturely perfection should be seen in terms of accommodated simplicity, or wholeness. He began with an explicitly Christological amplification of Ames’s definition of the theological project, “the

Mystery of the Trinity, Theological Commonplaces: Exegesis II-III, trans. Richard Dinda (St. Louis: Concordia, 2007), 254. Originally published 1625.

54. Carl Trueman points up the significance of Richard Muller’s argument that, “proof texts” in the seventeenth century were not intended as simple, blunt answers to complex questions. Proof texts operated rather as exegetical markers, directing the reader to the key verse but doing so in the expectation that the reader would check the classical expositions of that verse.” This makes attention to commentaries and sermons a vital practice in tracing the history of interpretation. Carl Trueman, “The Revised Historiography of Reformed Orthodoxy: A Few Practical Implications” *Ordained Servant* (October 2012). Online at https://opc.org/os.html?article_id=325.

55. Gerhard, *On the Nature of God*, 253.

56. Petrus van Mastricht, *Theoretical-Practical Theology II*, trans. Todd Rester (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2019), 150-51. Originally published in 1687.

50. Luther, *Sermon on the Mount*, 129.

51. @TonyReinke 10/30/21. Results were mixed, with skeptics comprising the largest single category (41%), but those inclined toward or confident in the idea combining to make the majority (59%).

52. Herman Selderhuis ed., *A Companion to Reformed Orthodoxy* Brill’s Companions to the Christian Tradition 40 (Leiden: Brill), 2013.

53. Johann Gerhard, *On the Nature of God and On the Most Holy*

IT IS REMARKABLE THAT THE GENERAL CONTOURS OF THE CHURCH'S UNDERSTANDING OF CHRIST'S COMMAND IN MATTHEW 5:48 REMAINED LARGELY STABLE FOR SEVENTEEN HUNDRED YEARS.

doctrine of living for God *through Christ*.⁵⁷ He then turned to the work of the Spirit. Such a life—like God as it was increasingly like Christ—was possible for the fallen creature because our spirit was originally “stamped in his image” and was now being restored through the process of our sanctification as we come increasingly to share in the moral goodness of God.⁵⁸ The goal of this restoration was to accomplish God’s original design for His children to become partakers of the divine nature.⁵⁹ Simplicity, or sincerity, is for the sake of *teleios*-ity.

There is a suggestive echo here of Luther’s equation of our moral goodness with whole-heartedness; that is, we emulate our Father’s *teleios*-ity as we imitate the prodigality of his love. Van Mastricht writes that the good “for which we were created” is to “devote ourselves with the simplicity and sincerity of God, not with a double heart, which is attributed to hypocrites, a heart which looks to itself, the world, and temporal things, at the same time as it looks to God. But instead, with one simple heart, which is carried in one straight line to the one God.”⁶⁰ Such a united, God-ward and God-like heart is animated by zeal to imitate God’s love, first for God Himself and then for our neighbor, “without any respect to worthiness or repayment.”⁶¹

Categories such as “simplicity,” and the method employed by Reformed scholasticism may lend an initial air of unfamiliarity to their conclusions. Yet a mo-

ment’s reflection reveals that the same concerns characterize their explication of Matthew 5:48 that have recurred in our study to this point. A right and robust understanding of the call to “be *teleios* as your Father in heaven is *teleios*” began with imitation as the *telos* of our being made in the image and likeness of God, exalted Christ as the true man and so our pattern for imitating the Father, focused on the unmerited or unnatural aspect of God’s love in Christ, and stressed the need in all of this for the gift of the Holy Spirit.

FRACTURE AND THE WAY FORWARD

It is remarkable that the general contours of the church’s understanding of Christ’s command in Matthew 5:48 remained largely stable for seventeen hundred years. In the opening decades of the long eighteenth century, however, this interpretive consensus on the Sermon began to fracture into Dylan’s broken glass.⁶² We move this chapter toward a conclusion through a brief consideration of this loss of consensus, as well as ways in which recovering the great tradition could resource contemporary interpretation.

Debates about the language of “perfection” do not long escape the gravitational pull of John Wesley (1703–1791) and his concept of Christian perfection, entire sanctification, or perfect love.⁶³ Over decades of sermons and tracts defending his understanding of Jesus’ command in Matthew 5:48, Wesley showed himself to be an able exegete, a keen student of church history, and committed to approach the call to holiness with utmost earnestness. His defense, therefore, capitalized on much of the best of what we have seen in our brief

57. Petrus van Mastricht, *Theoretical-Practical Theology* I trans. Todd Rester (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage Books, 2018), 8. Originally published in 1682. He returns to this theme throughout his second volume, concluding his treatments of the various attributes of God with the reminder, “[the immutable etc.] God, in whose imitation our every perfection exists.” The statement is accompanied, in most cases, by a reference to Matthew 5:48. Van Mastricht, *TPT* II:163, 276, 341, 381.

58. Van Mastricht, *TPT* II:141, 341.

59. Van Mastricht, *TPT* II:341.

60. Van Mastricht, *TPT* II:150.

61. Van Mastricht, *TPT* II:381.

62. Bauman suggests that it was through Tolstoy (1828-1910) that “the Sermon on the Mount first became a problem to the modern conscience.” But this is too late. Tolstoy was grappling in literature with a tension philosophers had discussed for a century. Bauman, *Modern Quest*, 7.

63. John Wesley, *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection* (Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press), 1966. Originally published in 1777.

tour, to this point, including the idea that *teleios-ity* is a call toward being “grown” or mature.⁶⁴

What was unique in his work was a redefinition of sin, blended as it was with an extraordinary view of the human capacity for obedience. Regarding sin, Wesley emphasized the intention of the heart. This led him to define sin as “a voluntary transgression of a known law of God.”⁶⁵ Transgressions due to ignorance, if made from a heart of love to God, were not sins but “mistakes.”⁶⁶ Regarding the human will, Wesley read the commands of Christ (i.e. be perfect) as requiring the possibility of obedience, and that in this life. While he did not develop his doctrine of Spirit baptism to the extent followers like John Fletcher and then Charles Finney would do, Wesley did charge his preachers to herald the possibility of an instantaneous experience of entire sanctification accomplished by the Spirit.⁶⁷

Wesley’s ministry is thus rightly seen as something of an interpretive watershed on the meaning of perfection. The instantaneous nature of the experience of perfection, as well as the stratification of sin(s) based on the intent of the heart, departed from the Christian tradition into a kind of over-realized *teleios-ity*. The love of God, and of all things for God’s sake, remained the admirable goal.⁶⁸ But Wesley’s insistence on the instantaneous nature of the Spirit’s work, as well his surrender of the necessary integrity between motive and act, sounded a sour note when transposing the anthem of divine perfection into an imitative, creaturely key.

Wesley’s position divided Methodism into Calvinistic and Arminian camps, with this latter group sustaining further division through the rise of the Holiness and Higher Life movements.⁶⁹ His participation in

the Evangelical Revival exerted a similar impact on nascent evangelicalism more broadly. But the watershed of Wesleyan perfectionism was *not* the source of interpretive division we are interrogating. Wesley, and indeed the trans-Atlantic Awakening, was itself a *response* to the increasing prominence of Enlightenment categories, particularly its rationalistic epistemology, over the preceding decades. The concern within Reformed Orthodoxy noted above—to maintain a vital link between piety and doctrine—had this epistemological crisis already in view. Richard Muller described the thinkers of High Orthodoxy (1620–1700) as already “beginning to feel the impact of Cartesian thought,” and thus as prosecuting a “highly nuanced engagement with the rationalists of the 17th century.”⁷⁰

The Enlightenment’s prioritizing of epistemology over theology, a consequence shifting authority from revelation to reason, eviscerated discussions of virtue. Even Gertrude Himmelfarb, at pains to argue that the *British* Enlightenment did in fact contribute an emphasis on the virtues largely absent from its French and American counterparts, must admit that it was “not personal virtues but the social virtues of compassion, benevolence and sympathy that the British philosophers believed naturally, instinctively, habitually bound people together.”⁷¹ That was the idea, at any rate. The story she traces, however, is an unfortunately familiar one within post-Kantian social ethics; a tale of men so inspired by love of humanity they avoided the obligations of concern for actual people.

The logic of Matthew 5:48 helps us understand the loss society must sustain once it follows Descartes, and then Kant, off of the epistemological cliff. Christian virtue is predicated on the imitation of our Father in heaven but, for Kant, we “can never know the God that *is*, we can only postulate some god that *ought to be*.”⁷² Further, our imitation of God is predicated on our be-

64. Wesley, *Plain Account*, 24.

65. Wesley, *Plain Account*, 66.

66. In so doing, Wesley seems to give away the integrity between motive and action that Jesus reclaimed through his antitheses in Matthew 5.

67. William Arnett, “The Role of the Holy Spirit in Entire Sanctification in the Writings of John Wesley” *Asbury Journal* (1974):5–23.

68. Wesley, *Plain Account*, 9.

69. Andrew David Naselli, *No Quick Fix: Where Higher Life Theology Came from, What it is, and Why it is Harmful* (Bellingham: Lexham

Press, 2017), 7–27.

70. Richard Muller, *Post Reformation Reformed Dogmatics* (Grand Rapids: Baker Publishing Group, 1987), I:73, 74.

71. Gertrude Himmelfarb, *The Roads to Modernity: The British, French, and American Enlightenments* (New York: Vintage Books, 2004), 5–6.

72. Shao Kai Tseng, *Immanuel Kant* (Phillipsburg: P&R, 2020), 141. Italics original.

ing made in his image. And our participation in that image is exemplified in the saving work of Christ and empowered by the indwelling Spirit. Theology (divine ontology and act) is, therefore, the foundation of piety.⁷³ The call of Matthew 5:48 is incoherent outside of this interpersonal context. To immanentize ethics, as happens when revelation is sacrificed to the canons of reason, is to saw off the very branch one demands to bear fruit. Any project to speak of virtue apart from a transcended Standard and Source becomes self-referential and results in a severely *under-realized teleios-ity*.

The self-defeating nature of Enlightenment ethics, in turn, helps to explain the reaction of both Wesley's over-realized *teleios-ity* as well as the hermeneutical fault lines that erupted along the lines of the Sermon's "fulfillability." The language of "virtue" and "ethics" was maintained throughout Enlightenment discourse, including those branches of the church that accommodated themselves to it. The concept of Jesus as (exclusively) moral exemplar also retained traction. But without its theological or doctrinal referent, the effort to go beyond what is "natural" in our ethic proved insupportable. The result was a proliferation of attempts to explain (away) just what it was Jesus was calling his disciples to do; attempts which, often as not, reflected the sensibilities of those in the pulpit or behind the lectern. As Jesus emphasized in his parable of the good Samaritan, when we do not know who our God is, we will not be able to recognize our neighbor.

While it means leaping whole epochs at a single bound, we close by giving a brief moment of attention to the relevant witness of Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906–1945). Bonhoeffer's famous broadside against cheap grace was a rebuke to the fruit of both rationalism and pietism, with their attendant under-realized and over-realized *teleios-ities*, as they made their way into the first half of the twentieth century. It is not coincidental that the constructive portion of Bonhoeffer's work, his argument for costly grace, was built as an exposition of the Sermon on the Mount. His work provides us with an example of how retrieving the historical consensus on

73. As Bavinck put it, "In dogmatics, God loves us; in ethics, therefore, we love him." Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Ethics* ed. John Bolt (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2021), xxvi.

the Sermon, particularly the call to participate in our Father's perfection, can serve the church attempting to be *teleios* "under the conditions of modernity."⁷⁴ Weaving all four historically prominent themes together into a compelling vision of a life wholly, truly, and really Christian, Bonhoeffer asks,

"How are disciples different from nonbelievers? What does 'being Christian' consist of? At this point the word appears toward which the whole fifth chapter is pointed, in which everything already said is summarized: what is Christian is what is peculiar [*exceeding* righteousness, vs 20]... It is the great mistake of a false Protestant ethic to assume that loving Christ can be the same as loving one's native country, or friendship, or profession; that the better righteousness and the *iustitia civilis* are the same. Jesus does not talk that way... What is the [difference]? It is the love of Jesus Christ Himself, who goes to the cross in suffering and obedience. It is the cross. What is unique in Christianity is the cross, which allows Christians to step beyond the world [what is natural]... Here are those who are perfect, perfect in undivided love, just as their Father in heaven is. It was the undivided, perfect love of the Father which gave the divine Son up to die on the cross for us. Likewise, the *passio* of the communion with this cross is the perfection of the followers of Jesus."⁷⁵

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74. Bruce McCormack, *Orthodox and Modern: Studies in the Theology of Karl Barth* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 232.

75. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2015), 114-115.

Beneath The Cedar

BY SARAH REARDON

The ruddy trunk outlasts ten thousand trees
Like cedar mid the winter's withered land.
Grown over years, a column made to stand,
And not to shiver with the passing breeze
And not to sway wherever time decrees:
Such ones are rare within this dying land,
And hard to find. For I have searched and scanned:
The only tree of health, my eye now sees.

Indeed, like alabaster set on gold
He stands, and far and firm his boughs extend,
and under him I need not fear the cold.
But first I must acquire the heart to bend
Beneath his boughs, and from that place behold
The cedar's strength: yes, first, I must descend.

The Political Challenge of Jonah: Reflections on Niebuhr and Postliberalism

BY HAMISH STIRLING

The character of Jonah is one of the most recognizable in the whole Bible, but the prophet's failure is not always understood as having a political dimension. Jonah's inability to value God's mercy at work in the political reality of Nineveh challenges the church to be "glad" in its political engagement with the world, and to take its own sin seriously as it does so. Here, I will consider the contrasting political approaches of Reinhold Niebuhr and contemporary postliberals in response to this challenge and ask, which is more susceptible to the temptation of the wayward prophet?

The fact that there is a political element to the story of Jonah is sometimes overlooked. Nineveh, after all, is a *polis*, and the drama of the narrative ultimately depends on the fate of this "great city" with "over a hundred and twenty thousand" inhabitants (Jonah 4:11 ESV). Whilst this drama can be understood in cultural terms—it is the *people* of Nineveh "from the greatest to the least" who respond to Jonah first (3:5)—it also concerns the response of the political authorities to God's word. The king of Nineveh, upon hearing of Jonah's

message, rises from his throne, removes his robe, and sits in sackcloth and ashes, commanding the people to turn from their evil ways and "call out mightily to God" that he might relent (3:6-9). While it is the people who initially call for a fast, it is the king who calls for an end to the violence, which is a vital element in God's recognition of their repentance (3:10). These details highlight the submission of the city's political order as well as its cultural order to God's word of judgment.

Yet it is rare to hear much extended reflection on Jonah as a book with political themes. Perhaps this is because of the manner in which it is presented. There is a child-like simplicity to the description of the Ninevites' response to God's judgment which also characterizes God's explanation to Jonah for his compassion. Whatever the complexities of the socio-political dynamics of ancient Nineveh or the trajectory of God's providential plan for history, in this moment we are confronted with a surprisingly straightforward picture of God's judgment and mercy at work in the city. This simplicity would seem to preclude the extraction of any serious

political-theological lessons from the story, suggesting that it is more about the attitudes of God's people and "insiders" such as Jonah than about God's work outside of Israel among the nations.

Indeed, an awareness of the broader place of Nineveh in the biblical story might make us cautious to draw radical conclusions from this episode. Whatever the precise character of the repentance that takes place in Jonah's Nineveh (there is no indication that the Ninevites are actually converted to Judaism), it clearly does not have a lasting effect when we consider Nahum's prophecy against the city some hundred years later. This fact perhaps encourages us to read the political events depicted in Nineveh as merely a foil for the internal prophetic critique of God's people. If *even* Nineveh can repent in response to God's word of judgment, then how much more ought the people of Israel?

THE FACT THAT THERE IS A POLITICAL ELEMENT TO THE STORY OF JONAH IS SOMETIMES OVERLOOKED. NINEVEH, AFTER ALL, IS A *POLIS*.

But if this is really the sole point of the story of Jonah, it would seem a somewhat disingenuous way for the author to use the life-or-death drama of such a "great city". For if Nineveh's repentance is incidental to the true message of the book, then it calls into question the sincerity of God's statement about caring for the city. Rather, for the exposure of Jonah's hard-heartedness to be achieved, the fate of the Ninevites *has* to matter in some way. If God really is, as Jonah himself puts it, "a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and relenting from disaster" (4:2), then the Ninevites' repentance and God's merciful response must represent a real possibility and hold some real value. Whatever the longer-term fate of the Ninevites might be, therefore, and however short-lived their repentance is, there is something basically good about such an event which God affirms.

Thus, the account of the Ninevites' repentance should not be explained away too quickly. Its simple and

straightforward character might, in fact, be part of its power as a source of reflection. This simple reality could be summarized as follows: *God has compassion toward "great cities", and his mercy is at hand for those who repent and turn from their evil.* Such a statement might seem obvious to the point of fatuity, but I suspect it can be easy to lose sight of its full implications. Indeed, the irony of Jonah's final response to God, which demonstrates no lack in his professed theology, suggests that we should not always expect ourselves to find this reality easy to accept, even if we fear it to be true.

Perhaps we can sympathize with Jonah in his situation. The prophet's response to God's compassion is often read as merely a bloodthirsty desire for revenge, but maybe he was also skeptical of the lasting character of the Ninevites' repentance. Knowing firsthand the horrors of which this "great city" was capable, what value could such limited repentance have? Does it not merely put off the day of reckoning for such a deeply unjust society? Yet God is not persuaded by such logic. Instead, he accepts Nineveh's repentance at face value and challenges Jonah to do the same. Indeed, Jesus himself holds up the Ninevites as examples of repentance in Matthew 12.

The political theologian Oliver O'Donovan identifies this challenge as one of *gladness*. If the church as the body of Christ is called to recapitulate the Christ-event in its life in the world, then it must recapitulate it in its entirety. The tendency can be to focus on one aspect of Christ's journey in the life of the church to the exclusion of others. In this case, the church can become so focused on its character as a *suffering* community that it forgets that it is also a *glad* community. The church rightly needs to be aware of its calling to suffer with Christ, that it should not expect to feel at home in the world that "killed the prophets and crucified our Lord," but it needs to do so as part of the overall knowledge of Christ's victory and his triumph:

[Gladness] is an essential qualification to the martyr-consciousness of the church. For communities that find their identity in the fact that they have been unjustly treated come to depend upon the injustice of others; they need to perpetuate the wrong and to ensure that the oppressor shall

NIEBUHR IS VIEWED BY MANY POSTLIBERALS AS THE PRIME EXAMPLE OF A CHURCH THAT MADE ITS PEACE WITH MODERNITY TOO EASILY.

not cease to oppress, like Jonah trying to ward off the disaster of Nineveh's conversion. What stands between the church and this pathology is the conscious joy it takes in the resurrection life. 'The Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead' dwells within it. From this position of strength it has no need of the oppressor's impotent oppression, and so can offer reconciliation. Forgiveness is the sign that all rebellion against God has been defeated, so that the enemy, too, is liberated from its power. That is not to belittle the evil that may have been intended; it is open to resurrection faith to take evil and forgiveness equally seriously.¹

We might add that this pathology could also be understood as a prior failure in the church's understanding of its suffering. One way in which the church is distinguished from its Lord is that its suffering is not entirely of another's doing, and that part of its call to suffer is in dying to its *own* self with its idolatrous desires. Jonah's hard-heartedness is doubly offensive because of the lack of self-awareness it shows of his own failure to follow God and his own experience of God's mercy. Jonah is a warning in this regard to God's people as he fails to understand his own life as a sign of God's mercy and thus cannot recognize and value movements of God's mercy more broadly, which extends even to the political life of a "great city" such as Nineveh.

In what ways, therefore, might the church in our day be susceptible to Jonah's temptation and fail to be truly glad, rendering it unable to recognize God's mercy at work in political reality?

One of the most significant developments in recent political theology in the West has been the proliferation of "postliberal" approaches. While this term could be used to describe a variety of positions (Christian and otherwise), Christian postliberals are united by a

critique of liberal modernity which sees it as fundamentally incompatible with Christian discipleship and seeks either a separation from or a radical revision of the liberal order in order to safeguard faithful Christian living. Postliberals have rightly caused the church to reflect on the many challenges to discipleship inherent in liberal modernity by exposing the violence done in its name to human communities and to creation more widely. Any serious Christian political theology must engage with the true extent of the idolatrous pretensions of modern Western culture and their historical roots, which ought to make us suspicious of any easy solution to the church's relations with liberal modernity. As Stanley Hauerwas reminds us, a healthy awareness of the church's call to suffer is crucial to avoiding this temptation.²

Postliberalism is often contrasted with the approach of the theologian and political thinker Reinhold Niebuhr (1892-1971), whose influential defense of liberal democracy is the target of much postliberal ire.³ Niebuhr represents an engaged political posture which asserts the responsibility of Christians to pursue limited political justice in a manner which accounts for the persistent reality of sin. But Niebuhr is viewed by many postliberals as the prime example of a church that made its peace with modernity too easily. Niebuhr's desire to chasten liberal politics with an appeal to original sin is seen as inadvertently buttressing the status quo by excluding appeals to "the ultimate" from political discourse, diminishing the radical implications of the Gospel in favor of a pragmatic understanding of politics which sidelines the church. Critics worry that Niebuhr's realism threatens to relegate God's redemptive work to the end of history and to grant sin

1. Oliver O'Donovan, *The Desire of the Nations: Rediscovering the Roots of Political Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 181.

2. Stanley Hauerwas, *With the Grain of the Universe: The Church's Witness and Natural Theology* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2001), 220.

3. Niebuhr made his apology for liberal democracy most famously in *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness: A Vindication of Democracy and a Critique of its Traditional Defense* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1944).

a present hegemony that is unwarranted. Thus, he is often accused of a failure of gladness in his own way.⁴ Niebuhr was famously dismissive of “sentimental idealists” who naively suggested moralistic solutions to complex political problems, but would he have regarded the story of Jonah similarly?⁵

NIEBUHR TOOK THESE INJUSTICES SERIOUSLY ENOUGH THAT IN THE EARLY 1930S HE WONDERED IF LIBERAL CIVILIZATION WAS NOT GENUINELY DOOMED TO DESTRUCTION.

While these criticisms must be taken seriously, however, there are reasons to believe that Niebuhr took on board the lesson of the wayward prophet better than some of his postliberal successors. Without denying the validity of postliberal approaches *tout court*, the danger is that the very strength of their critique of modernity can make political reality seem increasingly intractable to God’s redeeming work, causing the church to “wait under” a proverbial vine of its own. Like Jonah, this could perhaps be part of an *over-expectation* of political life that refuses to value limited moments of renewal. By contrast, Niebuhr affirmed the possibility and value of a certain experience of repentance and renewal in the lives of political communities, while also understanding the limits of such experiences in light of the constantly self-glorifying tendency of human collectives. He also posited an important role for the church as a kind of “saving remnant” within society, but understood that this required taking the church’s complicity in the evils of modernity seriously. There are thus some surprising resonances between Niebuhr’s writing and

the book of Jonah, which suggests that his example ought not to be discounted so quickly by Christians of a postliberal persuasion today.

We can see these resonances in an address Niebuhr gave to the World Council of Churches in 1948 on “The Christian Witness in the Social and National Order,” in which he explored the role of the church in the West in the wake of WWII.⁶ Niebuhr begins by recognizing the inclination and responsibility of convinced Christians “to bear witness against the secular substitutes for the Christian faith which failed to anticipate, and which may have helped to create, the tragic world in which we now live.”⁷ This was one aspect of the church’s calling to be a prophetic voice to the world, and Niebuhr was certainly never shy of critiquing what he saw as prideful assumptions at the heart of his own society. In his view, WWII and the long crisis that preceded it was a moment of judgment that had come upon the West for the idolatrous pretensions of liberalism. These pretensions had created the injustices in Western society out of which the existential threats of communism and fascism had grown. Niebuhr took these injustices seriously enough that in the early 1930s he wondered if liberal civilization was not genuinely doomed to destruction.⁸

However, Niebuhr promptly adds a warning to this recognition of the prophetic responsibility of the church that recalls Jonah. “Let us not presume to laugh with God,” Niebuhr writes, “lest we forget that His judgment is upon us, as well as upon them.”⁹ In Niebuhr’s view, the church was too implicated in the disaster of his day to permit itself more than “provisional testimony” against secular society. “The Christian Church must bear witness against every form of pride and vainglory, whether in the secular or in the Christian culture,” he affirmed, and it must be “particularly intent upon our own sins lest we make Christ the judge of the other and not of ourselves.”¹⁰

4. For representative critiques see William T. Cavanaugh, “A Nation with the Church’s Soul: Richard John Neuhaus and Reinhold Niebuhr on Church and Politics,” *Political Theology* 14, no. 3 (2013): 386-96; John Milbank, *The Word Made Strange: Theology, Language, Culture* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), 233-51; Stanley Hauerwas, *With the Grain of the Universe: The Church’s Witness and Natural Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013), 131-48.

5. To my knowledge, although the Hebrew prophets were a favorite source of reflection, Niebuhr never discussed Jonah at length in his writing.

6. Published in *Christian Realism and Political Problems* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1953), 102-13.

7. *Christian Realism and Political Problems*, 102.

8. See for instance his *Reflections on the End of an Era* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1934).

9. *Christian Realism and Political Problems*, 105.

10. *Christian Realism and Political Problems*, 107.

Furthermore, this negative task of the church is not intended to stand alone. The word of judgment is with the purpose of redemption:

Positively our task is to present the Gospel of redemption in Christ to nations as well as individuals. According to our faith, we are always involved in sin and in death because we try too desperately to live, to preserve our pride, to maintain our prestige. Yet it is possible to live truly if we die to self, if the vainglory of man is broken by divine judgment that life may be truly reformed by divine grace. This promise of new life is for individuals. Yet who can deny its relevance for nations and empires, for civilizations and cultures also, even though these collective forms of life do not have the exact integrity of the individual soul nor do they have as direct an access to divine judgment and grace?¹¹

NIEBUHR FELT HE HAD ALREADY SEEN SOME FRUITS OF REPENTANCE IN THE SOCIAL DEMOCRATIC TURN IN MANY WESTERN NATIONS.

Despite being a self-identified realist, then, Niebuhr baldly applies the language of judgment, mercy, and repentance to his understanding of power politics. Niebuhr did so because he understood the same dynamics of sin as operative in collective as in individual life. Individuals and communities have “the same sense of the contingent and insecure character of human existence and they seek by the same pride and lust for power to hide or to overcome that insecurity.”¹² This meant that some sort of experience of repentance was applicable to communities as well as to individuals. “It is not impossible,” Niebuhr wrote in *Faith and History*, “for nations and cultures, rulers and communities to interpret their vicissitudes as judgements upon their pride and thus to be reformed, rather than destroyed, by the bludgeonings of history.” Niebuhr saw these

opportunities as occurring at moments of political crisis, when the injustices of a community caught up with it and led to challenges to its prideful claims to authority.¹³

Thus, when Niebuhr saw the dramatic events of his lifetime as a judgment on the sinful pretensions of Western societies, he also saw this as an opportunity for the church to invite them to repentance and renewal. Rather than sitting back and watching the world suffer, Niebuhr called on the church as a “saving remnant” to “to mediate the divine judgment and grace that nations, classes, states and cultures, as well as individuals, may discern the divine author of their wounds, that they may also know the possibility of a new and whole life.”¹⁴ The liberal societies of the West had to understand how they reaped what they sowed in the twin challenges of fascism and communism, and correspondingly to repent of the sinful illusions that had fostered the injustices from which these movements drew strength. Niebuhr felt he had already seen some fruits of repentance in the social democratic turn in many Western nations, which displayed a willingness to question liberal illusions about the free-market and the concentration of economic power.¹⁵

Of course, true to his “realist” moniker, political repentance was not always a straightforward possibility for Niebuhr. In perhaps his most famous work *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, Niebuhr argued that human egoism was compounded in social settings to make collectives incapable of the kind of moral behavior that might be possible in individuals.¹⁶ Niebuhr carried a similar conviction into his mature thought, arguing that political communities were unable to transcend themselves like some individuals because they “have no other life than their life in history.” There is no such thing as a “martyr nation,” and no political community

11. *Christian Realism and Political Problems*, 107-8.

12. *Faith and History: A Comparison of Christian and Modern Views of History* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1949), 218.

13. *Faith and History*, 230. See pp. 214-234 of *Faith and History* for Niebuhr's extended discussion of the possibilities for repentance in political communities.

14. *Christian Realism and Political Problems*, 108.

15. *Christian Realism and Political Problems*, 110-1. See “Augustine's Political Realism” pp. 119-46 in the same volume for Niebuhr's reading of the development of social democracy.

16. *Moral Man and Immoral Society: A Study in Ethics and Politics* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1932), xi.

THE RELUCTANCE OF SOME POSTLIBERAL APPROACHES TO APPRECIATE LIMITED EXAMPLES OF REPENTANCE IN POLITICAL LIFE MUST BE QUESTIONED.

would finally escape the temptations of prideful pretension that would lead to its downfall.¹⁷ Niebuhr thus finishes his address with a reflection on the story of Abraham bargaining with God for the fate of Sodom and Gomorrah. Even though there might have been a sufficient number of righteous people in Sodom to constitute a “saving remnant,” ultimately its presence was irrelevant for the fate of the city. In the same way, the church should not set its hope on the world heeding its warnings. Western civilization was surely bound to fall one day –if not more imminently, given the invention of nuclear weapons. But, as Niebuhr concludes,

If such a day should come, we will remember that the mystery of God’s sovereignty and mercy transcends the fate of empires and civilizations. He will be exalted though they perish. However, He does not desire their perdition but rather that they turn from their evil ways and live. From us He demands that we work while it is day, since the night cometh when no man can work.¹⁸

In this way, therefore, Niebuhr held a political vision that tried to take the sin of the world and of the church seriously while still affirming the proximity of God’s mercy to political reality.

Perhaps Niebuhr’s extension of his existentialist theology to power politics in this manner is somewhat clumsy. It lacks the sophisticated understanding of history and God’s salvation plan which is a strength of more recent political theology such as Oliver O’Donovan’s. Niebuhr never quite transcended the ahistorical understanding of Christian faith he inherited from his liberal forebears. There also remain questions about whether Niebuhr’s underlying theology can genuinely sustain such an assertion of God’s redemptive activity in history, given his reticence about certain key elements of Christian doctrine such as the historicity of

the resurrection. In that, and in other respects, Niebuhr was a child of liberal modernity in his own way.¹⁹

But at the same time, maybe there is some virtue in the straightforward trust Niebuhr exhibits in the proximity of God’s mercy to human communities which might challenge us today. Postliberals are certainly right to say that ours is increasingly a society that “does not know its right hand from its left” and which requires radical renewal, but Niebuhr might warn them not to allow this to obscure the immediate counsels of hope and repentance that our society needs to hear. For one thing, as Ross Douthat has recently pointed out, Christian postliberals are not the only postliberals around, and there is no guarantee that their vision will be the one to rise out of the ashes of a fallen liberal order.²⁰ Like the man in Jesus’ parable whose demon leaves only to return with seven more terrible (Mt. 12:43-5), we might end up with something much worse than secular liberalism. This is where it is important to take the witness of figures such as Niebuhr seriously. He lived in a genuinely totalitarian time, not like the “liberal totalitarianism” which some detect in our own day. He had as much reason as anyone to be cynical about Western civilization, having lived through the Great Depression and two world wars. But through his experience of the next two decades, he thought he detected enough “fruits of repentance” in democratic liberalism that warranted its provisional support.²¹ Whether we agree with

19. The debate over the extent of Niebuhr’s theological liberalism is complex. Much of the difficulty concerns the precise nature of Niebuhr’s understanding of the Bible as “true myth”. For excellent discussions see Gary Dorrien, *The Making of American Liberal Theology, vol. 2, Idealism, Realism, and Modernity, 1900-1950*, (Westminster John Knox Press, 2003), 435-83; Kevin Carnahan, “Reading Reinhold Niebuhr against Himself Again: On Theological Language and Divine Action,” *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 18, no. 2 (2016): 191-209; Langdon Gilkey, *On Niebuhr: A Theological Study* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002).

20. Ross Douthat, “A Conversation with Ross Douthat,” interview by Peter Leithart and James Wood, *The Civitas Podcast*, 17/10/2023.

21. Reinhold Niebuhr, “Toward a Christian Approach to International Issues,” *Christianity and Crisis* 6 (Dec. 9 1946): 1.

17. *Faith and History*, 230.

18. *Christian Realism and Political Problems*, 112-3.

Niebuhr's assessment or not, the reluctance of some postliberal approaches to appreciate limited examples of repentance in political life must be questioned.

Likewise, Niebuhr's willingness to take seriously the church's complicity—by participation and by provocation—in the ills of modernity is salutary in contrast to a certain tendency among postliberals to gloss over this fact.²² While we can be grateful for the reminder of the church's call to suffer from Hauerwas and others, the distinction implied in Jonah between the church's suffering and Christ's suffering is one that complicates any simplistic opposition between church and world that sustains some postliberal approaches. When we observe that liberal modernity has largely rejected the church for instance, should we immediately assume that it has also rejected God? Or perhaps we should

22. See for instance the critique of William Cavanaugh's understanding of secular modernity by Christopher Insole in "Discerning the Theopolitical: A Response to Cavanaugh's Reimagining of Political Space," *Political Theology* 7, no. 3 (2006): 323-35, <https://doi.org/10.1558/poth.2006.7.3.323>.

say that, in part, it has rejected the God the church presented to it. This might help us to recognise some of the ways that God's mercy has been at work in liberal societies to this day.

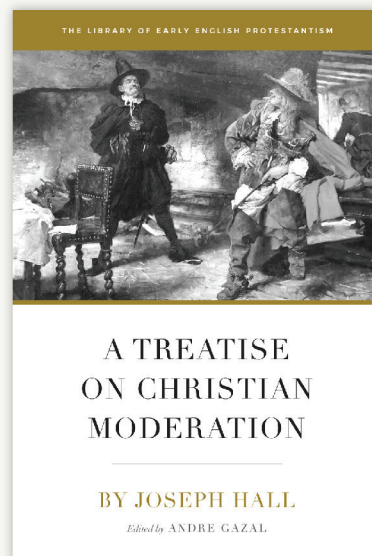
Of course, these reflections do not invalidate the postliberal insight altogether. It might stop us though from being too hasty in writing off the witness of those such as Niebuhr who, for all his faults, perhaps understood something of the challenge of Jonah better than ourselves. The most important lesson of Jonah, however, is one that we can all grasp better, which ultimately concerns the character of God himself, a God who is "gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love."

Hamish Stirling is a Ph.D student in Theology at the University of St Andrews, Scotland and a member of Cornerstone St Andrews United Free Church.

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BY JOSEPH HALL
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Kierkegaard, Repentance, and the True Self

BY DANIEL GOODMAN

Søren Kierkegaard (1813-1855) is renowned for his in-depth explorations into selfhood, identity, and the essence of living authentically. His works no doubt contributed to making concepts like “despair” and “anxiety” worthy of serious philosophical investigation in the modern era.¹ Debates regarding what constitutes a “true” self still endure hundreds of years later. Some assert that the true self resides “within” and must actively defy impositions to express individuality. Others advocate for a life of responsibility, finding meaning in willed acts of sacrifice. With keen foresight, Kierkegaard pursued both ends of the spectrum to their logical conclusions, discovering the existential shortcomings of each. However, his prolific use of pseudonyms, layered irony, metaphors, and storytelling makes him prone to misunderstanding. As such, it can be easy to

miss Kierkegaard’s unusual path towards authenticity: a life of repentance.

In his early masterpiece, *Either/Or* (1843), Kierkegaard skillfully portrays the journey of self-discovery in the form of a fragmented and self-aware narrative. This literary *tour de force* presents itself as an anonymously edited compilation, comprising stories, essays, and letters produced by a variety of pseudonymous characters. The non-systematic approach enables him to embody a multitude of conflicting philosophical ideals as characters studied in isolation. Altogether, the fictional authors represent two kinds of lives: the transient life of the “aesthete” and the bounded life of the “ethical.” Volume one of *Either/Or* muses upon the quintessential aesthetic life—an ironic portrayal of the Romantic modern man—and contains a forthright defense of expressive individualism.

Today, the word “aesthetic” often describes qualities of beauty or art (“That is an aesthetically pleasing painting!”) but those in Kierkegaard’s day classified

1. Consider Albert Camus who decried, “There is only one really serious philosophical problem and that is suicide. Deciding whether or not life is worth living is to answer the fundamental question in philosophy. All other questions follow from that.” Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays*, trans. Justin O’Brien (New York: Vintage Books, 1991), 3.

a wider domain of human experiences under this academic subject. Aesthetics, in their usage, signified the non-practical or non-scientific matters of life. It represented actions done not out of necessity, but because of human freedom. Aesthetics describes what is independent of any utilitarian measure. For many in Kierkegaard's day, this disposition celebrated the human experience in its essence—a celebration of imagination and freedom. Working from such a disposition, artists ferociously elevated originality as the highest of all artistic virtues. To be original signaled an authentic individual stripped of all necessity and inheritance. Author "A" of *Either/Or* incarnates this vision of self-actualization.

TO RESOLVE INESCAPABLE PREDICTABILITY, THE AESTHETE PROPOSES THE "ROTATION METHOD" WHICH FACILITATES NOVELTY IN A WORLD OF FINITUDE.

For the aesthete, the maxim of decision making is simple: seeing possibility in a world of necessity. Bluntly, this means they undertake a mode of life which avoids boredom and suffering at all costs—twin evils posing particular threats to self-expression. They stifle and restrict. Or as the typified aesthete in *Either/Or* soliloquizes: "Should one wish to attain the maximum momentum, even to the point of almost endangering the driving power, one need only to say to oneself: Boredom is the root of all evil."²

Boredom, as described here, isn't synonymous with monotony; instead, it stems from a sense of purposelessness inhabiting an entirely predictable world. The following passages regard boredom as an essential feature of human existence, always lurking, and always needing to be actively resisted. Boredom serves as a powerful motivator since humans find it infinitely repulsive. This explains why humans remain infinitely creative; they seek to always be amused and free.

2. Søren Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*, trans. Walter Lowrie and Howard A. Johnson, vol. 2 (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1959), 281.

Practically speaking, the aesthete is an "apostle of the empty enthusiasm who always makes his way through life on an interjection."³ Always saying "yes" to the new, the person arranges their time to distract or find solace from the world of determined qualities. Any sense of value judgments dissipates as he "cries Ah! Or Oh! Whenever the event be significant or insignificant, the difference having been lost to him in the emptiness of a blind and noisy enthusiasm."⁴ A dilemma arises when confronted with the necessities of repetition experienced in life.

To resolve inescapable predictability, the aesthete proposes the "Rotation Method" which facilitates novelty in a world of finitude. For just as a farmer carefully plants his seasonal crops to maximize the yield, so also the aesthete rotates his experiences to maintain a sense of newness. However, the unclever hedonist may confuse this strategy with the rotation of soil—always changing the environment. The sophisticated aesthete protests:

This is the vulgar and inartistic method, and needs to be supported by illusion. One tires of living in the country, and moves to the city; one tires of one's native land, and travels abroad; one is *europamüde*, and goes to America, and so on; finally, one indulges in a sentimental hope of endless journeying from star to star. Or the moment is different but still extensive. One tires of porcelain dishes and eats on silver; one tires of silver and turns to gold; one burns half of Rome to get an idea of the burning of Troy. This method defeats itself; it is plain endlessness.⁵

The key is to rotate crops, not fields—the self, not the environment. It is the skill of reinterpretation through the powers of imagination. With an active imagination, amusement can be found even within the most tedious of places just as "a prisoner in solitary confinement for life becomes very inventive, and a spider may furnish him with much entertainment."⁶ The mature

3. *Either/Or*, 286

4. *Either/Or*, 286

5. *Either/Or*, 287-288.

6. *Either/Or*, 288.

aesthete, the author declares, “seeks results intensively, not extensively.”⁷ Rotating the imagination like crops assumes the art of a poetic existence. After all, any artist willingly restricts himself to the bounds of a canvas to let his imagination run unencumbered. “The Rotation Method” therefore serves as the quintessential manual for living expressive individualism to its fullest.

SUCH A METHOD PROSCRIBED BY THE AESTHETE REQUIRES THE CHALLENGING WORK OF MAINTAINING AN ENVIRONMENT OF FANTASY RESILIENT TO LIFE’S COMPLICATIONS.

The poetic life does presuppose radical freedom for the individual since commitment of any sort restricts the ability to impose meaning in an arbitrary manner. The aesthete therefore must interpret life as nothing but a series of moments with no sense of continuity or direction. Consequently, this freedom “of remembering and forgetting will also insure against sticking fast in some relationships of life.”⁸ The author especially warns against committed relationships: “friendship is dangerous, to say nothing of marriage.”⁹ What is encouraged is the embrace of the arbitrary. The aesthete must “always have an eye open for the accidental, always be *expeditus* [ready], if anything should offer.”¹⁰

Such a method proscribed by the aesthete requires the challenging work of maintaining an environment of fantasy resilient to life’s complications. Or, as Louis Mackey discerns, “The aesthete wants enjoyment, but enjoyment cannot simply be had, it must be arranged. Life must be made an art, but the art of living requires a total detachment from everything merely given and possibly unpleasant, as well as a disinterested arbitrariness in the concoction of actual pleasures.”¹¹ To live

such a poetic existence necessitates a sharp detachment from the world in order to preserve one’s own inner life. The aesthetic self must always resist the *givenness* of the world in pursuit of authenticity.

The psychological consequences of the self-expressive lifestyle begin to emerge within the latter half of *Either/Or*. Here, a new character confronts the reader—Judge William (or “B”)—who offers a personal and poignant evaluation. Taking the form of long epistles, the Judge attempts to convince the aesthete toward a life of consequence. For the Judge observes the enthrallment of novelty leading ultimately to a passive and turbulent life where a sense of personal fulfillment depends on ever-changing circumstances outside one’s control. Even the slightest disruption can jostle the aesthetic self. In contrast, the ethical life posits true meaning, stability, and authenticity to the person who lives in accordance with principles and morals which obligate the individual to larger realities. Such a life, in contrast to the aesthete, is not just the serialization of moments maintained in neutrality but presumes the possibility of “becoming.”

Importantly, the ethic advocated by the Judge does not necessitate rote conformity to traditions or social norms. Quite the opposite. The truly ethical represents the Kantian ideal where one’s own reason discerns the laws of consciousness and adopts a moral disposition in life. Choice—indeed, the act of choosing—is the highest expression of freedom. The ethical life insists, fundamentally, upon a moral *self-will*. The self must *aim* at something whole-heartedly. It must begin to live in categories of “good” and “bad,” not just “boring” or “exciting.” The Judge defends this mode of self-authoring:

Herewith I am through for the present. To propound a doctrine of morals was never my intention. What I wanted to do was to show how the ethical, in the regions which border on the aesthetic, is so far from depriving life of its beauty that it bestows beauty upon it. It affords peace, assurance, and security...it saves us from every vain

7. *Either/Or*, 288

8. *Either/Or*, 291

9. *Either/Or*, 293.

10. *Either/Or*, 296.

11. Louis Mackey, *Kierkegaard a Kind of Poet* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1971), 14.

FOR THE REPENTANT, THE TOTALITY OF LIFE—INDEED, THE VERY SELF—BECOMES A GIFT TO BE RECEIVED. HERE, THE IDEALS OF THE AESTHETE AND THE ETHICAL FIND THEIR TRUE SYNTHESIS; THE SELF IS FULLY FREE.

enthusiasm which would enfeeble the soul and bestows upon it health and strength.¹²

The Judge frequently uses marriage to illustrate the benefits of self-imposed obligations. Since the aesthetic soul dwells in the realm of possibility, that self must conform to transient acts of imagination with little bearing on reality. Ideally, the aesthete would never willingly act in a repetitious manner. They could thus never act with self-sacrifice or transcendent love. The aesthete must remain confined to fleeting eroticism. The Judge, in contrast, experiences stable marital joy because the love transcends particular circumstances.¹³ *Either/Or* ends curiously with an appended sermon by an anonymous author which the character Judge William recommends to the young aesthete. The sermon, entitled “The Edification Implied in the Thought that as Against God We Are Always in the Wrong,” hints at an even further existential stage which extends beyond the ethical. The sermon hints that the methods prescribed by the judge still do not sufficiently yield true individuality. Since the ethical interprets all of life in a veneer of moral earnestness, the self will continually *strive* toward the self-posed ideal. Looming guilt always exists in the distance between the self in its current state and the ideal. By definition, the “becoming” self always positions itself below its own ideal—it is always in a state of fallenness. Insidiously, guilt grows precisely as the moral will develops. The ethical life in its totality takes on guilt and there exists no easy resolution except more determination. There is no way for guilt to be absolved.

12. Søren Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*, trans. Walter Lowrie and Howard A. Johnson, vol. 2 (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1959), 328.

13. Compare this with the aesthete’s initial worry that “the curse of engagement is always on its ethical side. The ethical is just as tiresome a philosophy as in life. What a difference! Under the heavens of the aesthete, everything is light, beautiful, transitory; when the ethical comes along, then everything becomes harsh, angular, infinitely boring.” *Either/Or*, 363.

The existential leap into the religious life, the sermon exhorts, necessarily includes a confrontation with one’s own personal guilt. To the ethical, this yields despair. But the sermon posits an act of repentance in response to this self-conscious guilt. For repentance to be intelligible, the penitent must first “[comprehend] guilt-consciousness as a totality” and relate it to their own self as an individual.¹⁴ The individual, alone, stands before God. This terrifying reality would easily render despair if it were not for the grace of God. It is only in receiving unmerited grace that this guilt can be absolved. Paradoxically, the act of receiving forgiveness as an unearned gift from God represents the culmination and supersession of the ethical life. It is the highest possible act of individuality—the individual *self* is forgiven.

While the aesthete may manufacture stimulation to distract themselves from the condition of despair, the ethicists throw themselves into moral earnestness. The methods are understandable, but Kierkegaard unveils the self-despairing dialectic which lurks behind both these attempts. What lies beyond is the “religious sphere.”

To be ‘religious’ means to concentrate my whole conscious, active, concrete being on what is ultimate, absolute, essential in the definition of who I am, on what I cannot lose without losing my self; and to do this in such a way that I open every secret hidden corner of my entire life to its light, to its demand, to its judgment.¹⁵

The path to true authenticity, Kierkegaard envisions, is neither thrill nor duty but “in willing to be itself, the self rests transparently in the power that established

14. Søren Kierkegaard, *Kierkegaard’s Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, trans. Walter Lowrie and Swenson F. David (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1941), 489.

15. Arnold B. Come, *Kierkegaard as Humanist: Discovering My Self* (Montreal: McGill-Queens University Press, 1995), 289.

it.”¹⁶ This is absolute dependence on God’s grace. What brings about this transition is repentance.

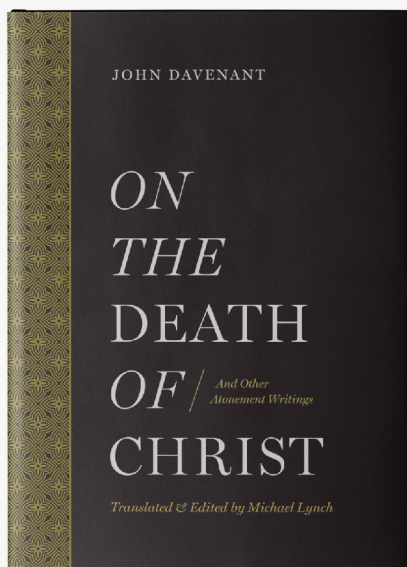
Before God, all acts of earnestness are reduced to filthy rags, but grace simultaneously infuses temporal life with significance since it was worth redeeming in the eyes of God. A posture of repentance willfully accepts and reflects upon the undeserved gifts from God. The knowledge and imitation of Christ’s self-giving love (*agape*) fills every activity and relationship with near-spiritual significance—a new kind of poetic existence. God becomes the author of possibility. Furthermore, the continual self-reflection of God’s grace toward the self emanates forth an eternal joy which exists independent of physical circumstances. Indeed,

16. Søren Kierkegaard, *The Sickness unto Death*, trans. and ed. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), 131.

all of life can finally be received with gratitude. Everything can be redeemed, even suffering and guilt.

For the repentant, the totality of life—indeed, the very self—becomes a gift to be received. Here, the ideals of the aesthete and the ethical find their true synthesis; the self is fully free. Further this theme manifests more as a disposition rather than a single compartmentalized act of the past. This adds new meaning to Luther’s familiar thesis: “When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, ‘Repent,’ he willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance.” To become oneself, one must repent.

Daniel Goodman is pursuing graduate work in Data Science at the University of Louisville. He has B.S. in Politics, Philosophy, and Economics from Boyce College and currently lives in Louisville, Kentucky.



FOR WHOM DID CHRIST DIE?

On the Death of Christ is a scholastic treatise dealing with the question of the extent of Christ’s atonement. Davenant employs Scripture, reason, and testimonies in defense of the so-called Lombardian formula: **Christ died for all people sufficiently; efficaciously for the elect alone.**

BY JOHN DAVENANT

Translated & Edited by Michael J. Lynch

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Twilight of the Gods

Matthew 2:16-18

BY D. A. COOPER

Now Ragnarök has come again,
and Sköll and Hati chase
the lights out of the firmament.
Hel shows her cloven face.

The wolves are howling at the door,
and fathers lose their minds.
The sun is gone, the moon consumed,
the darkness chills and blinds.

The warriors slaughter all in vain—
in vain the mothers cry:
“they think they’re gods, but all of them
will die, will die, will die.”

Fimbulwinter’s silence settles
across the middle realm
while Fenrir hunts a baby boy
among the ash and elm.

At the foot of Yggdrasil,
the Norns now prophesy:
“this world will burn then be reborn,
but first the boy must die.”

*Richard Hooker: Theological Method and Anglican Identity*¹

BY PHILIP HOBDAY

REVIEWED BY BRAD LITTLEJOHN

There once was a time when Richard Hooker was a good old Anglican, and that's all: mild-mannered, judicious, middle-of-the-road, and non-committal; holding the perfect balance between past and future, Rome and Geneva, faith and reason, Scripture and tradition. No longer. The past generation has witnessed a series of earthquakes within the narrow world of Hooker studies, compelling a comprehensive re-assessment of this most eminent of English Protestant divines and suggesting his wider relevance to the Protestant world more generally.

If the default old consensus was that Hooker was neither Reformed nor Catholic because he was a perfectly blended *tertium quid*, a “reformed catholic,” there were, of course, three main logical possibilities for exploding this consensus. One was to claim that Hooker

was in fact Catholic in all important respects and not Reformed at all, the first of the Anglo-Catholics. A line of historiography dating back to John Keble in the 1830s sought to demonstrate as much, but always a bit sheepishly and half-heartedly, and few serious scholars today would try to continue this charade. Another was to claim that Hooker was in fact Reformed in all important respects and not Catholic at all, a straightforward English Calvinist who simply preferred bishops and vestments. This interpretation gained steam among evangelical Anglicans in the 1990s behind the work of Nigel Atkinson, who was in some ways popularizing the groundbreaking scholarship of Torrance Kirby (although Kirby has always been somewhat more nuanced on the key questions). But it always felt a bit like special pleading.

There was, however, a third possibility, following a path charted by the paradigm-shifting historiography of

1. Philip Hobday. *Richard Hooker: Theological Method and Anglican Identity*. London: T&T Clark, 2023. Hardback. 223 pp. £76.50.

Richard Muller and his friends and disciples. What if the opposition between “Reformed” and “Catholic” was wrongheaded in the first place? What if, in other words, there was nothing particularly unique about Hooker’s status as a “reformed catholic,” which was in fact simply what it meant to be a moderate magisterial Reformed Protestant in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century? Not, of course, that there were no important differences between Rome and Protestantism during this period. Justification, for instance, comes to mind, not to mention that little disagreement about the status of the Bishop of Rome. The new historiography did not seek to blur these crucial lines of division. But it did seek to do two things.

One was to highlight, contra an aberrant twentieth-century consensus, that the Reformation was never intended to be a rethink of *everything*; on wide swaths of doctrine, philosophy, and ethics, the Reformers registered few disagreements with Roman Catholicism. Or perhaps more precisely, both Protestants and Romanists inhabited a wide terrain of shared agreements and disagreements; so, for instance, when it came to predestination, Dominicans and Calvinists largely mirrored one another in the seventeenth century (and quoted one another!) as did Jesuits and Arminians. A recent flourishing of scholarship on natural law, for instance, has demonstrated (1) that the Reformers by and large affirmed a doctrine of natural law in similar terms to their Roman counterparts; (2) that there were, however, significant variations among Protestant natural law theories; and (3) that these variations largely mirrored similar debates among early modern Romanist natural lawyers.

The other contribution of Mullerite historiography was to stress that even on those issues where unbridgeable chasms loomed up in the sixteenth century, such as on *sola fide* and *sola Scriptura*, the Reformers claimed, with surprising plausibility, that they were simply carrying on true catholic teaching, and Trent was abandoning it. Recent years, then, have witnessed a surge of studies showing the continuities between Protestant teachings on sacramental theology, political theology, predestination, and even justification with those of key medieval scholastics such as Thomas Aquinas. Of course, such studies are not without their critics, either Roman or Protestant, insisting that medieval Roman Catholi-

cism was still definitely Roman Catholicism, not proto-Protestantism. Still, the result of all this scholarship is to at least open up the possibility of a much more complex, nuanced, and fluid set of labels and categorizations for early modern Protestant theologians than was previously available.

The relevance of this rethink to the world of Hooker studies—and Anglican studies more generally—should be immediately obvious. If it turns out that Calvin and Aquinas were not so far apart after all, then the countless books and articles purporting to show that “Hooker was close to Aquinas, and therefore no Calvinist” or “Hooker was close to Calvin, and therefore no Thomist” are just so much wasted ink. It is just this hypothesis that a new generation of new Hooker scholars have tried out in the past decade and a half, to remarkable effect. The composite portrait painted by this new scholarship offers us a Richard Hooker who is to be celebrated not so much for brewing a unique theological blend, but for giving a uniquely powerful and eloquent statement to a “reformed catholic” vision that was always inherent in the best of early modern Protestantism.

Philip Hobday’s new book *Richard Hooker: Theological Method and Anglican Identity* is an excellent example of the fruits that this new historiographical approach can render. In it, he focuses his attention squarely on the much-debated “Anglican tripod” of Scripture, reason, and tradition that is often (mis-)attributed to Hooker. According to the older narrative, Hooker departed dramatically from the standard Reformed teaching on *sola Scriptura* in two ways: first, he elevated the role of reason in theology in a way reminiscent of medieval scholastics such as Thomas Aquinas; second, he gave great authority to tradition alongside Scripture as a source for doctrine and practice. Of course, this older narrative is typically rather vague on most of the key points, failing to distinguish between the ways in which reason functions as a *source* of knowledge versus a *tool* for digesting other sources of knowledge (such as Scripture), and likewise between tradition’s utility in matters of *doctrine* (where Hooker leans little on it) vs. matters of *practice* or *polity* (his primary focus in the *Laws*). The older narrative also tends to reduce the magisterial Protestant doctrine of *sola Scriptura* to a caricature of naïve biblicism.

Although a number of recent scholars have chipped away at this older narrative, none have undertaken the kind of sustained demolition that Hobday offers in this fine study. In order to focus the study, he chooses as his reference points for “Reformed” and “Catholic” John Calvin and Thomas Aquinas, respectively. Not perhaps the most original choices, but certainly representative figures against which he can test his hypotheses. These hypotheses are as follows:

(1a) Aquinas held a rather dimmer view of reason’s value in matters of theology than is generally realized, a view that clearly subordinates it to Scripture and that shows remarkable convergence with key Reformed concerns;

(1b) Calvin held a rather more robust view of reason’s value in matters of theology than is generally realized, a view that gives it a key role alongside Scripture and that shows remarkable convergence with key Thomistic concerns;

(1c) Hooker’s nuanced portrayal of the capabilities and defects of reason, and its role alongside and under Scripture, maps pretty readily onto the wide area of agreement between Aquinas and Calvin;

2a) Aquinas never elevated tradition to the authoritative position, equal to Scripture, later given it by Trent;

2b) Calvin never disparaged tradition as a valid and valuable source in theology, so long as it not be detached from Scripture or given equal authority;

2c) Hooker’s nuanced portrayal of the uses and abuses of tradition in theology is substantively the same as Calvin’s, despite differing rhetorical emphasis, and thus not inconsistent with Aquinas’s.

For each of these hypotheses, Hobday succeeds in marshaling a wealth of primary and secondary source evidence, supported by close readings and careful distinctions, that proves quite convincing. Not all readers will be persuaded of all of his arguments, to be sure, as there is plenty of contested interpretive territory here, but at the very least this work promises to reframe the conversation and sets a bar that future “un-Reformed” readings of Hooker will struggle to surmount.

To be sure, the book suffers from weaknesses typical to this genre of academic writing (the typical published dissertation). Stylistically, readers may find it dry and uninspired, and its pacing ponderous and at times repetitive. Of course, academic writing does not need to be this way, and it is a continuing disgrace on our graduate schools that they do not prioritize lively prose more. But Hobday’s work is certainly readable enough, which is more than can be said for a great many works of this kind.

One also finds oneself wishing that the book engaged with a somewhat more diverse cast of characters. After all, most theological readers by now have heard about and read about Aquinas and Calvin *ad nauseam*. And if there was anything the Mullerite revolution was meant to have wrought, it was a great widening of the source literature for historical theology. Henceforward, anyone comparing Protestant thought to medieval thought should be looking not only at Calvin, but at Lombard, Bonaventure, Albert the Great, Scotus, Ockham, Gregory of Rimini, and more. (Not that I know much about any of those folks, mind you, but I should like to.) And anyone seeking to triangulate the center of gravity of sixteenth-century Reformed thought has to look beyond Calvin to consider figures such as Bullinger, Vermigli, Musculus, Zanchi, Junius, Perkins, and more. Hobday’s book thus only scratches the surface on these important topics, though I suspect a wider-angle view would tend to corroborate and strengthen his overall conclusions, rather than undermining them.

Hobday, however, has certainly blazed an important trail for future Protestant historical theologians to follow, revealing a broad “reformed catholic” area of consensus on critical questions of theological method in the sixteenth century that holds great ecumenical promise for the church in the twenty-first century.

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*The Sickness Unto Death*¹

BY SØREN KIERKEGAARD

TRANSLATED BY BRUCE H. KIRMMSE

REVIEWED BY C. STEPHEN EVANS

Søren Kierkegaard's *The Sickness Unto Death*, published in 1949 and attributed by Kierkegaard to the pseudonym Anti-Climacus (with his own name on the title page as editor), is one of Kierkegaard's most important and influential books. Although parts of the book are readable and convey Kierkegaard's ability to write beautiful and poetic prose, the opening sections are legendarily difficult and abstract, a translator's nightmare (some examples will be provided later). Kierkegaard himself was well aware of the challenge this provided and described the book as "algebraic" in form.

I am happy to report that Bruce Kirmmse, one of the foremost Kierkegaard scholars of our time, is up to the challenge of conveying, to the extent that this is possible, the effect Kierkegaard intended for his Danish readers. Although Kirmmse, in his introduction, is generous in his assessment of earlier translations, my judgment is that this is the best English version of this important book. Kirmmse, who was trained as an his-

torian but knowledgeable about Kierkegaard as a philosopher and theologian, is the author of *Kierkegaard in Golden Age Denmark*, still the definitive work situating Kierkegaard in the context of nineteenth century Denmark and Europe. Kirmmse, who has lived off and on in Denmark for much of his life, is also the translator of the English edition of *Kierkegaard's Journals and Notebooks*, putting into English the relevant portions of *Søren Kierkegaard's Skrifter*, the definitive scholarly edition of Kierkegaard's published and unpublished writings. Given these accomplishments, I expected this to be a fine translation and those expectations were satisfied.

In the beginning of *The Sickness Unto Death*, Kierkegaard provides a triply relational account of the nature of the human self, understood as "spirit." The self is described as a "synthesis" of contrasting elements (temporality and eternity, finitude and infinitude, necessity and possibility). However, this relational synthesis is an active achievement of a self "that relates itself to itself." This self-relating is in turn made possible by a relation of the self to an "other." Here is how the key

1. Søren Kierkegaard. *The Sickness Unto Death*. Translated by Bruce H. Kirmmse. New York: Liveright Publishing Corporation, 2023. Hardcover. 224 pp. \$26.95.

opening passage is rendered in the Princeton edition of the translation by Howard and Edna Hong: “The self is a relation that relates itself to itself, or is the relation’s relating itself to itself in the relation; the self is not the relation but is the relation’s relating itself to itself.” (13) Here is the same passage as rendered by Kirmmse: “The self is a relation that relates to itself, or it is that in the relation which is the relation’s relating to itself. The self is not the relation but is *that* the relation relates to itself.” (19) The differences are obviously slight, and the Danish word for “that” is not italicized in the original, but in my view the freedom Kirmmse shows here successfully makes Kierkegaard’s intended meaning clearer.

Here is another interesting passage from Kirmmse: “... only that person’s life was wasted who lived in such a fashion that, deceived by life’s joys or its sorrows, he never became eternally, decisively conscious of himself as spirit, as self, or, what amounts to the same thing, never became aware and never in the deepest sense gained the impression that there is a God, and that ‘he,’ himself, his self exists before God—an infinite gain that is never attained except through despair” (36). The Hongs translate the Danish word in the last clause that Kirmmse renders as “gain” by “benefaction,” a term that seems unnecessarily archaic and fussy, a fault that is not infrequent in the Hong translations.

Here is another key passage from later in the book from the Hong translation: “If losing oneself in possibility may be compared with a child’s utterance of vowel sounds, then lacking possibility would be the same as being dumb. The necessary is like pure consonants, but to express them there must be possibility.” Kirmmse renders the same passage like this: “If one were to compare running wild in possibility with a child’s efforts at pronouncing vowels, then lacking possibility is like being dumb. Necessity, as it were, is solely composed of consonants, but to pronounce them, possibility is required” (49). “Running wild in possibility” is both closer to the Danish here and more vivid. Such examples could be multiplied.

The Hong translation is accurate, as are other recent translations. Someone who already owns one of them probably would not need to purchase Kirmmse. How-

ever, anyone planning to buy a copy for the first time should certainly consider the Kirmmse translation, which is printed in a compact and beautiful hardcover edition that is reasonably priced. Kirmmse also provides an excellent and helpful introduction to the book, a reliable guide for the non-expert.

The Sickness Unto Death is one of the most important works in Kierkegaard’s corpus, for several reasons. The pseudonym, Anti-Climacus, is unlike earlier Kierkegaard pseudonyms. Many of the earlier pseudonyms, such as Johannes Climacus or Johannes de Silentio, are non-Christian characters who look at Christian faith from an outsider’s point of view, or embody clearly non-Christian perspectives, such as the pseudonymous “A” who is the author of the first volume of *Either/Or*. Anti-Climacus, however, is a Christian writer, who looks at the human self from a deeply Christian perspective. The pseudonym was added by Kierkegaard simply because Kierkegaard did not feel personally adequate to represent this “high” Christian view. Thus, Anti-Climacus is Kierkegaard’s creation, but also in some ways writes *to* Kierkegaard himself.

Anti-Climacus is clear that he writes from a Christian perspective. In the “Foreword” he says the book will strike many readers as “curious” (3). (All future quotations are from the Kirmmse translation.) The book will seem to such readers “too rigorous to be edifying, and too edifying to be strictly scholarly.” Anti-Climacus does not respond to the latter objection, though he clearly does not agree, but he says that if the book were not edifying, it would be a fault: “Indeed, from the Christian point of view, everything, everything ought to serve for edification.” Anti-Climacus thus claims that scholarly work that is Christian should not be “objective” in the sense of being indifferent; “Scholarliness of the sort that is not, ultimately, edifying is for that very precisely unchristian.”

Despite this, the first section of *Sickness Unto Death* provides a description of the human self and the ways it can fail to be authentic that is supposed to be psychologically accurate without presupposing Christianity. In this first half of the book Anti-Climacus tries to show that an authentic self must be grounded in some

transcendent reality. The human self cannot invent itself but must seek to become the self it was created to be. Despair is the condition of the self that fails to become itself, failing to achieve the synthesis of possibility and necessity, eternity and temporality, that the self should become.

In Part II of the book this condition of despair is described in distinctively Christian terms: despair turns out to be sin, a rejection of God as God is revealed in Christ. Most human forms of despair are too “spiritless” even to be clearly forms of sin, though Anti-Climacus says that the sin in this case is to be spiritless, failing to be what God created humans to be. In rare cases humans reject God in a conscious way, a despair of “defiance” that can finally take the form of consciously rejecting God’s salvation in Christ.

Mis-readings of *Sickness Unto Death* are common, often because people project textbook misunderstandings of Kierkegaard onto the work. Part I, for example, which Anti-Climacus says is not distinctively Christian, still tries to show that God is necessary as the foundation of the self. God is, for example, the antidote both to the despair of possibility, in which people lose touch with actuality, and the despair of necessity, in which people lose possibility, either by becoming fatalists, or by allowing “the others” or “the public” to determine what the individual person should be. God is the antidote to both forms of despair. To recognize God is to recognize one’s own creatureliness and thus to accept

the necessary element of one’s self. However, God is the one for “whom all things are possible,” and thus provides the antidote to fatalism. Since God creates every person as an individual, God also provides the basis for resisting “the crowd” and “the public” as one seeks to become one’s authentic self.

Readers often fail to recognize that Part I is not written from a distinctively Christian point of view because of the prominent role God plays in the text. They may have read Camus or others who think that Kierkegaard sees belief in God as unreasonable and only possible through a “leap of faith.” However, Kierkegaard does not think this at all. The “leap of faith” is only necessary to believe in Christ as the “God-man.” Kierkegaard does not think that human reason by itself can bring us to Christian faith. Rather, faith in Christ is a supernatural gift of God. Belief in God, however, is never seen as irrational. On the contrary, Kierkegaard thinks that humans who do not recognize God’s reality have failed to recognize that God is present to all who are seeking to achieve the Good that is “absolute.” *The Sickness Unto Death* thus helps us get beyond common mis-readings of Kierkegaard, and Kirmmse’s new translation is likewise an important contribution to that end.

C. Stephen Evans is Emeritus University Professor of Philosophy and Humanities at Baylor University.

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The Karamazov Case: Dostoevsky's Argument for his Vision¹

BY TERRENCE W. TILLEY

REVIEWED BY WILLIAM COLLEN

The elephant in the room for lovers¹ of Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*—the uncomfortable truth which the famed Russian writer's dearest fans wish would just go away—is that the novel does not seem to present as strong a case in favor of Christian belief as it does against it. Ivan Karamazov's powerful and devastating indictment of Christianity and the institutional church in book five of the novel has, as its philosophical counterpart, almost nothing: the rather soft-headed musings of a dying monk, presented with none of the rhetorical force of Ivan's monologue. The two sections appear to be deliberately placed in the center of the novel as foils for each other, but the pro-Christiani-

ty side of the novel's "faith versus reason" argument is simply inadequate to refute the ferocity of Ivan's attacks on the Christian conception of a moral God and the institutional church.

Yet in his recent book *The Karamazov Case: Dostoevsky's Argument for his Vision*, Terrence W. Tilley makes the case that the Christianity-versus-atheism/faith-versus-reason antithesis adopted as an interpretive framework by most of the novel's analysts is simply not the whole story. In Tilley's reading, Dostoevsky deploys the whole of his novel to advocate for both a comprehensive vision of how the world really works, and a particular way of living in the world: a rational Christianity, grounded on a clear-headed examination of the truths of life, expressed in a proper understanding of community. His analysis of the novel builds in stages with the

1. *The Karamazov Case: Dostoevsky's Argument for his Vision* by Terrence W. Tilley. London, T&T Clark. 2023. Hardback. 184pp. \$115.

linear logic of a mathematical proof and draws upon several important statements by Dostoevsky himself about the novel's meaning, as well as on the breadth of scholarship which the novel has accumulated since its publication. As such, *The Karamazov Case* is poised to be one of this generation's most important scholarly discussions of Dostoevsky's masterpiece.

BY SUBTLY POINTING OUT THE FRUITS OF THESE RESPECTIVE WORLDVIEWS, DOSTOEVSKY IS ASKING US: WHICH ONE IS RIGHT AND TRUE?

Tilley begins his book with an extended discussion of the novel's dialogic narrative structure; his analysis is heavily indebted to Mikhail Bakhtin's conception of the polyphonic novel, and readers who are familiar with Bakhtin's argument can safely skim this section.² Tilley compares Bakhtin's concept of the polyphonic novel to the kind of polyphony present in opera, wherein independent harmonic lines converge and interact without any clearly apparent direction or resolution. This addresses a key complaint which Dostoevsky's readers have been expressing from the beginning: *The Brothers Karamazov* has an ending which, by the usual standards of the novelistic art form, feels weak and unresolved. Tilley says, however, that "the polyphonic novel seems incomplete because the novel does not bring the dialogue among the independent voices to a resolution. [. . .] The analogy to musical polyphony, especially counterpoint, is revealing. As in listening to polyphonic music, one can lose the whole behind the individual voices if one focuses only on the melody line in the music or only the hero of the novel" (22).

Just as in a work of polyphonic music, Dostoevsky's chorus of voices in the novel is an essential part of the structure; the key point here, the crux on which Tilley's argument rests, is that Dostoevsky was writing *The Brothers Karamazov* as both an accurate reflection of the messy, inconclusive polyphonic nature of real life

and as a guide towards a correct conception of living as part of real life. In this interpretation, Ivan's strident attack on Christianity in book five is only one of several ways of looking at the world. These worldviews are blended together by Dostoevsky just like a composer works themes together in an opera; each one interacts with the others, and they all contribute to the final whole—an accurate representation of the world. In this reading it's not so much a question of Ivan's unbelief versus Zosima's faith so much as these voices talking with each other and with other voices. Dostoevsky's polyphonic novel never answers the question of whose voice is correct; as Tilley says, "the answer [to the question of how to live in the world] is not given by the author of the polyphonic text but by the readers who interact with and respond to it" (89). And the philosophies of life presented by the characters can be evaluated by observing the consequences of their beliefs.

Tilley draws upon the theories of William James, who argued in *The Varieties of Religious Experience* that a person's conversion experience ought to be evaluated on empirical grounds only—i. e. whether or not the fruits are good. This is an echo of Jesus' statement in the gospel on the value of trees which bear either good or bad fruits. Many of the characters in *The Brothers Karamazov* undergo conversions of one sort or another and of various degrees of suddenness and consciousness; these conversions can all be evaluated based on what kinds of fruits come forth from them. When Zosima's brother Markel converts to Christianity, he immediately starts to reconcile himself to his estranged mother; when Zosima comes to his senses after remorse upon beating his servant, he calls off the duel in which he had planned on killing a man whom he had needlessly insulted. Dmitri experiences a renewal of his faith in Mokroye, and vows henceforth to give up his philandering ways and his profligacy. And Ivan? His life philosophy motivates him to renounce his fellow human beings and abandon the world that he admits God made: "It's not that I don't accept God, I just most respectfully return him the ticket." By subtly pointing out the fruits of these respective worldviews, Dostoevsky is asking us: which one is right and true? Dostoevsky's novel is, therefore, not a debate in the

2. Presented in Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* (1929; translated by Caryl Emerson, 1984).

sense of papers presented, discussed, and evaluated; it is, instead, a practical examination of the results of the character's worldviews. "By your fruits you will know them" (Matthew 7:20).

Tilley says that the main thrust of argument in *The Brothers Karamazov* is this: that the correct response to the suffering of the world will be enacted in community, and the heart of that response will be to give aid to the sufferers. This is in direct opposition to Ivan's rejection of a universe where suffering is present and of a God who would allow such suffering. In Tilley's interpretation (and that of Dostoevsky, if Tilley is right) Ivan's refusal to accept a world in which innocent children are made to suffer is exactly the wrong approach to the given facts of existence and demonstrates that Ivan's philosophy is irrational. As Tilley says, "There is no final resolution for the problem of the world in the world. But because the problem is not finally resolved in the world of the novel does not imply that there are no ways to live with it. As with many chronic illnesses, even if evils in the world cannot be cured in the world, those who suffer can be cared for" (25).

Ivan's returning of the ticket becomes, from this perspective, not the heroic, clear-sighted, and morally responsible act which Ivan thinks it is; instead it is shown to be an act of monstrously self-absorbed and irrational vanity. For how will the suffering present in the world be alleviated if no one is there to aid the sufferers? Alyosha, on the other hand, models the correct response to suffering when he visits the dying Ilyusha at home, tries to intervene in the Snegiryov family's plight, and works toward a nascent community of love and mutual aid with Kolya Krassotkin and his schoolmates in the novel's final chapters. That famous "Hurrah for Karamazov" at the novel's end, shouted into the chilly November air after Ilyusha's funeral, seems, to the casual observer, to be a futile and absurd gesture into a void of suffering and death; but in Tilley's reading it becomes a defiant shout of triumph, a declaration that, despite the atrocities of daily existence and the pain and suffering in the world, the spirit of unity that Alyosha, Kolya, and the boys have begun to discover in each other will live on and will render the suffering of no consequence.

An extremely important concept in Tilley's reading of *The Brothers Karamazov* is that of *Sobornost'*, the Russian word denoting a sense of fundamental togetherness and unity; it is a translation of Nicene Creed's word *Katholikos*, and connotes something more than "community." Tilley traces the concept of *Sobornost'* throughout the novel, finding it demonstrated negatively in the selfishness of the wicked woman in Grushenka's tale of the onion and positively in Alyosha's famous embrace of the earth during the reading of the gospels over Zosima's dead body. *Sobornost'* is a particularly Orthodox concept and has been discussed at length by theologians in the Orthodox tradition. Tilley's dependence on the concept of *Sobornost'* is the only thing in his book which gives me pause: is Dostoevsky's vision only approachable through an understanding of the Orthodox faith? As an Evangelical Protestant, are there some aspects of his thought which I will simply be unable to accept? It's unclear whether the argument for faith presented in *The Brothers Karamazov* is an argument for *Christian* faith or *Orthodox* faith. Dostoevsky himself was not of a very ecumenical mind; in *The Diary of a Writer* (the magazine he self-published in the 1870s) he regularly writes against the influence of Catholicism and German Lutheranism on the impressionable Russian peasantry. But does that come across in his novel? Tilley claims that at least some aspects of the novel depend upon a distinctly Orthodox anthropological concept; will readers from other faith traditions be able to accept Tilley's understanding of Dostoevsky's thought? Tilley doesn't speak directly to that question, but he does state that "Dostoevsky wrote in the context of Orthodox Christianity, [and] his vision is couched in those terms. That does not preclude the possibility that other religious contexts might not develop analogous visions. But arguing for such a view would take us far beyond the limits of this book" (51).

I would hope that some scholar of the near future would complete the task which Tilley realized was outside of his purview and show how Dostoevsky's particularly Orthodox vision of faith in community is also an ecumenical vision. If this is done, it would go a long way toward a renaissance of Dostoevsky's thought, enabling his powerfully sublime social vision

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to find acceptance among a new generation of readers. As it is, Dostoevsky's writings seem to have been neglected in recent times, due to a combination of factors including the recent invasion of Ukraine by the Dostoevsky-admiring Vladimir Putin and Dostoevsky's own latent racism and xenophobia as expressed in some of his writings. Can we leave the chaff and preserve what is good in Dostoevsky's thought? Tilley's book is a contemporary instance of doing just that.

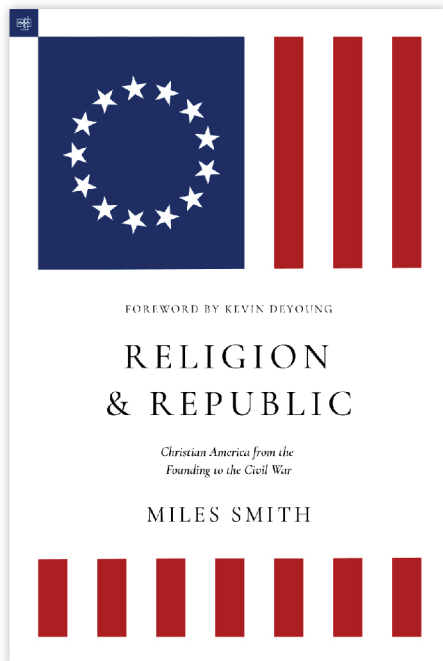
Tilley's reading of *The Brothers Karamazov* is a very valuable addition to the already vast secondary literature on Dostoevsky's supreme achievement. It's the kind of guide I wish I'd had at an earlier age. For readers in the present moment, straining to hear through the noise of the internet, is a novel like *The Brothers*

Karamazov seen as simply too difficult to be worth reading? Although there will always be both specialists and serious readers who are willing to put in the effort to read an 800-page novel, any assistance or aid which brings even a few readers into the fold is, in my opinion, welcome; and Tilley's book is exactly that.

William Collen is an art researcher and writer. He publishes reviews and theoretical essays on aesthetic criticism and art history at his personal blog, *ruins.com*; his writings have also been featured at *Agape Review* (where he is the staff film critic) and *Artway*. He lives with his family in Omaha, Nebraska.



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