

# Christian Ethics Today

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*"The voice of one crying out in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way of the Lord'"* Isaiah 40:3; John 1:23

For God so loved the world ...



*"The voice of one crying out in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way of the Lord.'" Isaiah 40:3; John 1:23*

<b>Christmas: Magic and Miracle</b> <i>Foy Valentine</i> .....	3
<b>EthixBytes</b> .....	4
<b>Just a Simple Nativity—Like the Original</b> <i>Dwight A. Moody</i> .....	5
<b>Old-Fashioned Creation Care</b> <i>David P. Gushee</i> .....	6
<b>As It Was In the Days of Noah: Global Warming</b> <i>Charles P. McGathy</i> .....	7
<b>What's to Become of Us? The Posthuman Person</b> <i>Jeph Holloway</i> .....	9
<b>Tetzel and TV Evangelists</b> <i>Britt Towery</i> .....	15
<b>Moratorium on Executions</b> <i>Bob Allen</i> .....	16
<b>Rich Folk and the Family of Lazarus</b> <i>Al Staggs</i> .....	17
<b>Confessions of a Whistle-Blower</b> <i>Richard D. Kahoe</i> .....	18
<b>Torture Then and Now</b> <i>Martin E. Marty</i> .....	20
<b>Americans Ignorant about First Amendment Rights</b> <i>J. Brent Walker</i> .....	21
<b>CHRISTIAN ETHICS AND THE MOVIES</b> <i>Reviewed by David A. Thomas</i> .....	22
<b>War: No End in Sight</b> (2007) .....	22
<b>Terrorism: A Mighty Heart</b> (2007).....	23
<b>BOOK REVIEWS</b>	
<b>Finally Feminist</b> <i>Reviewed by Susan Wise Bauer</i> .....	25
<b>Head and Heart: American Christianities</b> <i>Reviewed by Martin E. Marty</i> .....	27
<b>Faith in the Halls of Power</b> <i>Reviewed by Darold Morgan</i> .....	27
<b>Noah's Other Son</b> <i>Reviewed by Darold Morgan</i> .....	28
<b>INDEX OF VOLUME 13, ISSUES 63-67</b> .....	30
<b>KUDZU</b> <i>by Doug Marlette</i> <a href="http://www.dougmarlette.com">www.dougmarlette.com</a>	

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# Christmas: Magic and Miracle

By Foy Valentine, Founding Editor

Christmas is a magic word.

It is laden with a thousand images.

Images bright and beautiful, warm and wonderful, exciting and joyful.

Christmas, however, is more than magic.

It is a miracle. It is God's doing.

Like a treasured gold coin, Christmas has two sides. One is magic; the other is miracle. One is natural; the other is supernatural. One is of the earth, earthy; the other is straight from the heart of God, heavenly.

It is right for us to affirm both, to reject neither, to embrace the whole.

Christmas, of course, means different things to different people. Country people have a take on it that is different from city people. Children understand it differently from adults. Poor folks face it with different recollections and different expectations than the rich. The Americans and the English, in spite of our common language, experience Christmas in quite different ways. Germans and Italians have significantly different perceptions of the season. Christmas celebrants in the Northern and Southern Hemispheres naturally mark the occasion in strikingly different ways. The dour Puritans rejected the holiday altogether, seeing it as a popish practice with which true believers should have no truck; but faithful Roman Catholics were admonished by no less an authority than Pope Gregory I in 601 A.D. to "celebrate a religious feast and worship God by their feasting, so that still keeping outward pleasures, they may more readily receive spiritual joys."

Only God in heaven now knows, of course, actually when Jesus was born. Various dates were vigorously debated for the first five hundred years of the Christian era. January 6, March 25, and December 25 were front-runners in the speculation; but May 20, April 19 or 20, November 17, and March 28 were all put forth and stout-

ly defended. About 245 A.D. Origen, one of the most prominent of all the early church fathers, argued against celebrating Jesus' birthday at all, sniffing "as if he were a king Pharaoh."

December 25 was observed by pagan Romans as a feast day related to the sun; and pre-Christian era Britons observed December 25 as Mother's Night. Because of the winter solstice, falling on December 21 or 22, when the days begin to be longer with daily increase of light and decrease of darkness, and there was universal recognition of this major natural phenomenon, there came to be gradual acceptance of December 25 as an acceptable new feast day when the birth of Jesus could be appropriately celebrated. Roman Catholics set aside the four Sundays prior to December 25 as the "Advent season" ending with their midnight Eucharist, Christ's mass. Thus the term Christmas metamorphosed over nearly two thousand years to become what it is today.

The associations related to Christmas which I find most deeply embedded in my psyche are those formed when I was quite young: a well-formed but always smallish cedar tree cut from our own woods, a very few little packages (remember that this was in the heart of the Great Depression), fine, big fires in our living room fireplace, stockings stuffed with apples and oranges, nuts, and few pieces of candy, and lots of wonderful food—chicken and dressing, mashed potatoes and gravy, cranberry sauce, candied yams, hot biscuits, and homemade fruitcake. My best things, though, were the fireworks—firecrackers, sparklers, and Roman candles.

Surely these are the kinds of things that Pope Gregory I must have had in mind with his reference to "outward pleasures." They certainly pleased me.

And why not?

In his Christmas oratorio "For the Time Being," W.H. Auden has the Magi to say, "To learn to be human now is the reason we follow this star."

The magic of Christmas lets us affirm our humanity, the fruitcakes and firecrackers, the chicken and dressing, the mashed potatoes and hot biscuits, and all the other pleasures of hearth and home.

Oh, I suppose there will always be hair-shirted Puritans who want us to be miserable, to eat no fruit salad and to shoot off no firecrackers. These Grinches would without a qualm, steal the fun and wonder of Christmas from little boys and girls, and from the rest of us as well. However, like Paul who knew not only how to be "abased" but also how to "abound," I am inclined at this Christmas season to the abounding option, learning better, like Auden's wise men, how "to be human now."

I invite you, then, to join me this Christmas to revel at the twinkling lights, to join in joyful singing of "Here Comes Santa Claus" and "Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer," to read together again as my father used to read to me when I was a boy sitting in lap, "Twas the night before Christmas . . ." to indulge in a second helping of chicken and dressing, to throw another log on the fire, and to splurge by giving something extravagant to someone you really love. Salute the magic. Merry Christmas.

Now lest you slam judgment on me for being obscenely hedonistic, please stay tuned.

Christmas is also miracle.

In Jesus Christ, God has become one of us. Identifying with us in the incarnation, the eternal Word of God has been made flesh, and the Reason of God has been thus expressed in a language that everybody can understand. As we are told in the beginning of the Gospel of John, God's light has

*(continued on page 5)*



# EthixBytes

## A Collection of Quotes Comments, Statistics, and News Items

“Yesterday the Nobel Peace Prize was awarded to Al Gore for his work on the environment. In a strong reversal, the Supreme Court awarded it to George W. Bush.”

*NBC’s Saturday Night Live, Oct. 13, 2007.*

“Democracies die behind closed doors. The Framers of the First Amendment did not trust any government to separate the true from the false for us. They protected the people against secret government.

*Federal Appeals Court Judge Damon Keith (Newsweek, 10/08/07).*

“I am saddened that it is politically inconvenient to acknowledge what everyone knows: The Iraq war is large-ly about oil.”

*Alan Greenspan, former chief of the Federal Reserve.*

“Nothing is quite so uninteresting as a religious moralism that is always on the side of the angels but never fights any particular evil, which advocates brotherhood, but never in a specific situation; . . . we must be willing to ‘take sides’ if we are to make any concrete contribution to any moral issue.”

*Reinhold Niebuhr (The Lutheran, 1949).*

“People [like Joel Osteen] are saying that what you’ve got to do is to take charge of your life, think good thoughts, and you will be able to overcome adversity. That’s just inconsistent with . . . the Gospel and the critical realities of life.”

*William Lawrence, Dean of Perkins School of Theology, SMU.*

“The U. S. does not torture people.”

*Pres. George Bush after disclosure of secret Justice Department memos authorizing harsh CIA interrogation techniques, such as head slapping, frigid*

*temperatures, and simulated drowning (The Washington Post, 10/06/07).*

“I’m tired of these games. They can’t say Congress has been fully briefed while refusing to turn over key documents used to justify the legality of the [interrogation] program.”

*Sen. Jay Rockefeller (D-WV).*

“About one of every eight veterans under the age of 65 is uninsured, a finding that contradicts the assumption many have that all vets qualify for free health care through the Veterans Affairs Department.”

*Sojourners Daily Digest (10/31/07).*

“This was supposed to be Indian Territory . . . It basically comes down to land theft.”

*Mike Graham, Cherokee tribe member and founder of United Native America in response to the Oklahoma Centennial Celebration.*

“This lawsuit . . . is about intimidation, blackmail, and extortion.”

*Richard Roberts, President of Oral Roberts University, responding to charges of lavish spending of donor money including home remodeling, use of the university’s jet for his daughter’s senior trip to the Bahamas, and a red Mercedes convertible and a Lexus SUV for his wife (Assoc. Press, 10/06/07).*

“There was one problem. It was not true.”

*Former White House Spokesman Scott McClellan, on his 2003 denial to reporters that Karl Rove and Lewis “Scooter” Libby were involved in the Valerie Plame identity leak (Assoc. Press, 11/20/07).*

“ISSUES CANDIDATES SHOULD DISCUSS: Health Care, 23%, War in Iraq, 20%, Immigration, 8%, Economy/Jobs, 7%; Abortion, 2%,

Gay Rights, 0%.”

*CBS News Poll of White Evangelical Voters (October 17, 2007).*

“Christians should be among the hardest, not the easiest, to convince [to go to war] and we should require the highest burden of proof before military force is approved.”

*Jim Wallis, at the Values Voters Summit (Oct. 19, 2007).*

“British Petroleum committed serious environmental crimes in our two largest states, with terrible consequences for people and the environment.”

*Granta Nakayama, EPA’s Office of Enforcement, noting a \$373 million settlement of criminal charges for manipulation of energy markets and violation of environmental laws.*

“Dogs don’t bark at parked cars.”

*Lynne Cheney, in response to former Pres. Jimmy Carter’s comments about her husband’s ‘militant’ influence on U.S. foreign policy (Newsweek).*

“Every family has a black sheep.”

*Barack Obama spokesperson on the revelation that V.P. Dick Cheney is a distant cousin of Obama’s. ■*

# Just a Simple Nativity—Like the Original

By Dwight A. Moody, Dean of the Chapel, Georgetown College, KY

*During the Christmas season of 1973, my wife Jan, and I were living in Jerusalem. Missionary friends there presented us with a simple set of Nativity figures as a holiday gift. This is their story 30 years later.*

Not many ornaments made it out of the closet this year, a silent witness to the simplicity that has overtaken our celebration of Christmas.

There is a tree at the front window; but not much of one, my wife says. I offer no apologies: It was the last tree on the lot and even thin and misshapen trees need a place to stand on Christmas morning.

There is also a Nativity set on the table; but again, not much of one. It is now 30 years old, and may well be the only one the two of us will ever own.

It is a shabby set when compared with those that fill public spaces around the world. I viewed one in Pittsburgh recently, a life-size scene set between towers of money and power.

A place in Arlington, Texas, displays a thousand such Christmas scenes. Steyr, Austria, has a Nativity hill with more than 200 figures. One in the Czech Republic features hundreds of moving characters.

The world's largest, they say, is at the Opryland Hotel in Nashville, complete with millions of lights.

It is an old way of telling the Christian story. The catacombs in Rome display crude Nativity scenes carved into the walls more than 1,600 years ago. In 1223, Francis of Assisi organized one of the first outdoor Nativities using live animals.

Living Nativities are very popular. People treasure the opportunity to be shepherds, angels, wise men, and of course, Mary, Joseph and even Jesus. Often these dramas are maintained 24 hours a day, seven days a week, throughout the Advent season.

More recently, the Nativity of Jesus

has become the favorite theme for gargantuan pageants, complete with orchestras, animals and flying angels, not to mention a technical support crew.

One church fills a 6,500-seat auditorium no fewer than 13 times, taking in a million dollars in ticket sales.

Such spectacles are a strange contrast to the event they commemorate. Poverty, simplicity and utter anonymity were the order of that first Christmas day. Which is why we stick with our Nativity set.

We were poor and simple students in Israel 30 years ago, in the year of our Lord nineteen hundred and seventy three. Throughout October we had huddled around candles and radios during the Yom Kippur war. Few classes resumed in November even as we ventured around Jerusalem and the surrounding territories.

On Christmas Eve, we rode our Vespa scooter to East Jerusalem for a meal with missionaries Wayne and Jeanne Buck and their small children. To our surprise, they presented to us a wrapped and ribboned gift. It was an olive wood Nativity set: simple, unadorned, without color or varnish.

Later, we rode south to Shepherd's Field just west of Bethlehem and joined with hundreds of others in singing carols and reading Scripture. The sky was deep and clear and full of stars.

Our Nativity set, then, reminds us of two special days; the birth of our Lord a long time ago, and the unforgettable night when we were young and half a world away.

One shepherd and two sheep remain, plus an animal that may be a donkey. Joseph we have, and three wise men, I think, but it is hard to tell: All the figures look very much the same.

The manger is missing; so is Mary. And we have no baby Jesus piece. We like to think he grew up with our kids and now travels with them.

From time to time, we have been tempted to replace this remnant with something new, something, more fitting to our more affluent status, perhaps a Nativity set made of stone or glass or ornamental wood.

But we like the old set: We like its simplicity, its memories, even its brokenness. In these ways especially, it is a fitting reminder of the history it seeks to declare, both His and ours.

Because of that, we take our Nativity set each year from a closet full of things and arrange it in a place of prominence. After all these years, it remains the simple yet supremely spiritual way we celebrate the birth of the Savior. ■

*This article is selected from the author's most recent book, *On The Other Side of Oddville*, published by Mercer University Press, 2006.*

## Christmas: Magic and Miracle

*(continued from page 3)*

shined in the darkness, enlightening everyone, and full of grace and truth so that in the miracle of Christmas we behold the glory of God Himself and are enabled to experience salvation, full and free which is God's gift to all who in repentance and faith come willingly to Him.

Christmas is the best time of the year.

Bask in its sunshine.

Warm by its fire.

Join in its Hallelujah Chorus. ■

*This article was written some years ago and is included in Foy Valentine's last book, *Whatever Things are Lovely* (2004). Copies are available through CET.*

# Old-Fashioned Creation Care

By David P. Gushee, McAfee School of Theology, Mercer University, GA

I am becoming my grandfather, and that is a good thing. Let me explain.

The more I have gotten involved in the evangelical creation-care movement, the more I have found myself drawn toward practices that my grandparents did—or would have done if they were available. Each time I “reduce-reuse-recycle,” I become more like Grandpa Gushee from Milton, Massachusetts.

I am becoming convinced that creation care and what we evangelicals usually call “stewardship” are basically the same thing. This discovery is slowly changing my family’s lifestyle. The more that lifestyle changes, the more I skip back about 60 years to the values of an earlier generation.

These are values such as hard work, modesty in consumption, consistent giving, frugality in spending, saving for the future, and squeezing every last drop of value out of our possessions. You work hard and earn an honest living, spend your money judiciously after setting aside a generous portion for giving and saving, buy only what you need, and make it last as long as you can.

To be fair, these were values that my parents tried to instill in my sisters and me. But we were children of the 1960s and 1970s. Parental values had a hard time competing with mall values, schoolmates values, and TV commercial values.

I know that I haven’t warmed easily to simple living. I didn’t get everything I wanted as a kid, but I did get as much as I needed and some of what I wanted.

Early married years saw some pretty simple living. As newlyweds, Jeanie

and I delivered newspapers for a time while we went to school in Louisville. That was not fun. Date night consisted of cheese bread and water at Pizza Hut. A whole date for \$3.00!

But as our income increased, our lifestyle went up with it. Three years living in urban Philadelphia while working for Ron Sider did not win us over to the simplicity gospel. (Sorry, Ron.) As our children came along, we became more acculturated and began living in suburban style. A bit of inherited money helped that process along, and off we went.

Then the creation-care movement came calling. I became involved in various efforts of the Evangelical Environmental Network, helped draft the Evangelical Climate Initiative, and now get to hang out with some of the country’s leading environmental scholars and activists. I began to see that concern for creation is both biblically and empirically mandatory.

I also began to see that, as Al Gore has discovered, you must walk the walk if you are going to talk the talk of creation care. There can be no gap between proclamation and practice on this one. Not just because critics with sharp knives are near at hand, but also because integrity demands it.

## IMITATING RON

So theory is now becoming practice in the Gushee household. We are making a gradual transition to compact fluorescent light bulbs, which cost more on the front end but use less energy and last longer. Despite the lack of mandatory recycling or even easily accessible recycling here in Jackson, Tennessee, we are recycling plastics, paper, and newspaper. We are reusing the back side of printed pages in the

home office whenever possible. I now imitate my old boss Ron Sider and scribble many of my notes on the back of used paper. Ron is famous for that.

We have set the summer thermostat to 75 and the winter thermostat to 65. I am trying to retrain myself and my family to turn off every light in the house that is not being used. We are seeking to get maximum use out of our old cars; next year, when we train our fifth family driver, I will get a hybrid, and she will get my old Explorer. Jeanie loves to plant trees and is doing so across our property, which is good for the environment and beautiful in itself.

We have a long way to go. Our utility bills are still too high, as are our gasoline costs. We must find a way to cut both. We eat out too much. Probably our house is too big, and we should downsize someday, though I pity the poor fool who tries to drag Jeanie away from the home in which we have now raised our children.

In the end, the lifestyle that Grandma and Grandpa Gushee pursued is at least beginning to come into view over the horizon. They lived through scarcity and the Depression and learned valuable lessons from it. They were good stewards because they *had* to be. The challenge for 21<sup>st</sup>-century Americans is that many of us don’t. We must become good stewards simply because we *choose* to be.

As we do, we might discover that economic and environmental stewardship go together, hand in glove. Perhaps this rediscovery will motivate us to preserve the health of our planet. ■

*This article first appeared in the July, 2007 issue of Christianity Today.*

# As It Was in the Days of Noah: Global Warming

By Charles P. McGathy, Chaplain U.S. Navy (Retired), Madison, NC

I used to like hot weather. It signaled the end of the school year and the beginning of summer vacation. Though I still enjoy warm days and live in a warm place for just that reason, I'm also afraid things are getting too warm. Now more and more the heat reminds me that our planet is changing and trouble is on the way. I'm speaking of global warming of course. The predictions are dire indeed. Unless the steady temperature rise is reversed this planet, this living, dynamic planet, is bound for massive flooding, storms, and eventually another ice age.<sup>1</sup>

It feels like the beginning of a disaster movie. In act one the people, except for a few enlightened folks, ignore the danger looming on the horizon. They fail to act in time. In the final scenes they get theirs and it isn't very pleasant either. Only the ones who took heed are able to survive. It is their opportunity to build a new world upon the ruins of the old. In essence it is the retelling of the biblical story of the flood and Noah's survival.<sup>2</sup> Perhaps there is a lesson here we ought not to miss? Maybe we can learn from Noah something that can aid us as we face environmental upheaval?

**ARROGANCE.** The people in the days before the great flood arrogantly assumed they were in command of the situation. We need look no further to understand this attitude than to observe how we, as humans, have treated the planet ourselves. We live as if this blue orb spinning through space will always remain just as it is right now. The sea-

sons will change, the warmth and cold will come on time, and the rain and drought cycles will be tolerable are all part of our assumptions. We even take them for granted.

Yet scientists are telling us that we have been enjoying an incredibly stable time in the life cycle of this planet. This stability has allowed life to flourish.<sup>3</sup> There is, however, ample evidence that numerous times in its history Earth has changed dramatically and rapidly. Forests become sheets of glacial ice, oceans dry up, cold replaces warmth as the living planet remakes itself. In the course of all of this change animal species die out and others emerge. It is the ongoing creative act. Consequently, we need to cease from our arrogance and view ourselves as part of creation. We are not ultimately in charge and we can disappear as surely as the dinosaur.

**WARNING.** We do not know how many warnings had been given to the people of Noah's day. Apparently quite a few since the act of building a huge boat on dry land serves as a bit of a conversation piece. Even so, the people managed to ignore the warning. In the end it was their undoing.

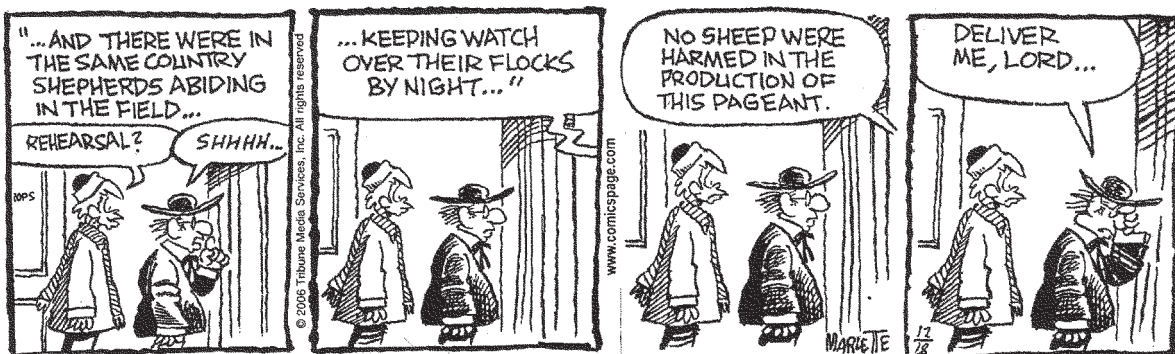
How many warnings do the people of this day need? Melting ice fields, dying polar bears and penguins, rising sea levels along with increasing storms in both power and number all serve to warn of disaster.<sup>4</sup> Yet the warnings go unheeded. These warnings have even been ignored by some people of faith who "reject scientific claims that humans are to blame

for global warming and dismiss governmental efforts to reverse it."<sup>5</sup>

Jesus said, "When it is evening, you say, 'It will be fair weather, for the sky is red.' And in the morning, 'There will be a storm today, for the sky is red and threatening.' Do you know how to discern the appearance of the sky, but cannot discern the signs of the times?"<sup>6</sup> Perhaps we do not even know how to discern the warnings from nature?

At heart it is an ethical question. Christian ethicist Norman Geisler warned in 1989: "Each year a tropical forest the size of Scotland is destroyed on planet Earth. . . . In addition to this, chemical wastes have entered the food chain and are found in human body fat. Seventy-seven percent of Americans, and ninety percent of children, are carrying more lead in their bodies than the Environmental Protection Agency says is safe. Ten thousand people die every year from pesticide poisoning and another forty thousand become ill . . . . In view of this dangerous ecological situation, what is the Christian's ethical responsibility to the physical environment in which we live?"<sup>7</sup>

What will be the response of the Christian community and of individual believers? Some will continue to turn their heads and deny a problem exists. Others may even rejoice in a twisted interpretation of eschatology that sees their dispensational beliefs coming to fruition.<sup>8</sup> Many, I hope, will rediscover that they are part of the wonder of God's creation and as such interact thought-





fully with the planet. They will use the power of the vote as well as economic and influential power to affect change for good. At this point many are insisting that change is still possible, disaster can be avoided or at least mitigated if we act with determination. As people of the Creator let us step forth and lead this effort and by doing so witness not only our love for the Creator, but for all of creation.

**CHOICE.** In Noah's day people were given a choice to return to God or perish. It was, in fact, a moral choice between good and evil. The good of the creation properly related to the Creator as opposed to the creation usurping the role of the Divine. That is the choice facing humanity now. The ability to decide makes us human. Acting ethically in how we treat one another is only part of the moral equation. We must act ethically in how we live with creation. We do not own it. It is not ours to exploit, burn up, or destroy for profit. The biblical mandate is that we care for it.<sup>9</sup> Implied in all of the warnings is the possibility that we can, if we are foolish, not take care of our Father's world which will result in devastating consequences.

**RESPONSIBILITY.** As the waters rose and it became clear to all that the warnings were accurate, the people of Noah's day got what they chose. Unfortunately innocent life also suffers, then as well as now. The overall implication is that while we must all do our part, some have a greater responsibility than others. Global warming is strongly linked to the emergence of the industrial age, in particular the burning of fossil fuel.<sup>10</sup> It is reasonable therefore that the ones responsible for accelerating the climatic shift bear an increased burden to alleviate its consequences. Just as the civic leaders of the lecherous cities of Noah's day had a greater responsibility to affect change, so too the major polluter nations bear an increased responsibility to turn the situation around.

That of course begs the question as to where we as a nation fall on the responsibility continuum? The answer from scripture still applies, "To whom much

has been given, much is expected."

**REPENTANCE.** Although repentance did not happen on a large scale it surely happened in microcosm. Noah and his family changed what they were doing. Perhaps they were farmers or in business or hunters, but whatever they were doing they changed into ark builders. They built the large boat, established a zoo, and preached an unpopular and critical message. Noah and his family changed direction.

We too must change what we are doing. It starts by taking personal inventory of what each person can do. That can be amazingly hard when all around it seems as if no one else is listening. Others continue to live their lives as always steadily marching toward environmental disaster just as it was in days of Noah.

**HOPE.** As the ark settled upon the peaks and humans emerged from their horrific experience, they seemed to be reborn. Their world had changed. It would never be as it was, and yet they were ready to embrace it. They did so imperfectly, and so too will we make mistakes. Even so we too can have a new beginning. Better to do so before the disaster. The good news is that the Creator is on the side of the creation. He wants us to live with an ethic of care for one another and for mother Earth. Noah preaches also to our generation. Are we listening? ■

- 1 Spencer Weart, *The Discovery of Global Warming*, (Harvard University Press, June 2006), available from <http://www.aip.org/history/climate/floods.htm>.
- 2 Genesis 5:28- 9:29.
- 3 "Past Climate Change," U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, 14 May 2007; available from <http://epa.gov/climatechange/science/pastcc.html#ref>.
- 4 "Consequences of Global Warming," Natural Resources Defense Council, 9 January 2006; available from <http://www.nrdc.org/globalWarming/fcons.asp>.
- 5 Marv Knox, "Southern Baptists Doubt Human Cause, Government Solution to Global Warming," Associated Baptist Press, 15 June 2007.
- 6 Matthew 16:2-3 (NASB).
- 7 Norman Geisler, *Christian Ethics: Options and Issues*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic: 1989), 293.
- 8 Wade Cox, "Global Warming and Bible Prophecy," Christian Churches of God, 16 August 2006; available from <http://www.ccg.org/English/s/p.218.html>.
- 9 Genesis 1:26.
- 10 Andrew C. Revkin, "UN: Poor Nations Unprepared for Global Warming," *New York Times News Service*, 1 April 2007.

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# What's to Become of Us? The Posthuman Person

By Jeph Holloway, Professor of Theology and Ethics, East Texas Baptist University

*"We know what we are, but know not what we may be."* (*Hamlet*, Act IV, Scene V)

While some have sought to raise the alarm,<sup>1</sup> others announce with eager anticipation that the time for the "Singularity" is at hand—that techno-apocalyptic moment when through the combined use of robotics, nanotechnology, genetic engineering, and artificial intelligence human consciousness can leave behind its limited, frail, and mortal embodied condition and seize control of personal evolution so as to experience any "virtual" reality imaginable—to become Posthuman.<sup>2</sup> What we may be in this posthuman era will indeed be up for grabs. "It is difficult," says Oxford philosopher Nick Bostrom, "for us to imagine what it would be like to be a posthuman person." What is evident among posthuman aspirants, though, is the quest for limitless intellectual power, indefinite youth and vitality, and absolute control over emotions and consciousness—goals theoretically attainable through increasingly sophisticated and powerful bio- and computer technologies.<sup>3</sup> In the meantime, "transhumanists" will take advantage of the accelerating pace of technological development and scientific understanding to improve radically the human condition and to lengthen its durability to the point where a person could in some way survive to see the arrival of the posthuman era. Such technologies as genetic engineering, artificial organs, psychopharmacology, and human-computer interfaces might provide prolonged life and enhanced experience enough to enable a person to survive to that point when, for example, consciousness might be uploadable into a cloud of self-replicating nanobots which could take any shape or form wanted and could live

forever in a world matched to any and every desire.

One immediate response to the posthuman agenda is that its adherents have watched too much *Star Trek*. While that may or may not be the case, transhumanist and posthumanist visions of a cybernetic future for humanity profess simply to extrapolate from the accelerating rate of technological innovation and argue that by the mid-point of the 21<sup>st</sup> century we will have already seen fundamental changes in the human condition toward its posthuman destiny.<sup>4</sup> Such claims demand scrutiny and for Christians the entire agenda calls for evaluation in light of fundamental convictions concerning human nature. A first task, though, is simply to ask how some could have come to the point that a hoped for digital future appears more attractive than present embodied existence. How might we account for the primacy given to an arbitrary, disembodied will that refuses to recognize any boundaries separating nature from artifice?

A full genealogy of Transhumanism and Posthumanism is beyond what can here be offered. Certain broad movements in the sweep of Western thought, however, certainly have contributed to an outlook that, when combined with ongoing technological developments, go far to account for the transhumanist/posthumanist vision.<sup>5</sup>

Bostrom himself asserts that Trans/Posthumanism "can be viewed as an outgrowth of secular humanism and the Enlightenment."<sup>6</sup> While those influences are not to be denied, a fuller assessment will have to recognize "the complicity of Western metaphysics in a cybernetic agenda, especially the role played by Christian volunteerism and Neoplatonism" in elevating an immaterial soul over a material order that could and should be mastered by the

human will.<sup>7</sup> As far back as the 12<sup>th</sup> century Europe's monastic orders provided the setting in which, according to David Noble, there developed "a connection between the mundane and the celestial, between technology and transcendence."<sup>8</sup> The "mechanical arts" were even conceived as a divine bestowment aiding humanity in the recovery of its lost estate. The late middle ages and into the early modern period saw an increasing sense of the "mechanization of nature" above which there reigned a free human consciousness which could turn its rational skills toward the technological mastery of nature for the sake of humanity's improvement. One pivotal figure joining "applied science" to a millenarian view of humanity's growing dominion over nature was Francis Bacon (1561-1626). Bacon considered the "useful arts" of technology and engineering to be essential to humanity's dominion over creation and thus "rehabilitation of past glory and primeval bliss."<sup>9</sup>

What this would look like, according to Gerald McKenny's account of the "Baconian project," would be two-fold: the elimination of suffering and expansion of the realm of human choice—"in short, to relieve the human condition of subjection to the whims of fortune or the bonds of natural necessity."<sup>10</sup> It hardly needs stressing, though, that Bacon's biblically inspired vision was one of ameliorative recovery, not of heedless transformation. The mechanical arts—technology—would serve humanity's restoration, not boundless revolution.

It fell to René Descartes (1596-1650) to strengthen the account of a distinct and free mind over against a subordinate and inferior material order that includes the human body. For Descartes, what is essential to human existence is a mind, the *res cogitans* ("thinking thing"), funda-

mentally distinct from the body, the *res extensa* (“extended thing”). The immortal mind is godlike, incorporeal, and exists strictly to think: “What then am I? A thing which thinks” And what is more, “I am not a collection of members which we call the human body” (*Meditations* II). And yet for Descartes there is still some sort of relationship between mind and body, “For the mind depends . . . on the temperament and disposition of the bodily organs” (*Discourse on Method*, VI). The distinction and relationship between the two makes possible and necessary for Descartes his own extension of the Baconian project, now specifically applied through medicine. While current medical knowledge is limited, there remains the confidence that “we could be free of an infinitude of maladies both of body and mind, and even also possibly of the infirmities of age, if we had sufficient knowledge of their causes, and of all the remedies with which nature has provided us” (*Discourse on Method*, VI). For Descartes, the divine mind of humanity has the task of investigating nature through a “practical philosophy by means of which, knowing the force and the action of fire, water, air, the stars, heaven and all other bodies that environ us . . . we can . . . render ourselves the masters and possessors of nature” (*Discourse on Method*, VI). Included in this mastery of nature would be the human body, which Descartes considers “as being a sort of machine . . . built up and composed of nerves, muscles, veins, blood, and skin” distinguishable from the mind so as to come under its sovereignty (*Meditations*, VI).

This Cartesian dualism of a free and independent mind imposing its sovereign will over a mechanized nature—including the human body—provides many of “the assumptions that underlie the dream of mind transfer” cherished by Posthumanism.<sup>11</sup> Of course, Descartes had to address the question of whether this free and independent mind has any genuine acquaintance with the external world of nature and bodies. While his belief in a good

God that would not deceive permits for Descartes the confidence that the mind’s perceptions of external reality are accurate, not all were so trusting. David Hume (d. 1776) raised the specter of a break in any relationship between mind and external world and occasioned an all-out skepticism that stirred the thinking of Immanuel Kant (d. 1804). Kant’s insistence that we can and do know the world of appearances came, though, at the price of admission that we know such a world, not in spite of, but because of our minds’ active participation in its creation. Our minds, according to Kant, do not passively receive sensory impressions that grant a direct representation of an objective reality. Instead, they actively organize, interpret, and arrange sensory impressions according to universal categories of thought (cause and effect, number, time, etc.) that provide all humans with sufficient knowledge of the world in which we live. Kant believed he had adequately addressed the epistemological crisis created by Hume’s skepticism. His solution would work so long as there remained wide agreement that the mind with its universal categories of thought (the Transcendental “I”) still possessed a measure of independence from the material order it actively constructed. It would not be long, however, before such confidence was challenged.

The nineteenth century would see a steady “process of the naturalizing of the soul,” challenging the Cartesian notion of a human mind that stood free and independent of the material order. “At the beginning of the nineteenth century, most progressive intellectuals still held that humans had been made in the image of God. By the end of the century . . . most held that humans had been made in the image of biology and society.”<sup>12</sup> With Charles Darwin on the one hand and Karl Marx of the other, we have the insistence that not only are humans completely immersed in the natural order, but every aspect of human consciousness, “including not only mundane, day-to-day

reflections, but law, morality, religion, and philosophy, is but a reflection of underlying social relations, which are wholly material.”<sup>13</sup> The total impact of this shift in human self-understanding is certainly beyond narration here, but its affect on any tendencies toward Posthumanism can be tracked to some degree.

For one thing, to submerge human nature totally into the wider natural order is to deprive humanity of what had for some time been denied the material realm—a *telos*. Study of any material object had long been guided by Aristotle’s account of causality. Investigation would proceed with search for the object’s material cause (for a statue, marble), its formal cause (the design in mind), its efficient cause (the sculptor), and its *telos*, goal, or final cause (beauty). The search for final causes in the material order is a key ingredient of any natural theology that claims to discern divine purpose and design in the universe. At the very origins of modern science, however, is a dismissal of such a search as outside the boundaries of empirical inquiry. Any concern for such is entirely unfruitful for study of the material order. Bacon spoke of final causes as “barren virgins,” while Descartes demanded concentration “on the immediate mechanical causes of natural phenomena.”<sup>14</sup>

If humans are placed strictly within the material order, then they can only be evaluated and assessed in light of human nature as it is and without regard to any notion of a *telos* or any grand narrative of a purpose for human existence. It is precisely this loss of *telos* that Alasdair MacIntyre says lies behind the moral fragmentation and emotivism of our age. Without a sense of what humans are for, there is no frame of reference for judging what counts for the human good or what qualities of life can be said to reflect the ultimate trajectory of human existence. If the notion of what a watch is for is entirely up for grabs, then to insist that a watch keep accurate time is simply one arbitrary preference among many possibilities.<sup>15</sup>

It should be no surprise, then, that the naturalization of the human would also ultimately lead to the loss of the very idea of a fixed, stable self or of the idea of the normatively human. If the “natural” world is constructed, then so is the “self” that does the constructing. With his reliance upon a thoroughly biological account of all life, Friedrich Nietzsche (d. 1900) insists that any sense of a unity of consciousness that would account for the human subject is a useless fiction. The notion of a unitary self represented by the little word “I” is simply the result of the bewitchment of language, and we do not need to mistake grammar for reality. “It may even be said that here too, when we desire to descend into the river of what seems to be our own most intimate and personal being, there applies the dictum of Heraclitus: we cannot step into the same river twice.”<sup>16</sup> The absolute rejection by Nietzsche of any sense of teleology—whether theological (e.g., Christianity), philosophical (e.g., Hegel), or biological (e.g., Darwin)—leaves only a world of constant and purposeless motion, the Dionysian whirlwind of pure natural energy overwhelming any and all stability, boundaries, and subjectivity.<sup>17</sup> Without purpose or goal there is no stable self in the world any more than there is a stable world beyond what language falsely creates.<sup>18</sup> While this loss of *telos* and subjectivity might be the occasion for nihilistic despair by some, unbridled rage and lust by others, for the Nietzschean *Übermensch* the loss of a false equilibrium provides every opportunity for life’s realization, its “instinct for growth, for durabil-

ity, for an accumulation of forces, for *power*.”<sup>19</sup> It must be remembered, however, that this growth and accumulation is completely without purpose, guidance, direction, or intent. It is simply the will-to-power. Indeed, “*This world is the will to power—and nothing besides.*”<sup>20</sup> The only “given” in this world is the world of “our desires and passions.” According to Nietzsche, “We can rise or sink to no other ‘reality’ than the reality of our drives.”<sup>21</sup>

While Nietzsche would not likely approve of the posthumanist agenda, Posthumanism cannot likely be explained apart from him. From Nietzsche we have thrust in our faces the arbitrary self, ever-seeking power in a world artificially constructed and entirely without inherent meaning, a world that can and must bend to the demands of the will-to-power. The posthuman vision of an arbitrary self unconstrained by the boundaries of nature, because it is totally immersed in boundless nature, is but a technological innovation away from realization.

This innovation, however, is not yet that of some advance in genetic engineering, artificial intelligence, or nanotechnology that permits a farewell to embodiment. It is of a new role for technology that no longer functions as a tool used by humans, but now as an agent, a determinate possessing the capacity to constitute human experience.<sup>22</sup> It is no longer a question of asking how humanity will employ advanced technologies in genetics, robotics, and nanoscience. Rather, the question is, accord-

ing to Elaine Graham, “To what extent is technology reshaping our experiences and understandings of what it means to be human?” In a Baconian/Cartesian world of sovereign mind over matter, technology simply provides “tools, devices, and procedures to assist human living.” But in a world where mind and matter, humanity and nature, the real and the constructed have all merged, “technologies . . . are more than mere appendages to autonomous human reason. They actually affect our experiences and apprehensions of what it means to be human so that we cannot conceive of ourselves independent of our tools and technologies.”<sup>23</sup>

Already a “posthuman sensibility” operates, certainly in any context where technology is no longer “other” but has been fully “assimilated into everyday human functioning.” Whether the talk is of prosthetics, cochlear implants, heart pacemakers, MP3 players, lap-tops, the Internet, gene therapy, or assisted reproduction, “biological humans are everywhere surrounded—and transformed—into mixtures of machine and organism.” In this environment “what we call ‘nature’ has [already] been significantly reshaped by technology, and technology, in turn, has become assimilated into ‘nature’ as a fully functioning component of organic life itself.”<sup>24</sup>

Trans/Posthumanists eagerly anticipate those technological advances that promise increased longevity, heightened intelligence, direct human-computer interface, and eventually the grail of an “up-loadable” consciousness into a virtual reality where percep-





tions of time and space are entirely programmable. That anticipation is fostered and sustained, however, by a disposition that no longer simply seeks ease from suffering and expansion of human choices, but sees formal notions of human being as arbitrary and sees no reason why choices cannot include new combinations or constructions of the relationship between the organic and the non-organic, even if such combinations are not recognizably “human.” While such combinations are not yet entirely possible, culturally the Posthuman has already arrived.

This present disposition expectantly awaits imminent realization of its grandest dreams. The World Transhumanist Association’s web site asserts in its vision statement: “Humanity will be radically changed by technology in the future. We foresee the feasibility of redesigning the human condition, including such parameters as the inevitability of aging, limitations on human and artificial intellects, unchosen psychology, suffering, and our confinement to the planet Earth.”<sup>25</sup> One critic detects in this agenda “levels of self-indulgence and megalomania that are simply off the charts” and wonders how such “tawdry notions could have attracted such a large audience at all.”<sup>26</sup> Others appeal to the dystopic depictions of a posthumanist future in science fiction literature and film to ask if perhaps technology is not already out of control.<sup>27</sup> Perhaps posthumanist aspirations are nothing but the visions of an adolescent male sense of invulnerability seeking license for perpetual self-indulgence, and all this dressed up in the language of technological innovation.<sup>28</sup> It is tempting to dismiss the transhumanist/posthumanist agenda as geek testosterone on a jump drive. We should not be quick to do so.

While many of the goals of Trans/Posthumanism might seem farfetched, aspirants point to 1) the already remarkable achievements of biotechnology, robotics, information technology, and nanotechnology and 2) the ongoing acceleration of such

technological advancements, the pace of which will only proceed at an exponential rate. To make his point about the pace at which technological innovations proceeds, Ray Kurzweil cites a quaint prediction from a 1949 volume of *Popular Mechanics*: “Where a calculator on the ENIAC is equipped with 18,000 vacuum tubes and weighs 30 tons, computers in the future may have only 1,000 vacuum tubes and perhaps weigh 1.5 tons.”<sup>29</sup> Of course, many digital watches today possess more computational power than did the room-sized computers of the 1940s. Given the accelerating pace of computational performance, Kurzweil projects that personal computers will match human brain capacity by around 2020.<sup>30</sup> While computational performance alone does not guarantee the promise of a posthumanist future, advances in information technology, Kurzweil argues, will support the acceleration of innovations in other areas—genetics, nanotechnology, and robotics—that will result in “interplay and myriad synergies” as a consequence of “multiple intertwined technological advances.”<sup>31</sup> Given sufficient artificial intelligence the other required posthuman technologies will certainly follow.

It is the prospect of the up-loadable mind, however, that occasions the most skepticism, as it begs affirmative answers to the most debated questions. Is human consciousness reducible to a digital format? Is the mind essentially software? Are the operations of a living, working brain reproducible in a non-organic environment? How these questions are related to one another and how they might even be independently answered are fiercely debated. In any case, what Transhumanism hopes and what Posthumanism assumes is that the essential core of personal identity can be scanned using advanced magnetic resonance imaging techniques and all its “salient details” reinstated “into a suitably powerful computer substrate” capturing “a person’s entire personality, memory, skills, and history.”<sup>32</sup> Sticklers might wonder what counts

for “salient details,” but the question of whether such an up-loaded mind would fully correspond to the current embodied mind is somewhat irrelevant for the true Posthumanist, since the self at any moment is an artificial construct to begin with. Besides, such indeterminacy is part of what puts the “Post” into “Posthumanism.”

Question of “self” and “personality,” however, perhaps occasion the greatest disquietude for the Christian and call for serious reflection on Posthumanism in light of fundamental convictions concerning human nature. In some ways, the posthumanist agenda shares many points of correspondence with the Christian faith. Brent Waters has identified several key areas of agreement between Posthumanism and Christian theology: 1) Posthumanists and Christians agree that the current state of the human condition is less than ideal, 2) both agree that it is important to seek release from this condition, 3) both Christians and Posthumanists see death as the final enemy, and 4) both place their hope in a future that lies beyond the reach of human mortality.<sup>33</sup> If there are similarities, however, it is because Posthumanism represents a current expression of what John Milbank has traced throughout the history and aspirations of modernity. While Nick Bostrom and others would assert the secular character of Trans/Posthumanism, Milbank insists that what we call the secular “. . . does not just borrow inherently inappropriate modes of expression from religion as the only discourse to hand . . . , but is actually constituted in its secularity by ‘heresy’ in relation to orthodox Christianity, or else a rejection of Christianity that is more ‘neo-pagan’ than simply anti-religious.”<sup>34</sup> The technologies feeding posthumanist aspirations might be very this-worldly, “their true inspiration,” however, “lies elsewhere, in an enduring, other-worldly quest for transcendence and salvation.”<sup>35</sup>

Noreen Herzfeld summarizes the paired sense of self and salvation maintained by Posthumanists:

“When one becomes pure data, one can transform oneself at will, becoming nearly anything at any time, transcending all limitations.”<sup>36</sup> This quest for self-transformation generally embraces certain themes. The Extropy Institute’s Max More offers a common set of trans/posthuman beatitudes: through biological and neurological augmentation the Transhumanist will transcend the “natural” limits imposed by humanity’s biological heritage, culture, and environment and enjoy perpetual expansion of “intelligence, wisdom, and effectiveness, an unlimited lifespan, and the removal of political, cultural, biological, and psychological limits to self-actualization and self-realization.” Further, “When technology allows us to reconstitute ourselves physiologically, genetically, and neurologically we who have become transhuman will . . . transform ourselves into posthumans—persons of unprecedented physical, intellectual, and psychological capacity, self-programming, potentially immortal, unlimited individuals.”<sup>37</sup> Cyber immortality offers limitless choice in limitless space and time. It promises the unencumbered self, the realization of the serpent’s offer of a shedding of the constraints of Creatureliness for divine-like existence beyond the boundaries of history and embodiment. As Herzfeld observes, the trans/posthumanist vision of virtual immortality in cyberspace assumes perspectives on human nature and the character of eternal life that “are quite different from those of most Christians.”<sup>38</sup>

The great differences between these two contrasting visions of self and salvation raise the troubling question of whether resistance is futile. For many reasons (not least the commercial and military interests involved) it will be the case that, whether the up-loadable consciousness is ever achieved, many transhumanist technologies will continue to develop rapidly so that greater mastery over our genetic disposition, for example, might be attained. Human life expectancy will increase for many. We might eventually man-

ufacture drugs that heighten human intelligence and memory. We will continue to develop artificial organs that offer some a new lease on life. We will fashion prosthetic limbs that outperform present appendages. Research will continue in various fields whereby independently pursued projects, seeking solutions to therapeutic needs, will serve the concerns of enhancement in other contexts and ultimately combine to alter basic features of human physiology and psychology.

I acquired my copy of Kurzweil’s *The Singularity is Near* at a brick and mortar Barnes and Noble book store. When I opened my copy, out fell a small pamphlet announcing “The Gift of Eternal Life.” Someone had no doubt placed the tract in the book to inspire my revival. While the view of the gospel in the pamphlet is somewhat truncated, I appreciate the implicit recognition that Kurzweil’s tome offers a fundamentally different account of self and salvation than does the Christian faith. Will today’s Christian community note and observe the contrast? Already dominant trends of our culture have blurred the lines between humanity and technology; already we offer uncritical welcome to every innovation that promises health and longer life; already many Christian commitments have been rewritten in light of powerful market and military interests. The challenges of any resistance need to be made clear. Such would include the explicit willingness to be “left behind” in terms of the advantages sought and promised by the trans/posthumanist agenda. As Casey suggests, “We will need to learn, as odd as it may sound, to be at home in our homelessness.”<sup>39</sup>

The Christian community will also need to develop greater capacities for discernment so as to distinguish better between what can be welcomed as affirming human well-being and what must be resisted as a threat, however attractive such might initially appear. That line of distinction can only be drawn if there is deep affirmation of what God intends for humanity. Jean Elshtain responds to the “messianic

project” offering limitless choice in limitless time and space by insisting, “We need powerful and coherent categories and analyses that challenge cultural projects that deny finitude [and] promise a technocratic agenda that ushers in almost total human control over all the natural world including those natures we call human.”<sup>40</sup> For Christians, a biblical view of self and salvation might be a good place to begin such analyses. Such celebrates a vision of human purpose and calling that stands in strong contrast to the trans/posthumanist agenda. It remains to be seen which of these two rival versions of human hope will capture Christian imagination and commitment. ■

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- 1 See Bill McKibben, *Enough: Staying Human in an Engineered Age* (New York: Times Books, 2003).
  - 2 See Ray Kurzweil, *The Singularity is Near* (New York: Penguin Books, 2005).
  - 3 Nick Bostrom, *The Transhumanist FAQ: A General Introduction* (WorldTranshumanistAssociation, 2003), 5-6.
  - 4 Kurzweil, *The Singularity is Near*, 7-33.
  - 5 Helpful is Timothy K. Casey, “Nature, Technology, and the Emergence of Cybernetic Humanity,” in *Is Human Nature Obsolete? Genetics, Bioengineering, and the Future of the Human Condition*, edited by Harold W. Baillie and Timothy K. Casey (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2005), 35-65.
  - 6 Nick Bostrom, “In Defense of Posthuman Dignity,” *Bioethics* 19 (2005): 202.
  - 7 Casey, “Nature,” 60.
  - 8 David F. Noble, *The Religion of Technology: The Divinity of Man and the Spirit of Invention* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1997), 16.
  - 9 *Ibid.*, 50.
  - 10 Gerald P. McKenny, *To Relieve the Human Condition: Bioethics, Technology, and the Body* (New York: SUNY Press, 1997), 2.

- 11 Daniel Dinello, *Technophobia! Science Fiction Visions of Posthuman Technology* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2005), 22.
- 12 Raymond Martin and John Barresi, *The Rise and Fall of Soul and Self: An Intellectual History of Personal Identity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 201.
- 13 Ibid., 211.
- 14 John Hedley Brooke, *Science and Religion: Some Historical Perspectives* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 54.
- 15 Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 2d edition (South Bend, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984).
- 16 Friedrich W. Nietzsche, *Human, All Too Human: A Book for Free Spirits*, ed. and trans. R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 267-68.
- 17 Friedrich W. Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, trans. Francis Golffing (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1956), 1.
- 18 See "The History of an Error" in Friedrich W. Nietzsche, "Twilight of the Idols," in *The Portable Nietzsche*, ed. and trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Penguin Books, 1982).
- 19 Friedrich W. Nietzsche, "The Antichrist," in *The Portable Nietzsche*, ed. and trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Penguin Books, 1982), 6.
- 20 Friedrich W. Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, trans. Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Vintage Books, 1968), 1067.
- 21 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil: Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (London: Penguin Books, 1990), 36.
- 22 Elaine Graham, *Representations of the Post/Human: Monsters, Aliens, and Others in Popular Culture* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2002), 6.
- 23 Elaine L. Graham, "The 'End' of the Human or the End of the 'Human'? Human Dignity in Technological Perspective," in *God and Human Dignity*, eds. R. Kendall Soulen and Linda Woodhead (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), 265.
- 24 Ibid., 266.
- 25 "The Transhumanist Declaration," <http://www.transhumanism.org/declaration.htm>.
- 26 Langdon Winner, "Resistance is Futile: The Posthuman Condition and Its Advocates," in *Is Human Nature Obsolete? Genetics, Bioengineering, and the Future of the Human Condition*, edited by Harold W. Baillie and Timothy K. Casey (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2005), 405.
- 27 See, e.g., Dinello, *Technophobia*; and Graham, *Representations of the Post/Human*.
- 28 Noreen L. Herzfeld is largely correct in saying that "cybernetic immortality has been suggested as a possibility only in the writings of rich, white males." See her *In Our Image: Artificial Intelligence and the Human Spirit* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002), 74.
- 29 Kurzweil, *Singularity*, 56.
- 30 Ibid., 70.
- 31 Ibid., 73.
- 32 Kurzweil, *Singularity*, 198-99. Herzfeld (*In Our Image*, 72-73) tempers the enthusiasm in this regard somewhat when she insists, "Current research in neuroscience suggests that the workings of the brain are far more complicated than was initially supposed and may not be capturable in neural net technology as we currently conceive it."
- 33 Brent Waters, *From Human to Posthuman: Christian Theology and Technology in a Postmodern World* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2006), 80.
- 34 John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 2d edition (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), 3.
- 35 Noble, *Religion of Technology*, 3.
- 36 Herzfeld, *In Our Image*, 72.
- 37 Cited in Dinello, *Technophobia*, 31.
- 38 Herzfeld, *In Our Image*, 73.
- 39 Casey, "Nature," 61.
- 40 Jean Bethke Elshtain, "The Body and the Quest for Control," in *Is Human Nature Obsolete? Genetics, Bioengineering, and the Future of the Human Condition*, edited by Harold W. Baillie and Timothy K. Casey (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2005), 170.





# Tetzel and TV Evangelists

By Britt Towery, Baptist Missionary (ret.) and Pastor, Brownwood, TX

Back in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, the Dominican monk Tetzel, to fulfill the pope's demands, preached from village to village how the faithful could shorten the time of their loved ones in purgatory with a few shekels. According to Roland Bainton's classic life of Martin Luther, Tetzel would say to the villagers:

"As soon as the coin in the coffer rings

The Soul from purgatory springs."

Tetzel was so good at raising money this way, he began to sell indulgences that would forgive sins and keep sinners from the horrors of purgatory and hell.

This really got under Luther's skin. He had come to believe, from his reading of the New Testament, that God alone could forgive sins and then only to repentant sinners. Luther's fiery response to monk Tetzel's hypocrisy, shook the European world of religion. The Protestant Revolution blasted into history.

Tetzel and the many like him could not deliver on promises of fewer days in purgatory or the forgiveness of sins. But the people flocked to him and would even give their last farthing in hopes the old Dominican was right. Tetzel was treated more like a celebrity than a man of God. Sounds like some

21<sup>st</sup> century TV preachers.

Promising something you cannot deliver is as alive and well in America as it ever was in the old Europe.

Yesterday I watched the televangelist Paula White as she all but promised the moon to those who would phone in with cash donations. To not do so was dangerous to my soul and the end of any hope for a prosperous life. She does a great job of "out-Tetzeling Tetzel!" Give, give, give and you will receive!

Ms. White, recently divorced from her husband Randy, remains as the leader of Without Walls International Church and Paula White Ministries. She keeps her financial information a very closely guarded secret. So you the viewer have no way of knowing where the money goes. Last week Senator Charles Grassley (R-Iowa) sent letters about alleged donor abuse to Ms. White (and five other TV preachers) about their use of finances.

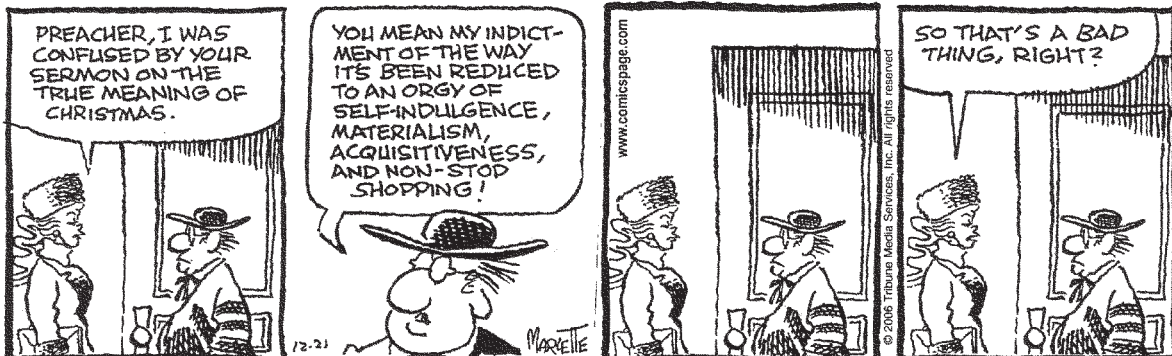
The TV ministries are to report by December 6 on the use of donations. The senators are scrutinizing, among other matters, where all the fancy cars and jets come from and credit card statements for expenses paid by the Whites' tax-exempt entity, including cosmetic surgery.

Ole Anthony, president of the

Trinity Foundation of Dallas, calls the televangelist's blatant parade of gimme gimme gospel of greed as pagan. To prey on the elderly, the poor and the desperate is bad enough, but to do it in God's name is the bottom of the sin barrel.

The Trinity Foundation reports that TV and radio evangelists are working a donor pool of about five million people. Fifty-five percent of these people are elderly women. Another 35 percent is made up of what they call the desperation pool—those whose child has AIDS, whose spouse has cancer, and the homeless. Some are so needy that they send in their food stamps (no longer stamps, but plastic cards) and wedding rings. A few upper-middle class give wanting spiritual justification for their greed.

Baird Helgeson and Michelle Bearden of *The Tampa Tribune* quotes Pete Evans of the Trinity Foundation, that it is going to take an uprising from the pews before churches agree to any kind of transparency regarding finances. "When the scandals erupt, everyone starts calling for change," he said. "But then it dies down for a while. We shouldn't be surprised that it keeps happening." ■



# Moratorium On Executions

By Bob Allen, Managing Editor of *EthicsDaily.com*, Nashville, TN

The American Bar Association has called for a nationwide moratorium on executions, citing a three-year study of state death-penalty systems that found unfairness and other flaws. "After carefully studying the way states across the spectrum handle executions, it has become crystal clear that the process is deeply flawed," Stephen F. Hanlon of the ABA Death Penalty Moratorium Implementation Project said in a press release. "The death penalty system is rife with irregularity—supporting the need for a moratorium until states can ensure fairness and accuracy."

Several states placed a moratorium on executions after the U.S. Supreme Court decided last month to review a case from Kentucky about whether death by lethal injection constitutes cruel and unusual punishment. On Tuesday the high court stayed the execution of a Mississippi prisoner sentenced to die that way, pending that review. The ABA studied capital punishment in Alabama, Arizona, Georgia, Florida, Indiana, Ohio, Pennsylvania and Tennessee and found "significant racial disparities" in imposing the death penalty.

Other problems included a lack of policies on use and retaining of DNA evidence, eyewitness misidentification and false confessions, mistakes in crime laboratories, lack of proper training for prosecutors, testimony by jailhouse "snitches," inadequate public-defense lawyers and poorly written or conveyed instructions to juries.

The study also raised questions about whether judges who must seek election or appointment are unduly influenced by political pressures. And even though the Supreme Court has held it is unconstitutional to execute offenders with mental retardation, each state is free to make its own rules about whether the defendant was

mentally retarded at the time of the offense.

Every state in the study, the report said, "appears to have significant racial disparities in its capital system, particularly those associated with the race of the victim." Even in states with acknowledged racial disparities, it said, "Little, if anything has been done to rectify the problem." States generally don't keep enough data to quantify any problems with bias., "Making the process of conducting analysis difficult, if not impossible," the study said.

The 413,000-member lawyer group says it neither supports nor opposes capital punishment, but it has since 1997 urged states to put a moratorium on executions pending study about whether their systems meet legal standards for fairness and due process. Three weeks ago death-penalty opponents called on the United Nations to adopt a General Assembly resolution on a universal moratorium on executions.

"The most basic human right—the right to life—is violated both by homicide and by execution," Sister Helen Prejean, the nun whose ministry to death-row inmates was made famous by the movie "Dead Man Walking," said in a New York press conference. "We call today for a consistent human rights ethic in response to violence. The American people are not any more vengeful than people in Europe," she said. "The death penalty is unreflected upon by people. They do not think about it. It is not one of the moral issues that touch most people personally."

The Alliance of Baptists, American Baptist Churches in the U.S.A. and Baptist Peace Fellowship of North America have adopted statements opposing the death penalty. The Southern Baptist Convention in 2000 passed a resolution supporting

"the fair and equitable use of capital punishment by civil magistrates as a legitimate form of punishment for those guilty of murder or treasonous acts that result in death."

Albert Mohler, president of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, said Monday on his call-in radio show that the Bible supports the death penalty in both the Old and New Testaments. Mohler said God's covenant with Noah in Genesis establishes a principle that "it is necessary to underscore the sanctity of human life by making it clear that if you take a human life in a homicide you forfeit your own life." "Romans 13," he continued, "grants governments the power of the sword. The power of the sword is intended to be the ultimate sanction against lawbreaking and in particular against homicide as it's now most commonly defined," he said. "So you have both in the Old Testament and New a very clear sense that there are some crimes that justify death."

A moderate Baptist ethicist said Mohler is "inexcusably wrong in his misuse of Romans 13 to justify the death penalty." Robert Parham of the Baptist Center for Ethics said the word translated as "sword" in the text does not refer a double-edged, 3-foot weapon used for decapitation. "The word really means a police dagger, hardly the weapon for execution," Parham said. Beside that, he said the Roman Empire's method for the death penalty was not decapitation but crucifixion, the form of capital punishment used to kill Jesus.

"If the Old Testament is a justification for the American death penalty," Parham said, "then our death penalty will need to be applied for Sabbath-breaking and parent-cursing, if we are to be faithful to the biblical practice. If the Old Testament is the model for the death penalty, then stoning will

be the American method.” When we draw a straight and literal line from the Bible to 21<sup>st</sup> century public policy, we misuse God’s divine treasure chest,” Parham said. “The Bible is not a literal blueprint for the American justice system and should not be used to justify the death penalty.”

Mohler said while many conservative Christians understand that the Bible affirms the death penalty, many of them don’t understand why. “It is not revenge. It is not retaliation,” he said, “it is the sense that once a person has committed a crime against the Imago Dei, against the image of God—that’s exactly the argument found in Genesis Chapter 9—once a person has insulted the image of God in another human being by killing that person and taking that life, then that person has forfeited his or her own right to live. The argument in the Old Testament is that society can’t seriously say that it maintains the sanctity of human life if it is not willing to administer the ultimate punishment,” Mohler said. “That seems to be very much what is in line with Paul’s thinking in Romans Chapter 13.”

While supporting the death penalty, Mohler said he shared concerns in the ABA report about unfairness and racial and economic disparity. “The Bible also says the justice is not to be sold in the streets,” he said. “It is not to be up for sale. We seem as a nation to be somewhat squeamish about the death penalty,” Mohler said, “and I wonder if that’s just due to a lack of courage and moral conviction and the entire process, or if maybe we’re really worried that maybe we don’t know enough to apply the ultimate sanction. The argument there is once you’ve executed someone, it’s too late.”

“I wish Christians were more squeamish about the death penalty,” Parham said, “Maybe Mohler will show us his so-called courage by nailing to a cross or casting the first stone in his Bible-styled version of the death penalty.” ■

*This article is reprinted by permission from the November 1, 2007, EthicsDaily.com site of the Baptist Center for Ethics.*

## Rich Folk and the Family of Lazarus

By Al Staggs, Chaplain and Performing Artist, Sante Fe, NM

It’s a long, long time to wait  
For life to be better in that  
Sweet by and by  
For most citizens of this land  
And for most of those who dwell  
on this earth.

For these life is a long way  
From something that is good,  
It is instead a prison,  
Something to be endured  
Day after agonizing day.

For these who worry  
For food, housing, medical care—  
Life is a prison,  
It is unrelenting stress  
To find the day’s manna,  
To keep something on one’s belly  
And to satisfy the appetites of  
their young  
And their aged kin.

These are those who have no time,  
No energy, no freedom to  
organize,  
To speak as one loud and  
compelling voice  
For justice and equality.  
There’s also little desire to pray  
For God appears to have  
bequeathed the riches and  
treasures  
Of this earth to a tiny minority,  
Those who feel entitled,  
Those who feel deserving of their  
opulence.  
God, they assume, is their silent  
partner  
And so they repose in tranquil  
slumber each night  
Knowing that there will be quite  
enough for tomorrow  
And many more tomorrows.

Does God know this?  
Does God see this?  
Does God have the power to  
rectify  
The gap between the rich and the  
poor?

One fact remains in this disparity—  
The gulf between the haves and  
the have nots  
Is created, perpetrated and  
exacerbated  
By the evils of systemic injustice.

Surely God is not only concerned  
With whether we pray  
Or whether we attend church on  
Sundays  
Or whether we have ever  
entertained a lustful thought  
Or uttered words of curses.

Surely God is concerned that there  
are those  
Who sit at the world’s family table  
And who reach into the common  
platter of food  
And take much more than they  
need  
And thus deprive others around  
that table  
Enough on which they can  
survive.

Those who suffer here  
Should not be required to wait till  
the hereafter  
And those who possess an abun-  
dant  
Should either share and work for  
equity  
Or else not look forward to any  
thing after this life  
Except that which awaits us all,  
Judgment Day. ■



# Confessions of a Whistle-Blower

By Richard D. Kahoe, Woodward, OK

Virtually my entire adult life I have known and tacitly supported the ministry of the Gideons. Churches (with a significant range of theological perspectives) to which I have belonged have welcomed speakers on Gideon Sunday to present their ministry of placing the Bible in hotel rooms, hospitals, prisons, and schools, and in the hands of U.S. servicemen and others who may welcome access to God's written word. Gideon Bibles in motel rooms and other places have often been helpful, if I failed to bring a Bible with me. Several friends and relatives have been active Gideons, and on occasion I have been guest at Gideon dinners. I was fairly generous in making periodic financial contributions to this worthy ministry.

So, when I returned to my home county some fifteen years ago I accepted an invitation to a meeting to explore the possibility of active membership in the Gideons. Though, as a lay minister, I had other opportunities of ministry, the Gideons seemed to deserve some fraction of my pending retirement time. Each guest who expressed willingness to become a Gideon was given a brief personal "spiritual" questionnaire. I don't recall the questions that tapped into what I would call my "spiritual life," but I stalled on several questions at the end that blatantly expressed fundamentalistic theology. When I turned in my questionnaire with some of those questions left blank, and tried to explain myself, the Gideon who was taking them shuffled my questionnaire to one side and made clear that I did not meet the Gideon standard of "spirituality."

Surely I was not the first mainstream, moderate Christian to discover that the Gideons is a "closet fundamentalist" organization. Never had any of their presentations expressed such extreme theology, and

they never asked my theological positions when I gave them my offerings. I had taken at face value that they gave out only King James Bibles, because those could be printed with less expense—with no current copyright. Now I wonder if this practice is a concession to those fundamentalists who believe God ordained only the KJV, and "If it was good enough for Peter and Paul, it's good enough for me." I pondered becoming a "whistleblower" to other moderate Christians who had not learned this dirty little Gideon secret.

While I was surprised, almost shocked, at the revelation of underlying Gideon theology, I withheld my hand from any letters to editors or other media. I found other ministry opportunities. For several years I wrote a religion column for the local newspaper, without ever mentioning the Gideons—one way or the other. And now I minister to a Mennonite and a Baptist congregation.

Recently, though, I talked with a denominational college professor friend (a PhD. in Zoology)—after an inexcusably-long lapse of time. I knew he had been under attack by fundamentalists in his university and its sponsoring denomination. He started bringing me up-to-date with his Gideon experience. He had been an active Gideon for almost fifteen years. A new pastor came to town and learned that Dr. H., as an academic biologist, did not concur with Bishop Ussher's dating of creation at 4004 B.C. When the pastor discovered that Dr. H. also was a Gideon, he informed the organization that one of their members did not believe that the earth is flat. Well maybe not quite like that, but at least that he held to the scientific truth common to virtually all educated biologists, that "the beginning" occurred billions of years ago, and that life on earth had

been evolving for more than a million years. To Dr. H.'s shock, the Gideons unceremoniously informed him that he could no longer be a member of their organization—and no thanks for his fifteen years of faithful service.

The earlier minor disrespect to me I could handle. The gross insult to my friend after his years of service—with no reservations about theology—demanded some response, I thought. Presumably many moderate, mainline Christians do not know that the Gideon organization demands their stewards hold to an extreme rightist religious dogma. Now that I "out them" to some who may be closer to my theology than to their fundamentalism, how do we respond?

I am not a professional ethicist, never even had a course in Christian ethics. My own professional ethical standards (as a psychologist) offer little help. Many of us mainstream Christians have come through more conservative dogma—just as the apostle Paul moved from Phariseeism to freedom of Christ as espoused in his letter to the churches in Galatia. Yet we read in Acts that, even after moving to freedom in Christ for the Gentiles, Paul still practiced some of the old Jewish rituals.

Long after my denomination left me in terms of theological orientation, I tried to be part of the loyal opposition. At one point when I could no longer, in conscience, support Southern Baptists' flagrant meddling in national politics, I designated my church tithe to be used for "local ministries only." After several more years I felt such discomfort with my local congregation that I could no longer be a part of it. I moved my membership to an SBC church where the pastor held to what I believe to be orthodox Baptist principle. Only when the pastor moved from that church did I finally burn

my bridges and join another branch of our faith, where I was serving as an interim pastor.

My brief biography may serve as a cautionary tale, speaking to this ethical dilemma: How I might relate to a valued ministry like the Gideons, which nonetheless adheres to dogmas that I cannot endorse nor explicitly support. I recognize that many Southern Baptists “jumped ship” long before I did, and I have friends who—while not buying the whole conservative/fundamentalist package—somehow still feel they can leaven the loaf positively from within.

Here’s one way I would feel comfortable in dealing with the Gideons. If they invited themselves to present their message in one of my churches, I would inform them that their conservative doctrines are far afield from those of my congregation, but we affirm their ministry of Bible distribution. So, as long as they understand

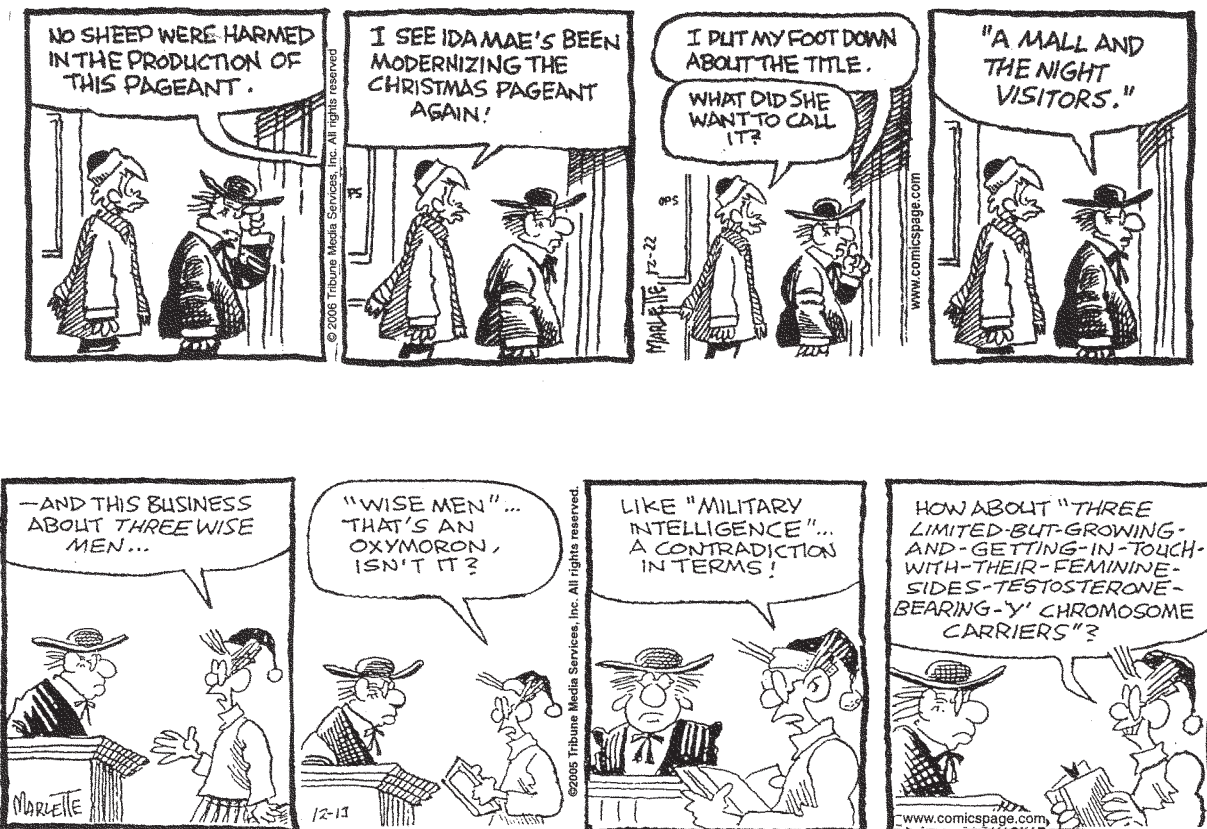
our theology and they limit themselves to their ministry and the power of the written word (and do not push any theological position) they are welcome to our church. At the same time I would inform my congregation of the current Gideon theology, and let each person decide how they can and will support the Gideon ministry financially and in their prayers.

After a Gideon visit I would also be inclined to write Gideon headquarters—local, state, and national—and tell them that we have welcomed their ministry, even though we do not subscribe to their fundamentalist theology. I could add that we pray the Gideons will someday soon come to the position that one does not have to subscribe to a narrow sector of Christian belief to be an active steward in their organization.

Further, without regard to our support of the Gideons, we as mainstream Christians might be continually

reminded of the work of the American Bible Society and the International Bible Society. We can support their works—which, among other things, make the Bible available in modern translations. Part of my ministry is to visit the jail in the county where I serve two churches. Frequently inmates will ask for copies of the Bible—and virtually never do they specifically request the King James Version. Without interfering with the Gideon ministry, we as ministers, laypersons, and congregations may develop ministries of distributing the Bible in any of the more readable (but still faithful) versions that are available.

We can fill niches the Gideons do not. They can inspire us to make God’s written word available for millions at home and around the world who thirst for it. And, who knows, maybe our prayers will be answered and God will influence the Gideons to divorce ministry from dogma. ■



# Torture Then and Now

By Martin E. Marty, Chicago, IL

Torture, including torture by Americans: Who could have predicted that this would be a live topic here in the twenty-first century? We know how to associate torture with the accused and accusing other, with Inquisitors and witch hunters five centuries ago, or with far-away twentieth century totalitarian regimes and religious terrorists. But today the theological, humanistic, and tactical themes connected with torture have appeared close to home, giving new significance to those distant times, places, and events.

Accordingly, a very distinguished historian, Princeton's expert on the Renaissance, is speaking up. Not known for ideology or pamphleteering, Anthony Grafton takes pains not to oversell the relevance of his subjects. He favors patient historical work and writes in a moderate mode. Recently he looked up from his Renaissance research to see how things are going today. Alert to contemporary controversies and mildly allusive about events in America, he stops short of issuing indictments. Grafton seems to be writing in the haze of "where there's

smoke there's fire," but clearly sees enough to issue cautionary words.

His article in the November 5th *New Republic*, entitled "Say Anything," refers to what he has learned from the transcripts of those Inquisitors and witch-hunters. He knows enough to say enough about the practical ineffectiveness of torture. Americans, we were always told, do not torture for a number of reasons: torture violates our moral codes, including those based on religious notions that humans are made in the image of God; religious leadership is almost unanimously against torture, and America is a religious nation; for us to torture is to enter a dangerous game, since if we torture we have no moral claim to demand that "the other," our enemies, should not torture our people when they are captured; and we are a practical people and like to work with things that work. Grafton concentrates on this last piece, the ineffectiveness of torture.

He notes that four centuries ago, as now, the tortured will "say anything" to get the pain to stop, which means anything that the tortured thinks the

torturer wants to hear. And what the torturer hears is almost never right or useful. Grafton reports on the work of younger historians who are finding that "torture—as inflicted in the past—was anything but a sure way of arriving at the truth." He tells how, in unimaginable pain, some tortured Jews were broken and finally "filled in every detail that Christians wanted." Nowadays, he says, "no competent historian trusts confessions wrung by torture that confirms the strange and fixed ideas of the torturer." Grafton's conclusion: "Torture does not obtain truth . . . it *can* make most ordinary people . . . say anything their examiners want." Moral: "It is not an instrument that a decent society has any business applying. . . . Anyone who claims otherwise...stands with the torturers" of long ago. And that, Grafton has made quite clear, is not a good place to stand. ■

*This article originally appeared in Sightings (11/26/07), a publication of the Martin Marty Center of the University of Chicago Divinity School.*





# Americans Ignorant about First Amendment Rights

By Brent Walker, Exec. Dir. Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty Washington, D.C.

Fall is my favorite season. Cooler weather, college football, the World Series, and my birthday—September 13. I also look forward to—and in a sense dread—the publication of the First Amendment Center’s annual “State of the First Amendment” national survey. I look forward to it because it gives me a bead on the popular attitudes about the First Amendment generally and the religion clauses in particular. I dread it because inevitably, it reflects sentiments that give me grave concerns. This year was no exception.

You can read the full report at [www.firstamendmentcenter.org](http://www.firstamendmentcenter.org). The 2007 survey reveals three attitudes that I find particularly troubling—one dealing with woeful ignorance of the Constitution and history, one reflecting a popular misunderstanding of the Establishment Clause, and one revealing a cramped view of rights under the Free Exercise Clause.

First, when asked to name the specific rights guaranteed by the First Amendment, only 19 percent could name “freedom of religion.” Moreover, 55 percent think that the Constitution itself establishes a “Christian nation” and an unbelievable 65 percent agree with the statement that the “nation’s founders intended the United States to be a Christian nation.” How could so many be so wrong about so much? Yes, everyone is entitled to their own opinion, but they are not entitled to their own facts. The Constitution never mentions Christianity, or God for that matter. It is a decidedly secular document. It mentions religion only once and then, in Article VI, to disallow a religious test for public office. Some of our founders wanted to mention

Christianity, but they lost the debate in Philadelphia in the summer of 1787. No doubt most of our founders were men of faith of some ilk—rationalists, deists, orthodox Christians. And our nation today is Christian demographically. But it’s a plain canard to say that our founders intended a Christian nation or that the Constitution establishes one.

Second, with respect to the Establishment Clause, more bad news. The survey revealed 58 percent think teachers in public schools should be allowed to lead in classroom prayer. The U.S. Supreme Court ruled 45 years ago that state-sponsored, teacher-led prayer violates the Establishment Clause. Of course, the 58 percent who want teachers and public school officials to lead in prayer assume that is going to be their own prayer. In our amazingly pluralistic society, that will not necessarily be the case. And, why would we want school officials deciding when, where and what our children should pray? The BJC works to show the dozens of ways in which voluntary, vital and voluminous religion can be included in the school day without counting on the government to do our religion for us or to foist, if not force, school-sponsored religion exercises on students who are in the classroom by compulsion of law.

Finally, concerning the free exercise of religion, only 56 percent think that religious liberty applies to all religions. And an astonishing 28 percent said that the freedom of worship as one chooses “was never meant to apply to religious groups that the majority of the people consider extreme or on the fringe.” So, religious freedom applies only to those groups that the major-

ity thinks is acceptable? The BJC has worked for more than seven decades to defend and extend religious liberty for all.

The BJC has been quite successful in convincing Congress, the courts, governmental agencies and policymakers that the Bill of Rights generally is counter-majoritarian. It does not matter what the majority thinks. The protection for religious liberty in the First Amendment protects against the tyranny of the majority. But, we must do a better job in convincing the culture. Eventually, it does matter what the majority thinks. They can elect new members of Congress and vote for presidents that will make new appointments to the Supreme Court and, in rare cases, a super-majority can amend the Constitution. So, ironically, for this counter-majoritarian understanding of the First Amendment to survive challenges, it must be embraced by a majority, if not a consensus, of the American people.

This is where you can help. Stand up for the truths that America is not a Christian theocracy, that our public schools should not inculcate a particular religious point of view, that everyone, no matter how extreme, foolish, or wrong their religious beliefs are, should be able to worship as they see fit. This important enterprise demands that we all cooperate to dispel the myths and misunderstandings that inform these results.

I hope and pray for a better birthday present next year. ■

*This article was originally published in the October, 2007, Report from the Capital.*

# Christian Ethics and the Movies

Reviewed by David A. Thomas, Assoc. Prof. of Rhetoric Emeritus, University of Richmond<sup>1</sup>

## *War: No End In Sight* (2007, Documentary)

Besides the spate of theatrical war dramas, there are now a dozen Iraq War documentaries either in production or in distribution this year. The best one so far is *No End in Sight*. It won a significant prize at the Sundance Film Festival. Richard Schickel, *Time* magazine's reviewer, called the film "without question the most important movie you are likely to see this year."

*No End in Sight* covers the U. S. occupation and reconstruction of Iraq following the fall of Baghdad in May, 2003. It is devastating to American credibility. It shows the nearly criminal incompetence of our officials in charge. It is not merely that mistakes were made, but that *only* mistakes were made.

It is a textbook example of the best documentary techniques. Unlike Michael Moore's flagrantly political films, *No End in Sight* is universally praised for its depth, density, and rigorous factual presentation of its message. As the genre suggests, it fully and fairly documents its assertions. It is straightforward, historic, chronological, and calm. Charles Ferguson, the film's producer, is not a typical film maker. His education includes an undergraduate degree in mathematics from Berkeley, and a Ph. D. in political science from MIT. He has been a visiting faculty member at both of those prestigious universities. He was a Senior Fellow at the Brookings Institute, and a member of the Council on Foreign Relations. When he began this movie project, he supported the war. No one can accuse him of being soft on national security. This movie is his first. He is not a part of the film industry. In another interest area besides politics and national security, he authored three books on

information technology. He made millions when he sold his software company to Microsoft. He spent \$2 million of his own money to make this movie. He expects no profits, but he says it is the best \$2 million he ever spent.

Because of his solid reputation as a conservative thinker, he was given unprecedented access to the government's insiders. Ultimately, he interviewed hundreds of participants and key players. However, at the top of the organization chart, no one agreed to cooperate with him. This "No" list included the President and Vice President, Secretary Rumsfeld, Secretary Powell, Condoleezza Rice, along with their top NeoCon advisers like Paul Wolfowitz. L. Paul Bremer III, the first Coalition Humanitarian and Reconstruction Authority director, who made the biggest errors, also refused interviews.

Just about everyone else in a position to know cooperated. On camera interviews include our Ambassador to Iraq, Barbara Bodine; White House insider Richard Armitage; Gen. Jay Garner; Col. Paul Hughes; Col. Lawrence Wilkerson (Colin Powell's Chief of Staff); and many others who spoke freely with Ferguson on the record. Dozens of mid-level foreign service officials, Marines, civilian workers, and Iraqi nationals, also appear.

Ferguson and his crew spent months on the ground in Iraq. They generated 200 hours of interview footage and 30,000 pages of interview transcripts, of which less than one percent could be used in the movie due to length.<sup>2</sup> Ninety-five percent of the interviews are with Republicans. Only one person, Walter Slocombe, Bush loyalist and former director of the Coalition Provisional Authority, still defends his actions and decisions despite the outcomes. He is to be

admired for his courage to be interviewed.

In the end, *No End in Sight* is an indictment of the Bush Administration's embarrassing handling of the Iraq situation. It turned a quick military victory over Saddam Hussein in 2003 into a catastrophic political and social quagmire even worse than it was before we invaded the country. Now, four years later, there is no end in sight.

Four main topics are covered in the movie's bill of particulars. First, the war's launch: The war was initiated and executed without any post-invasion plans. Pres. Bush based his actions on his utter reliance on a few NeoCon advisers and his own deeply held commitment to their imperialistic philosophy. None of those top level advisers had any experience or expertise in the military or diplomacy, certainly none in the Middle East. Their errors stemmed from their refusal to read military and CIA intelligence analyses, relevant State Department studies, and other key documents. The first major blunder Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld made was his decision to use only half the number of troops that the Pentagon insisted would be needed post-invasion.

The next three mistakes were all made by Bremer, the administrator who replaced Gen. Jay Garner in Iraq. He was the bureaucrat who was first assigned to take charge of post-invasion reconstruction. Bremer had never served diplomatically in the Middle East, had never set foot in Iraq, and he did not speak the language. He had never served in the military. Yet he made the following three fateful decisions without seeking the advice of anyone who could have helped him.

(1) Immediately after capturing Baghdad, our military failed to stop the looting of Baghdad. MPs were *ordered* not to interfere. This was a

direct result of going in with insufficient forces for security. Stores, government buildings, and facilities were gutted down to the plumbing. Under Bremer's orders, while priceless treasures of the National Museum and libraries—mankind's oldest artifacts—were being carted off by thieves in semis, our U. S. Marines provided protection for just one location: the Oil Ministry.

(2) The decision to oust all Ba'ath Party members from any government posts, with the result that every Iraqi professional was permanently unemployed, including practically every doctor, lawyer, manager, commissioner, technician, and civil administrator all the way down to classroom teachers, with no qualified replacements available. This effectively paralyzed every function of civilian life in Iraq.

(3) The decision to disband the Iraqi Army, which instantly put a half million young Muslim men on the streets, many of them still armed. Inevitably, after the country was militarily defeated, Iraq was thrust into total social and political chaos. A wealthy and orderly nation was destroyed and poverty stricken, and completely out of control.

*No End In Sight* is made up of many "talking heads" on camera, with few action episodes or even background shots. It is, pure and simple, a debate brief on film. There is no fiction, no embellishment, no condensed time sequences, no composite characters. The only actor in the movie, the narrator Campbell Scott, speaks calmly. It is about as apolitical, prosaic, understated, objective, and, well, Republican documentary as there could possibly be. It never preaches, yet it never bores. After viewing this movie, it is difficult to understand why Pres. Bush's low ratings are as high as they are.

**Ethical Implications of Iraq War Movies Today.** What ethical or moral implications can be drawn? Here, politics and ethics overlap.

There have been literally dozens of presidential primary debates to this point. For months, we have repeatedly watched a stage full of Democratic

candidates on one hand, and an equally crowded platform of Republican candidates on the other, hammer home their talking points about what they believe the Iraq War issues come down to. What if their TV debates were our only sources for understanding the war? As this is written prior to the primaries, Democratic contenders seem united only on blaming Pres. Bush for misleading the nation into the war in the first place. None of the leading candidates of either party talk about actually ending the Iraq War. Rudy Giuliani says, "every time the Democrats debate, Hamas is the winner." In press conferences, Pres. Bush talks about World War III. At this point, according to both sides, there is literally no end in sight.

That could change. *No End in Sight* is not a box office smash, but its target audience is highly responsive. In contrast to the mass audiences that go to movie theaters for entertainment, those who elect to see movies like this are opinion leaders. It has already been shown in Congress. More Iraq War documentaries are scheduled soon. ■

- 1 David A. Thomas retired in 2004 and is now resides in Sarasota, FL. He invites your comments at [davidthomas1572@comcast.net](mailto:davidthomas1572@comcast.net).
- 2 A book is planned.

## Terrorism: *A Mighty Heart* (2007)

Angelina Jolie stars in *A Mighty Heart*, a movie based on the actual January, 2001 (thus prior to the 9/11 attacks), kidnapping and brutal murder of Daniel Pearl, a *Wall Street Journal* correspondent in Karachi, Pakistan. Jolie plays Mariane Pearl, the victim's wife. The perpetrators eventually shocked the world by leaking a videotape of themselves beheading Daniel Pearl. That gruesome scene was not reproduced in the movie, though it is strongly referred to. The movie follows the step-by-step efforts of a task force of local and U. S. security officials to catch the kidnappers and rescue Daniel

Pearl, so it has been categorized as a "police procedural." Even though we know how the story ends, the movie is spellbinding and suspenseful. One of its subtexts is hope.

The international supporting cast of actors playing the "good guys" (and also the "bad guys") is very strong. Primarily for this reason, the movie also qualifies as a thriller, loaded with testosterone. Character actors whose faces you may know from many other movies, but whose names you may not know, are entirely believable. Readers of this journal may recognize Will Patton, from *The Spitfire Grill*. Irrfan Khan, a well-known Indian actor in Hollywood, also appeared previously as the father in the recent successful American release of the movie, *The Namesake*, a movie sure to come up in church discussion circles. Others in the cast list are of equal stature and talent.

*A Mighty Heart* carries some inevitable political overtones. The kidnappers, who were captured and convicted in Pakistani courts, were Moslem extremists. For verisimilitude, it was filmed on location in Karachi and other Pakistani and Indian cities. Much of the location material is shot in the intimate form of handheld cameras. The kidnapping is dealt with as a terrorist act committed for religious and/or political reasons. The terrorists are a shadowy presence for the most part, shown only when they are captured in the end.

The movie's themes include the elements of a local cop show set within a global political context. Importantly, a careful reading of the movie shows it to be primarily a memoir of Mariane Pearl's life and her character, as it was tested during that horrible two-week ordeal. Based on her own book recounting her experiences, and allowing for certain dramatic modifications in the interest of narrative coherence and visual possibilities, the movie is told from her point of view.

My take on the movie is that, first and foremost, *A Mighty Heart* is a dramatic woman's movie. (This is not to say that it is a "Chick Flick," or a good teen date movie.) It is a retelling of Mariane Pearl's bravery and her abil-



ity to keep up a public appearance of poise and equanimity, and her refusal to become terrorized by the kidnapers. The movie succeeds in conveying a powerful message. It is about Mariane Pearl's dealing with the terror in her heart, and ultimately, with her intense grief. She is not a superhero who joins in the pursuit and prosecution of the kidnapers, but she cooperates with the highly competent and powerful men who fulfill that role. She is a victim herself who resists the victimage role.

In the opening scene, Mariane Pearl identifies herself in a voiceover as the wife of Daniel Pearl, five months pregnant. In the same speech, she relates that both she and her husband were there as journalists. But the movie barely shows Mariane Pearl operating in any professional capacity. Later, in the movie's closing scene, once again in a voiceover, Mariane Pearl dedicates the film to their son, Adam. As an epilogue, the final scenes show Mariane Pearl and her son Adam, now five years old, strolling down a street in their new home town in France, with a caption stating that she is still working as a journalist.

In between, we see how she tries to cope with the mounting tragedy of her husband's kidnapping, in private and in public.

But the movie is more than that.

The fact that Angelina Jolie is the star in the role is a highly salient consideration. It is true that Jolie was Mariane Pearl's favorite actress in line to play the part. Given Hollywood's

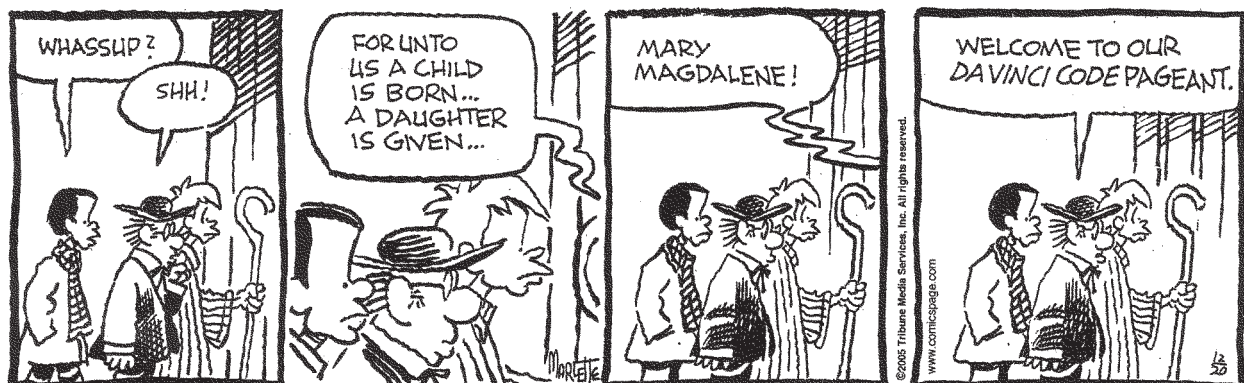
expertise with make-up and wigs, Jolie bears a strong physical resemblance to Mariane Pearl. And Jolie, a previous Oscar winner, is a superlative actor. She almost channels the real Mariane Pearl's public and private feelings throughout this entire courageous but heartrending episode. We can expect Oscar consideration, if not a Best Actress win for her this year.

As a social text, the movie is strengthened by the fact that Angelina Jolie is the actor doing this movie. Jolie's own persona ennobles and elevates the significance of Mariane Pearl, while it echoes the strength of the real Mariane Pearl's character. It is difficult to imagine a lesser actress, say, a Winona Ryder or even a Demi Moore, having as powerful an effect. In her real life, at present, Jolie represents a personage who has risen above the superficial trappings of movie stardom and the fame of celebrity to become an authentic global humanitarian. She and her domestic partner, Brad Pitt, have made major commitments to international programs to aid orphans of AIDS victims in Africa and other Third World countries. She has adopted three such children as her own. She and Pitt donate one-third of their high movie salaries to these charities. They devote time and energy to serving in more personal ways. Jolie has been designated a United Nations Goodwill Ambassador. *Newsweek* magazine recently listed Pitt and Jolie among the "100 Most Important People in the World" based on these factors.

My observation is not meant as an unqualified endorsement of any of these things, though I do find them admirable. I do not hold up Angelina Jolie as a Christian role model in her personal life. I wonder about how permanently she will persist in her charity efforts in the long run. In celebrity column terms, I also wonder how long the Pitt-Jolie domestic partnership will last, given their previous marital track records.

But also understand this: in terms of my commentary about *A Mighty Heart*, such personal opinions and issues, my own or those of others, are beside the point. My concern, as ever, is with the rhetorical importance of a movie as a social text. And, in my opinion, churches need to take a cue about how deep a commitment it should make, in the name of Christ, to the predicament of the major victims of poverty, sickness and terrorism around the globe.

There's a clear feminist angle here. In the media's presentation, and the public's eyes, Angelina Jolie—in her own right—is a role model for being a successful career woman, a compassionate global influence, and a successful mother. Her participation in *A Mighty Heart*, and Jolie's depiction of the real world Mariane Pearl, depict a worthy way of being a woman in today's world. And incidentally, so does the real story of Mariane Pearl. One might wonder, if given the choice of spending a social dinner evening with either Angelina Jolie or Mariane Pearl, which one we would choose? ■



# Book Reviews

*"Some books are to be tasted, others to be swallowed."* Francis Bacon (d. 1626)

## Finally Feminist: A Pragmatic Christian Understanding of Gender

John G. Stackhouse, Jr., Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005, \$15.

*Reviewed by Susan Wise Bauer, author of The History of the Ancient World.*

**I** was saddened and disappointed in your remarks," one of my readers wrote me, "and I pray that you might reconsider your position in the light of the glory of God." Another reader lamented, "I do have grave concerns with your statements on this issue." A third demanded, "Has God said, or not?"

Just so you know, I haven't come out against the Trinity or the bodily resurrection. I remarked on my blog how much I like John Stackhouse's new book *Finally Feminist*.

This fairly mild pronouncement got highlighted on Gender-News.com, which published a headline story announcing that "many evangelicals may have been blindsided" by my blog entry, and quoted Randy Stinson of the Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood as saying, "She is undermining biblical authority by holding her current position on the gender issue." On the Reformation 21 blog, poster wrote that my approving citation of Stackhouse's book shows that I have taken a position "in knowing contradiction to the teaching of the Bible; at that point the earth begins to give way."

No wonder Stackhouse sounds so weary in the preface: "Aren't we 'done' with gender?" he begins. "Haven't all the relevant issues been raised, all the texts scrutinized, all the alternatives arrayed?" Well, yes. But if my blog post can whip up that much anxiety,

we're obviously not "done" with gender yet.

John Stackhouse, growing up in a church filled with intelligent, godly, articulate women who sat silently in public meetings while men and boys led, turned to Scripture to find out why this was so. His examination of such passages as 1 Timothy 2:11-15 left him puzzled: he found that neither egalitarian or complementarian interpretations managed to "explain all of the clauses . . . with full plausibility" or resolve the tensions he saw between those passages and other parts of Scripture. "I then began to think that this problem was true not only of expositions of this one text but of the whole gender question," he writes. "No one I had read (and I had read quite a few) could put all the relevant texts together into a single finished puzzle with no pieces left over, with none manufactured to fill in gaps, and with none forced into place."

So Stackhouse began his own quest: not to create a perfect arrangement of propositions which would settle the issue once and for all, but to find a paradigm, a pattern in Scripture which would make sense of the puzzling statements that Paul makes about the place of women in the redemptive community.

*Finally Feminist* lays this paradigm out. From Genesis to Revelation, Stackhouse argues, God's overriding purpose in working with his creation is to make the truth of the gospel in Christ clear. To accomplish this, God works within human culture, rather than wiping it out and starting fresh. His acts of redemption are limited by the human context in which they take place. As an example, Stackhouse points to the miracles of the Gospels. Jesus did not heal everyone, or raise everyone from the dead, even though this was well within his capacities.

Rather, he limited his miracles so that they acted as "signs of the inbreaking of the kingdom through him and thus signs of his authority and identity." In the particular time and place of the Incarnation, this served God's sovereign purposes.

Stackhouse then turns to the letters of Paul, to see how they too fit into this paradigm. The church to whom Paul writes lived, as we still do, in the "already but not yet," a time when "God's direct and glorious rule is already and authentically here, through Jesus Christ, but it is not yet fully realized in this world still marred by sin."

As inhabitants of both worlds—the community of redeemed, and the sinful culture that surrounds them—the believers of the New Testament are told to live within the structures of their society. Never mind that those structures were developed by a pagan nation which paid no homage to God, Paul tells them to honor the emperor (even if that emperor happens to be Nero). He tells them to pay taxes and to work with their hands. He tells slaves to be content and not to strive for freedom.

No evangelical could argue with any heat that these straightforward commands reflect God's ultimate plan for his redeemed people. They are given so that the church of God can thrive in hostile surroundings—and so that the spread of the gospel will not be hindered. Would boycotting your taxes hinder the preaching of the Word? Then don't do it. Would escaping from your master increase suspicion among the unsaved that the gospel is merely a cover for rebellion? Then don't escape.

But while the church is striving not to cause unnecessary offense to the unbelievers around it, another dynamic is unfolding, at least within Christian homes and the church:

“kingdom values at work overcoming oppression, eliminating inequality, binding disparate people together in love and mutual respect, and the like.” And this, of course, is central to Stackhouse’s understanding of the “difficult passages” having to do with gender. There is tension between the message of the gospel and the particular commands to the churches. “Paul means just what he says about gender,” Stackhouse writes, “everything he says about gender, not just the favorite passages cited by one side or another. . . . He believes that women should keep silent in church and that they should pray and prophesy. How can they do both? By being silent at the right times, and by praying and prophesying at the right times.”

As the church accommodates itself to avoid unnecessary offense in the “already,” we also catch glimpses of the “not yet”: “exceptions,” as Stackhouse calls them, “that do not make sense unless they are, indeed, blessed hints of what could be and will be eventually in the fully present kingdom of God. We would expect, perhaps, to see exceptional women teaching adult men . . . offering leadership through their social standing and wealth . . . bearing the titles of . . . deacon and apostle.” And so we do: in Pricilla, Lydia, Phoebe, Andronicus, Junia.

What, then, of the church today? In a society that is (at least theoretically) egalitarian, a different kind of offense looms. “The church,” Stackhouse concludes, “Is . . . not rejoicing in the unprecedented freedom to let women and men serve according to gift and call.” Many evangelicals are clinging to patriarchy as God’s perfect plan for his people, rather than recognizing it as a sinful and temporary cultural phenomenon. In this way, Stackhouse suggests, we are doing exactly what Paul was trying to prevent: we are hindering the gospel, driving away unbelievers who might otherwise hear the truth of Christ’s deliverance and be redeemed.

Stackhouse’s paradigm is well-reasoned and based on careful exegesis of Scripture. It is thoroughly orthodox

in its insistence on the inspiration of every part of Scripture. It is likely to be extremely convincing to all whose who are already egalitarians.

Critics of Stackhouse’s approach insist that there is no need for a paradigm, because there are no difficult passages. To insist that these passages are capable of more than one interpretation is to undercut the authority of Scripture. “If you can get egalitarianism from the Bible,” says Ligon Duncan, “you can get anything from the Bible.” If we say that the Bible allows the ordination of women, next we’ll have to admit that the Bible doesn’t bar homosexuals either.

Women and homosexuals: they’re inextricably linked all across the evangelical cosmos. Al Mohler writes that “feminism must necessarily be joined to the homosexual agenda.” As a defense of the Bible, this is very peculiar. If allowing women to be ordained will destroy the authority of Scripture, why doesn’t the slippery slope argument go, “Ordain women, and Christ’s bodily resurrection will be the next thing to go,” or, “Ordain women, and we may have to relinquish our belief in the communion of saints, the forgiveness of the sins, and the life everlasting.”

To those who argue that, in some denominations, the ordination of women has led to the open acceptance of homosexuality, I would agree that this is indeed a real phenomenon. It has occurred because, in those denominations, the church has completely lost sight of the fact that it is supposed to be the gathered people of God, a counterculture which lives apart from the power-structures of the world.

The slippery slope argument has an uglier aspect as well. If gay rights borrowed language from the women’s rights movement, and the women’s rights movement borrowed principles from the civil rights movement, and we are indeed on a slippery slope, shouldn’t we trace the church’s slide into decadence right back to the liberation of African Americans?

Let me be clear: I am not accus-

ing complementarians of being racists. I am criticizing the slippery slope argument itself, not the motivations of those who make it. The theologians who insist that the commands restricting women are obvious and universal—and if you don’t think so, that’s your problem—have to do some fancy footwork if they’re going to assert that the equally “clear” passages on slavery suddenly became no longer applicable sometime in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Stackhouse finds, in the church’s changing attitude toward slavery, a proper model for the church’s changing attitude toward women. He points out that while women and homosexuals are never linked in the restrictive passages of the New Testament, women and slaves are. Women and slaves in the early church, freed in Christ, were nevertheless encouraged to observe cultural norms to keep the gospel from disrepute.

But slaves have been freed from that particular cultural norm—or such is the overwhelming consensus today. “In the case of slavery,” Stackhouse writes, “Christians worldwide have come to agree that the social conservatism of the New Testament was a temporary matter.” This was not an agreement reached without struggle; Stackhouse points out that theologians of the 19<sup>th</sup> century “marshaled powerful, Bible-based arguments” on both sides of the issue. “[A] straightforward interpretation of the passages regarding slavery conveys no obvious condemnation of the institution,” he concludes, “and seems instead to encourage Christians in both roles, master and slave, to stay right where they are and simply behave properly. Yet there is no important Christian leader anywhere in the modern world today who defends slavery.”

Stackhouse argues that the abolition of slavery provides us with a model for the Holy Spirit’s slow, ongoing work in doing away with a sinful, oppressive cultural norm—a change that doesn’t at all undercut the authority of Scripture. Many evangelicals point to thousands of years of



patriarchy as proof that patriarchy is an essential part of God's creation. Yet slavery, which we have now rejected, was as universal as patriarchy, and the Christian church has rightfully rejected it.

Perhaps we could replace the slippery slope with a more biblical metaphor, such as the narrow path. Even if one is fully committed to staying on a narrow path, there may be points at which the exact borders of the path grow a little indistinct. One might even be walking on the verge for quite a while. But the group on the verge and the group in the middle of the path are both heading in the same direction. They can even shout helpful advice to each other, as John Stackhouse does in *Finally Feminist*. On the other hand, if someone's already skidding down a slippery slope, all you can do is yell "Disaster!" and keep others away. ■

*Note: This review first appeared in Books & Culture (www.Christianitytoday.com) and is adapted and reprinted by permission of the publisher*

## Head and Heart: American Christianities

Reviewed by Martin E. Marty,

Chicago, IL

"But is abortion murder?" Garry Wills asks the question in his new book, *Head and Heart: American Christianities*. In this enlightening book—you will hear much about it—Wills explores how the Enlightenment heritage interacts with the Evangelical heritage, which Wills treats evangelically at least until the last chapter, "The Karl Rove Era." This Wills sees as a corruption of both traditions. I had read Wills' manuscript, and couldn't wait to see it in print. I'd say more about its qualities, but must hurry on to how he answers the question posed above. He finds the abortion question important because it is the "wedge issue," the one that evokes absolutist claims that have political effects.

Wills contends, "It is not demon-

strable that killing fetuses is killing persons. Not even the Evangelicals act as if it were. In that case, the woman seeking the abortion . . . is killing her own child." If the fetus is regarded as a person, why would the murderous mother be exempt from the death penalty, in which most Evangelicals believe? And many Evangelicals allow abortion in the case of rape or incest. That won't work: "We do not kill people because they had a criminal parent." Some allow for abortion to save a life. Wills asks, "Why should the mother be preferred over the 'child' if both are, equally, persons?" Why opt for the 'certitude' of murder over only the 'danger of death?'

Wills, himself a Catholic, raises the temperature even higher: "Nor did the Catholic Church treat abortion as murder in the past. If it had, late-term abortions and miscarriages would have called for treatment of the well-formed fetus as a person—calling for baptism and Christian burial." But this was never the case. "And no wonder," says Wills. The subject of abortion is not scriptural, "it is not treated in the Ten Commandments, the Sermon on the Mount, or anywhere in the Jewish Scripture, the New Testament or the creeds and the early ecumenical councils." Augustine? He could never find in Scripture "anything at all certain about the origins of the soul." And the most notable Thomas Aquinas, "lacking scriptural guidance" and using Aristotelian distinctions, "denied that personhood arose at fertilization by the semen. God directly infuses the soul at the completion of human formation."

Wills refutes arguments that abortion is a religious issue, and that anti-abortionists are acting out of religious conviction. No, it is not a theological matter at all: "There is no theological basis for either defending or condemning abortion." Even the popes say it is a "matter of natural law, to be decided by natural reason," and the pope is not an arbiter of natural law. Informed conscience, said super-convert John Henry Newman, has to come first in matters of this sort.

Wills concludes: When anti-abortionists claim to be 'pro-life,' they are inconsistent. Only people like Albert Schweitzer can be called consistently pro-life. "My hair is human life," yet the barber does not preserve it. What matters is not 'human life' but 'the human person.' Sonograms of the fetus reacting do not show a human person: "All living cells have electric and automatic reactions." Don't get Wills wrong: "It is not enough to say that whatever the woman wants should go. She has a responsibility to consider. . . ." But, he asks, do religious or political authorities have the right to take over that responsibility? Take it from there. ■

*This article originally appeared in Sightings (10/08/07), a publication of the Martin Marty Center at the University of Chicago Divinity School.*

## Faith in the Halls of Power: How Evangelicals Joined the American Elite

D. Michael Lindsay, Oxford University Press: 2007, \$25.

Reviewed by Darold Morgan,

Richardson, TX

When one gets into this book, powerful impressions surface quickly! Evangelical Christians in America are now officially a part of the elite in the land. They have become a political force to be reckoned with. Like it or not, they have added to their name a long list of impressive accomplishments. And the movement is obviously controversial! Not only are there persuasive preachers in mega-churches, the movement has major players in corporate offices, the media, academia, and in the highest and most powerful political offices.

Michael Lindsay's book is a major account of how they got to this level. Not so many years back, evangelicals were dismissed as "backwood bigots, or as poor uneducated, easily-led Christians of which America has an abundant supply. Yet since the days

of Jimmy Carter and Ronald Reagan, and particularly since the Clinton and George W. Bush years, these evangelicals have steadfastly moved from that stereotyped environment into stratospheric heights of genuine influence. How they got there, and even more intriguing whether they can stay there, forms the backbone of this book.

One is impressed by the huge amount of research in the writing of this book. The author, a professor at Rice University, interviewed precisely 360 people, most of whom are evangelicals. The list includes former presidents, corporate executives, prominent personalities from the well-known evangelical groups, as well as a number of the mega-church pastors. An appendix lists not only the names of these interviewees, but the format used in the encounter.

Lindsay documents how these now bold and intrepid evangelicals have moved from obscurity to positions of power on the American scene. One has to credit these believers with “a holy mission” as they moved to gain major voices in presidential campaigns and the major educational centers in the land. Early on, they perceived the importance of being heard with their message in entertainment and media centers. Gravitating to corporate offices was accomplished quite quickly.

These were not accidental and spasmodic developments. This was and is a deliberate, calculated, “winner take all,” campaign to bring America back to God. These gifted and committed persons view this as a sacred task, growing out of what they define as an evangelical: “someone who believes (1) that the Bible is the supreme authority for religious belief and practice, (2) and that he or she has a personal relationship with Jesus Christ and that (3) one should take a transforming activist approach to faith” (p 4). The author makes it plain that this movement is far more than “a set of beliefs, it is also a social movement and an all encompassing identity.”

A number of evangelical lead-

ers and their organizations quickly made the twin issues of abortion and homosexuality dominant, almost to the neglect of other major social concerns. One detects a loyalty to the Republican Party, resulting in a two way street of influence—evangelical votes will put certain candidates into office as long as they support these specified policies. And these policies are always defined as Christian family concepts.

One of the most helpful parts of this book are his conclusions about developments which may or may not ultimately weaken this evangelical resurgence. One of them is the narrow and limited programs centered about the already mentioned concerns of abortion and homosexuality. Another is the growing divide between what he calls “the cosmopolitan evangelical” and “the populist evangelical.” The former group consists of corporate, educational, academic leadership. The latter is hazily defined as the local church leadership and membership. It is similar to the historic differences between the laity and the clergy.

Some business leaders have backed away from local church involvement because some pastors have exhibited glaring examples of poor business judgment as well as the sad saga of moral failures.

The cosmopolitan evangelicals are concerned also about the populist position which often decries women in place of leadership. Additionally they are genuinely concerned about the dominance of sexual issues, which often ignore social issues like poverty and the environment. Both groups are still deeply committed to the national goal of a moral resurgence, but the potential of fragmentation is a fact worth noting.

With the 2008 election in the wings, evangelicals are extremely reluctant to relinquish any of their ‘elitism.’ Whether or not they will is not an issue in this volume. What we have is a fair-minded book which compliments the zeal of these evangelicals, but also gently hints that

evangelicals could gain more if there could be more moderation and cooperation.

The evangelical “winner take all” philosophy needs to find some common ground in America’s swirling, complicated, and bruising diversity. ■

## **Noah’s Other Son: Bridging the Gap Between the Bible and the Qur’an**

Brian Arthur Brown, New York:  
Continuum, 2007, \$22.

*Reviewed by Darold Morgan,*

Richardson, TX

**A**lthough the title may sound strange, the sub-title of this well-written book explains that the subject is the Christian Bible and how it relates to the holy book of Islam, the Qur’an.

A gifted Canadian clergyman has almost made a holy quest of how can Christians, Jews, and Islamists come together for some kind of rapport and understanding. The point is quickly and pungently made that a zealously sincere effort in this direction is desperately needed!

The author makes much of the theological and historical fact that half of the world’s population consists of “the children of Abraham.” There are approximately 15 million Jews in the world, over two billion Christians, and over a billion Moslems. Add these numbers and one has one-half of the world’s population. These statistics lead quickly to the conclusion that many of problems facing the world today are rooted in these peoples—world-wide terrorism, war in Iraq, the unsolved issues between Israel and Palestine, Middle East oil supplies controlled by Islamic governments, the immigration of Islamic peoples into European and American cities—these are some of the major challenges facing the world today.

This volume will raise the hackles of each of these monotheistic groups. Jews will be disturbed by the author’s

blunt assessment of some of Israel's policies toward Palestine. Some evangelical Christians will react vigorously against the post-modernism critiques of historical Christianity. Many Moslems will question severely the author's repeated quotations from Salmon Rushdie (the Islamic author whose controversial novel led to an Iranian cleric condemning him with a "fatwa," a death sentence for blasphemy against Mohammed).

One of the most helpful segments of this book is the author's explanation of Rushdie's volume. Out of this comes Rushdie's appeal for a full-orbed critical analysis of the Qur'an, something that has never occurred.

Moving quickly past the negatives, the earnest reader will discover a veritable gold mine of information, particularly from the author's approach to the similarities and differences between the Bible and the Qur'an. This will perhaps astonish Christians and Islamists alike. The structure of the book is "around twenty-five familiar biblical figures whose teachings also appear in the Qur'an" (p14). Much of this information will prove to be fascinating reading for many Christians who perhaps were unaware that the Islamic Holy Book contains major amounts of material which often read like the King James Version of the Bible. Much of the fascination and frustration for Christians will

come when major differences, both historical and theological surface.

Yet throughout this genuinely original book is the author's hope that some common ground for mutual understanding between these hostile groups will coalesce. It is obvious that the author's Canadian United Church has been a leader in this quest and is in some measure a genuine guide to others who sense the compelling demands for a mutual development toward religious compromise. Islamic leaders in Canada have signaled a willingness for dialogue with Jews and Christians. Perhaps this book could serve as a catalyst for similar moves elsewhere.

That the Qur'an is structurally different from the Bible is apparent. Any sense of chronology, an important part of the Bible, is missing in the Islamic Holy Book, and as such it makes comparisons hard. Here is where this author does all a great service. He manages quite effectively to present refreshingly rich and candid presentations about dozens of Bible events and their reinterpretations in the Qur'an. Christians and Jews alike need to know these facts, despite the Islamic contention that their approach is the correct one. How to get to some degree of mutual acceptance and understanding is not a small task!

Christians need to know that Moslems believe in Adam and Eve, the

biblical patriarchs and the Tower of Babel. Above all, Abraham (Ibrahim) is a towering figure in Islamic theology. Hagar and Ishmael are the important characters, not Sarai and Isaac. David, Moses, and all the prophets are part of the Islamic story. Move to the New Testament and Mary, the mother of Jesus, is given honor and status. So is Jesus (Isa) as one of the greatest of the prophets. Christians will be surprised to learn that it is Judas who is crucified, not Jesus of Nazareth. It is information like this that makes this book not only interesting but of exceptional value for dialoguing with Islamic people today. Naturally, this must be a two-way street, but the dialogue is essential in today's world.

The author closes his book by stating: "The purpose of his book has been merely to present again the stories of familiar characters in the Bible who also appear in the Qur'an, as a way to become more familiar with the things these three traditions have in common" (p 232). He succeeds in this goal, adding the peculiar twist that somehow the disaster of Noah's other son who missed the ark (the Qur'an's interesting addition to that story), is an act brought on by youthful rebellion and misunderstanding need not happen in these perilous times. Christian ethicists and Christian apologists must not ignore this book. ■





# Christian Ethics Today

Index to Authors/Subjects Volume 13, Issues 63-67 (2007)

**Note:** A complete index of Issue 1-58 (1995-Winter 2006) is available on a Compact Disc (CD) for a donation of \$25. The Index of Issues 1-31 (1995-2001) is also printed in Issue 31 (December 2000), and an Index of each year's articles from 2001 to the present is found in the December issue of each year 2001 to the present.

- A**  
Allen, Bob: Moratorium on Executions, 67, 16.
- B**  
Baptists: A Political Shift for Southern Baptists?, 65, 18.  
Barnette, Helen: Our Son Defected: A Mother's Plea, 63, 16.  
Barnette, Henlee: Deacons and Deaconesses, 65, 12.  
Bezner, Steve: Capital Punishment: A Pastoral Perspective, 64, 10.  
Bread and Bibles, 64, 9.  
Book Reviews:  
    Cheating Culture (Callahan), 66, 29.  
    Everyman (Roth), 63, 28.  
    Exiled (Kell), 63, 29.  
    Faith and Politics (Danforth), 63, 28.  
    Faith in the Halls of Power (Lindsay), 67, 3.  
    Finally Feminist (Stackhouse), 67, 25.  
    Four Books By Three Atheists (Dawkins, Hitchens, Harris) 65, 28.  
    Head and Heart: American Christianities (Wills), 67, 27.  
    Higher Ground (Dilday), 64, 29.  
    Innocent Man (Grisham), 64, 30.  
    Myth of a Christian Nation (Boyd), 66, 28.  
    Noah's Other Son (Brown), 67, 28.  
    Palestine Peace Not Apartheid (Carter), 64, 28.  
    The Road (McCarthy), 66, 30.  
    Speaking My Mind (Campolo), 64, 29.  
    Who Really Cares? (Brooks), 63, 29.  
    World is Flat (Friedman), 65, 31.  
Brown, Allyson: The Interaction Between Ethics and Moral Behavior, 64, 22.
- C**  
Capital Punishment:  
    Death By Hanging Is Way Too Easy!, 63, 24.  
    Capital Punishment: A Pastoral Perspective, 64, 10.  
    Moratorium on Executions, 67, 16.  
    My History With The Rope, 63, 23.  
Christian Ethics: One Thing Thou Lackest!, 63, 2.  
Christian Zionism: An Oxymoron, 66, 20.  
Christmas:  
    Christmas Magic and Miracle, 67, 3.  
    Just a Simple Nativity—Like the Original, 67, 5.  
Cole, Ben: If We're Rick Warren's Friends, 63, 15.
- D**  
Deacons and Deaconesses, 65, 12.
- E**  
Edwards, Carolyn: A Post-1 Timothy-2 Woman, 65, 20.  
Environment:  
    Old-Fashioned Creation Care, 67, 6.  
    As It Was In the Days of Noah: Global Warming, 67, 7.  
Ethics:  
    Interaction Between Ethics and Moral Behavior, 64, 22.  
    A Theology (and Ethic) for Radical Believers, 65, 14.  
EthixBytes: 63, 3; 64, 4; 65, 2; 66, 3; 67, 4.  
Evangelicals: Evangelicals on the Left?, 64, 15.  
Evans, James L.: A Political Shift for Southern Baptists?, 65, 18.  
Evil: What Is God Doing About Evil?, 64, 16.
- F**  
Fanning, Buckner: Bread and Bibles, 64, 9.  
Financial Report for 2006, 63, 31.  
Flowers, David D.:  
    John Calvin 3:16-21, 64, 24.  
    Romans 13: The Patriotic Version, 65, 8.  
Freedom: The Meaning of Freedom, 63, 5.  
Freeman, Curtis W.: A Theology (and Ethic) for Radical Believers, 65, 14.
- G**  
Gaffney, James: Remembering: Yad Vashem and Ramallah, 66, 13.  
Gideons: Confessions of a Whistle-Blower, 67, 18.  
Government: Romans 13: The Patriotic Version, 65, 8.  
Government and Religious Freedom: On Asking Too Much, 64, 13.  
Griffin, William: A Pious Proposal: The F Word vs. the J Word, 66, 4.  
Gushee, David: Old-Fashioned Creation Care, 67, 6.
- H**  
Hodges, Sam: The Woman Was Right, 64, 21.  
Holloway, Jeph:  
    What Is God Doing About Evil?, 64, 16.  
    What's to Become of Us? The Posthuman Person, 67, 9.  
Hull, William E.: Let Them Grow Together, 64, 5.  
Humphreys, Fisher: Original Sin and Limbo, 65, 23.
- J**  
Jewish and Palestinian Relations: Remembering Yad Vashem and Ramallah, 66, 13.
- K**  
Kahoe, Richard.: Confessions of a Whistle-Blower, 67, 18.
- L**  
Langley, James A.: Blessed Bread, 64, 31.  
Letters From Our Readers: 63, 4.
- M**  
McGathy, Charles P.:  
    As It Was In the Days of Noah, 67, 7.  
    The Day I Knew We Had Lost The War, 66, 6.  
    Jus Post Bellum in Iraq, 66, 6.  
Malotky, Daniel: A Presidential Apology?, 65, 13.  
Marlette, Doug: Requim for a Cartoonist, 66, 22.  
Marty, Martin E.: Torture Then and Now, 67, 20.  
Media:  
    A Pious Proposal: The F Word vs. the J Word, 66, 4.  
    On Journalism and Democracy (Interview Moyers), 66, 10.  
    Tetzel and the TV Evangelists, 67, 15.  
Ministry: Ethics in Ministry: 66, 16.

- Moody, Dwight. Just a Simple Nativity, 67, 5.  
Moorhead, Michael (Book Review): The Road, 66, 30.  
Morgan, Darold H. (Book Reviews):  
    Cheating Culture, 66 28.  
    Faith and Politics, 63, 28.  
    Faith in the Halls of Power, 67, 27.  
    Everyman, 63, 28.  
    Myth of a Christian Nation, 66, 28.  
    Noah's Other Son, 67, 28.  
    Palestine Peace Not Apartheid, 64, 28.  
    Speaking My Mind, 64, 29.
- Movie Reviews: Christian Ethics and the Movies  
Biomedical Ethics: The Constant Gardner, 63, 26.  
Globalism: Babel, 66, 24.  
Good and Evil: Children of Men, 65, 25.  
Human Corruption: The Departed, 66, 24.  
Movies and TV: The Queen, 65, 25.  
Multicultural Reconciliation: Freedom Writers, 66, 24.  
Social Reform: Amazing Grace, 64, 26.  
War: Flags of Our Fathers, 64, 25; Letters From Iwo Jima, 64, 25; No End in Sight, 67, 22; A Mighty Heart, 67, 23.
- Moyers, Bill:  
    Interview with Bill Moyers, 66,10.  
    The Meaning of Freedom, 63, 5.
- P**  
Parham, Robert: Remembering Herb Reynolds, 65, 3.  
Patterson, Burton H.:  
    (Book Review) Higher Ground, 64, 29.  
    Confessions of a (Sinful) Father), 65, 22.  
Poetry:  
    Langley, James A. Blessed Bread, 64 31.  
Staggs, Al:  
    A Train Going the Wrong Way, 66, 31.  
    Rich Folk and the Family of Lazerus, 67, 17.
- Politics:  
    A Presidential Apology?, 65, 13.
- R**  
Recreation: Camping Theology: Panentheistic Meditations, 65, 19.  
Religious Liberty:  
    Americans Ignorant about First Amendment Rights, 67, 21.  
    What God Has Put Asunder, 65, 9.  
Remembering Herb Reynolds, 65, 3.  
Rossell, Tarris D.: Camping Theology, 65, 19.
- S**  
Sapp, David: Ethics in Ministry, 66, 16.  
Scott, John: (Book Reviews):  
    Four Books By Three Atheists, 65, 28.  
    Who Really Cares?—America's Charity Divide, 63, 29.  
Self, William L.: What God Has Put Asunder, 65, 9.  
Sin: Original Sin and Limbo, 65, 23.  
Social Justice: Faith and Social Justice, 66, 2.  
Sports: Winning At Any Cost?, 66, 21.  
Stackhouse, John G.: Evangelicals on the Left?, 64, 15.  
Staggs, Al:  
    Pretending We're Iraqis, 63, 21.  
    Rich Folk and the Family of Lazerus, 67, 17.  
    Train Going the Wrong Way (Poetry), 66, 31.  
Sterling, Scott A. A Christian Warrior's Code?, 63, 13.  
Students: If I Were 21 Again, 65, 4.
- T**  
Tatoos: The Temple and Tatoos, 66, 15.  
Thomas, David A. (Movie Reviews): 63, 26; 64, 25-26; 65, 25; 66, 24; 67, 22.  
Toleration: Let Them Grow Together, 64, 5.  
Towery, Britt:  
    Christian Zionism: An Oxymoron, 66, 20.  
    Tetzel and TV Evangelists, 67, 15.  
Trull, Audra E.: (Book Review) Innocent Man, 64, 30.  
Trull, Joe E.:  
    Cancer Saved Your Life! 64, 3.  
    If I Were 21 Again, 65, 4.  
    One Thing Thou Lackest, 63, 2.  
Trull, Molly: The Temple and Tatoos, 66, 15.
- V**  
Valentine, Foy. Christmas Magic and Miracle, 67, 3.  
Verghese, Abraham: My History With the Rope 63, 23.
- W**  
Wallis, Jim: Faith and Social Justice, 66, 2.  
War:  
    A Christian Warrior's Code, 63, 13.  
    The Day I Knew We Had Lost the War, 66, 6.  
    Jus Post Bellum in Iraq, 66, 6.  
    Our Son Defected: A Mother's Plea, 63,16.  
    Pretending We're Iraqis, 63, 21.  
    Torture Then and Now, 67, 20.  
Warren, Rick: If We're Rick Warren's Friends 63, 15.  
We've Got Mail: Letters From Our Readers, 63, 4.  
Wilkey, Don: Winning At Any Cost?, 66, 21.  
Women:  
    Confessions of a (Sinful) Father, 65, 22.  
    Junia (Rom. 16:7), 64, 21.  
    A Post 1 Timothy-2 Woman, 65, 20.
- Y**  
York, Tripp:  
    Death By Hanging Is Way Too Easy! 63, 24.  
    On Asking Too Much, 64, 13.
- \*Denotes an article in this issue of the Journal.**

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