

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

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How Far We Have Not Come!

By Joe E. Trull, Editor

While I was teaching Christian ethics at New Orleans Baptist Seminary, one of my best students shared an unusual story in class. I recently talked with him and learned the issue he related has continued—in fact, it is worse today than when he first shared the event several years ago, which is why he requested anonymity although he wanted me to publish the story.

Although born in New Orleans and raised in Mobile, Alabama, the student's first and last name is very Arabic, given to him by his Palestinian father, who came to the U. S. to attend college and seminary and here married his mother, a native Alabamian.

To our class the student recalled this story.

Just a few months after arriving on the campus of the seminary in New Orleans to begin his Master of Divinity study he received an unusual phone call. The call was in response to his resume left with the Church Relations Office, which aids students in finding part-time church work while attending seminary.

The caller, obviously a Southerner (from Mississippi as it turned out) was calling on behalf of his church, which was looking for a student pastor. His first question to the seminary student was to ask if he spoke English, and if so, did he have a heavy accent? After introducing himself over the phone, the divinity student jokingly answered, "Well, how do I sound?"

The church caller laughed and

replied, "You speak with a southern accent!"

The young seminarian listened as the caller explained his inquiry. At first, the pastor search committee of his church eliminated him from consideration due to the fact, as he put it, "Your name just didn't seem like the name we wanted on our sign out in front of our church."

"Why not?" the student asked?

The church leader replied with absolutely no hint of embarrassment, "We don't think your name would draw the right kind of people."

The student then asked a very perceptive question: "And what kind of people would that be?"

The caller answered, "Well, I'm sure you understand what I mean."

After a pause, the seminary freshman tried to be redemptive. "I think I understand. However, since I obviously will not be allowed to preach for you, may I ask if your search committee will need someone to preach for them in the next few weeks?"

"Yes, we will," responded the caller. "Do you have someone in mind you could recommend to us?"

"Oh yes," replied the young divinity student. "I have a friend who just arrived off a boat from Israel. He is a former carpenter by trade and says he was called to preach. Perhaps he could give your church a missions talk. He is a very interesting fellow—claims to be

from Nazareth. Would you be interested?"

"What's his name," asked the church caller?

"His name is Yeshua-ha-Meshiah," responded the student. "Will that be a problem?"

Hiding the full truth, the Mississippi layman replied: "Yes, I'm afraid so. His name just wouldn't work for the folks who live out here. They wouldn't want to listen to someone with that hard a name to pronounce."

"I see," said the Alabama-born seminarian. "Perhaps you should know that his name translated into English is *Jesus the Messiah*.' So if you won't have our Savior in your church, and you won't have me, then I guess I am in good company. Good day sir!"

At that point, the student hung up the phone. He was angry. He was hurt. He was deeply disappointed. Yet, above all of his feelings came the thought, "How far we have not come!"

My recent conversation with my former student verified that, although we have come a long way during the past decades, racial pride and prejudice are still with us. In fact, to have a middle-eastern name or dress in middle-eastern attire will immediately raise questions in the minds of many Americans.

Yes, my student was right. How far we have not come! ■

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EthixBytes

A Collection of Quotes Comments, Statistics, and News Items

“My country right or wrong’ is a thing that no patriot would think of saying except in a desperate case. It’s like saying, ‘My mother, drunk or sober.’”

G. K. Chesterton.

“Better to be ruled by a wise Turk than a foolish Christian.”

Martin Luther.

“[I saw myself as] the captain of a warship leading God’s troops into battle. Instead I found my flock wanted me to captain the Love Boat, making sure everyone was having a good time.”

Presidential candidate Mike Huckabee, explaining his frustrations in the ministry (Newsweek, 12/17/07).

“How have we provoked al-Qaeda? We now have 700 military bases in 130 countries!”

Presidential candidate Ron Paul on Meet the Press (12/23/07).

“My faith teaches me that I can sit in church and pray all I want, but I won’t be fulfilling God’s will unless I go out and do the Lord’s work.”

Sen. Barack Obama, addressing the General Synod of his denomination, the United Church of Christ.

“Many U.S. Christians seemed to listen more to a version of American nationalism than they did to the global Body of Christ. We must decide: To whom do we belong?”

Jim Wallis on the issue of Iraq (Sojourners, 1/08).

“While the oil companies are turning the American consumer upside down at the pump, the White House is defending unnecessary giveaways and tax breaks to big oil.”

Rep. Edward Markey (D-Mass),

Ch. Of House Select Committee on Energy Independence in response to Exxon Mobil’s \$40,610,000,000 profit in 2007.

“Oil companies are now celebrating in their boardrooms. They continue to have a death grip on this Senate.”

Sen. Richard Durbin (D-Ill), as a veto threat defeated an attempt to revoke \$12 billion in tax breaks to the wealthiest corporations (Dallas Morning News, 12/14/07).

“I will give \$1 million to any C.E.O. who pays more income taxes than his secretary. I know I don’t.”

Multimillionaire **Warren Buffet,** criticizing the present tax system that favors the rich.

“It is pitiful that Mexico—a country of 108 million people that shares a 2000 mile border with the U.S.—has the same cap as Botswana, an African country of 1.8 million.”

Douglas Massey, sociology professor at Princeton University, noting in 2006 the U. S. issued only 418 permanent immigrant visas to low-skilled Mexican workers.

“While the media persist in using the word casualty as if it meant ‘death,’ my dictionary defines casualty as ‘a member of the armed forces who is killed or injured during combat.’ By that definition, the American casualties in this war on terror are not 4,000 but over 27,000 and climbing.”

Barbara Brown Taylor in Christian Century (7/24/07).

“About 151,000 Iraqis died from violence in the three years after the U.S. invaded, concludes the best effort yet to count deaths.”

World Health Organization pro-

jection based on door-to-door surveys of 10,000 households (New England Journal of Medicine, 1/08).

“We are not preaching any type of civil disobedience, we’re simply saying if someone comes to us and they’re in need of food [or] a doctor, we’re not going to take the time to look for a green card, we’re going to minister and show them Christ’s love.”

Rev. Robert Wilson, explaining a resolution passed by Oklahoma Baptists to continue working with illegal immigrants despite a new state law that makes it illegal to aid them.

“[MANY CHRISTIANS] demand that the Ten Commandments be posted in public buildings. . . . I haven’t heard one of them demand that the Sermon on the Mount, the Beatitudes, be posted anywhere. ‘Blessed are the merciful’ in a courtroom? ‘Blessed are the peacemakers’ in the Pentagon?”

Kurt Vonnegut, In These Times.

“The decision to block California’s vehicle emissions standards is a new low in the federal government’s ongoing efforts to torpedo environmental regulations. The Bush administration’s disdain for pollution limits is well documented. Sixteen other states were poised to follow California’s lead.”

Editorial in the Dallas Morning News (12/30/07).

“We should desire health not in order to be healthy, but in order to live as fully as possible.”

Gilbert Meilaender (Christian Century, 10/16/07) ■

A Bronze Star for Brenda

By Randall O'Brien, Exec. V.P. and Provost, Baylor University

Heroes, civil rights heroes and heroines, number in the hundreds, or even thousands, from the 1960s alone. Immortalized in the pages of American history many of our country's bravest soldiers earned their medals of valor on battlefields of strange name: lunch counters, bus stations, courthouses, and jails. Purple Hearts rained upon chained chests in darkened forests where Satan's army tortured God's children of color. There hooded hoodlums and klansmen cops dispensed pain to prophets, wounds to warriors, evil to any who courageously worked for racial equality.

Jesus was a Negro in the 60s and anti-Christ Christians and other hate-filled infidels killed him—again. And again, and again and—again.

Was not that a crucifixion on the balcony of the Lorraine Hotel in Memphis in 1968? Did not Chaney, Schwerner, and Goodman precede Dr. King on Golgotha in Philadelphia, Mississippi in 1964? Was not Medgar Evers nailed at Calvary by a bullet to the back in Jackson in 1963?

All of these are heroes, fallen heroes, national heroes, and heroes of mine. There are thousands more. One, a young Black girl, from McComb, Mississippi, stands out.

On Saturday, August 26, 1961, Mississippians Hollis Watkins and Curtis (Elmer) Hayes, both African-American, sat down at a "Whites Only" lunch counter in my hometown of McComb, becoming the first persons in the state to take direct action against segregation in a "sit-in." For their revolutionary bravery they were promptly arrested and jailed for 30 days, charged with breach of peace.

Four days later on Wednesday, August 30, 1961, Robert Talbert, Isaac (Ike) Lewis, and 15-year-old Brenda Travis "sat-in" at the segregated Greyhound bus station in McComb. They, too, were arrested immediately

and incarcerated 28 days in the county jail.

When Ike and Brenda were expelled from Burgland High (McComb's segregated high school for Blacks), and refused readmission they were, in effect, handed lifetime sentences of punishing poverty. Within a month or so other African-American students would also be permanently expelled. Southern Negroes with high school educations could hardly expect, as a rule, to earn a fair, living wage. But to be denied the opportunity to earn even a high school diploma represented cruel and unusual punishment, or a sentence of extreme poverty for life.

On October 4, 1961, approximately 120 of Brenda's and Ike's protesting classmates, led by young Brenda, marched from Burgland High School through town, to the steps of City Hall while singing, "We Shall Overcome." One-by-one the students ascended the steps of City Hall to kneel and pray. There they were beaten and kicked by cops and other fine citizens, then arrested.

Brenda related years later, "I believe I was predestined to become an activist. I joined the NAACP and became involved in the movement to get people to vote. But they were afraid."

Jailed again, this time for her role in the McComb march, Brenda and the other students sang and prayed through the night. After several days, "They took me out of jail," Brenda related. "Said, 'We're taking you to Jackson to see your attorney.' After a long drive they pulled the car up to the gates of the Reform School in Oakley. My family, nobody knew where I was. My mother was never allowed to visit me the whole time. My family suffered."

Though sentenced to a year in Reformatory School, the young teenager was released before completing her full term under one condition

established by the Governor: she must leave the state within 24 hours of her release!

After 45 years of exile, Brenda returned to Mississippi, June 21, 2006, for the 45th anniversary of the 1961 direct action against segregation in Mississippi. Determined, I got in my automobile, pulled out of my driveway, and drove 10 hours from my home in Texas to meet her in McComb. I had something to give her; I had something to say to her.

Following two days of recognitions, speeches, awards ceremonies, a moving graduation exercise nearly a half-century too late for the expelled seniors of Burgland High, class of '62, and a final stirring address to a full house at Burgland High by Brenda Travis the right moment arrived for me to approach Brenda. My heart raced.

"Brenda," I began, "I'm Randall O'Brien. I am a minister and Executive Vice President and Provost of Baylor University. I grew up in McComb." "Oh, I'm very glad to meet you." "No, the honor is all mine. You are a hero of mine. I was 12-years-old when you sat-in at the bus station and marched on City Hall. You were 15. Those remain, for me, two of the greatest acts of bravery in my lifetime."

"How very kind of you. Thank you, Randall." "Brenda, what happened to you was one of the darkest travesties of justice in American history. I am ashamed; I am embarrassed; I am angry. I am also changed by you, by your life, your courage, your cries for justice. As you know," I continued, "our lives always travel down paths of continuation or compensation, one or the other, in the area of racial injustice. Your witness, and the courageous work of your sisters and brothers has been a huge influence upon my life. I've tried to live my life to help compensate for all the wrong done to African-

Americans. How can I say, 'thank you,' Brenda, for who you are and for who you've helped me to become?"

Brenda tried to speak, but couldn't. Her eyes filled with tears. We embraced. Slipping my right hand into my pants pocket, I clutched the surprise I had for her, pulled the gift out, and placed it in Brenda's hand.

Pulling back, looking into her eyes while still holding her hand, I whispered, "A few years after your civil rights battles for our country, I fought for our country on a different battlefield—in Vietnam. Sometimes in an imperfect world a person might need to fight for his country. But *no one*—no one—should ever have to fight her country!"

Nodding humbly in silent agreement, her brown eyes floating in tears, Brenda stood still. "For my service in Vietnam I was awarded the Bronze Star," I said. "For your gallantry, Brenda, you were awarded Reform School, and cruel exile from your family and home state. You were so many times more heroic than I ever was! I want you to have my Bronze Star, Brenda, for your heroism. You already have my heart and my admiration."

Plunging us into tearful embrace again, Brenda whispered to me through her sobs, "I don't know what to say." "You don't have to say anything," I said. "I thought about saving my medals for my children," I confessed, "maybe giving my bronze star to my son, so my children would have something to remember me by. Then I thought, No, this is how I want to be remembered: Brenda Travis gave her youth for civil rights for all Americans; daddy gave his Bronze Star to Brenda Travis." ■

The Scandal of Love

William E. Hull, Research Professor, Samford University Birmingham, AL

If the prophecy of Hosea were to be classified by the mass media for public consumption today, it might well be X-rated, "reader discretion advised," for it tells the sordid story of a preacher whose wife went astray. Such scandalous moral lapses are not unknown in our time, but the most surprising feature of this shocking escapade is that God was its instigator from start to finish. He played the matchmaker in prompting Hosea to marry Gomer, then to send her away when she played the harlot, then to take her back again when she had lost the last vestige of decency. Is that any way for a prophet to be acting, much less for his God to be telling him to act? Why, we wonder, did such a tawdry tale ever find its way into the Bible?

The answer to that question is not long in coming. Inserted between the beginning of the story in chapter 1 and its ending in chapter 3 is an oracle applying Hosea's domestic tragedy to the relationship between God and his chosen people (Hos. 2:2-23). The prophet's obedience to divine promptings provided the catalyst for his revolutionary discovery of the deepest passion of God's own heart. Hosea soon realized that he was being called to proclaim a truth so scandalous that it could not be grasped in words until it had first been acted out in deeds. Until the people saw the radical nature of God's love embodied in the experience of the prophet, they would not be able to fathom its meaning for themselves. So let us revisit the story as a drama in three acts, seeking to learn what its provocative plot tells us about a sovereign love that has no limits.

Act I: Love Hopes

Hosea and Gomer were a study in contrasts. He was an inflexible moralist, wholeheartedly embracing the stern preachment of the prophet Amos with its message of doom and gloom for Israel. The failure of the people to

honor the righteousness of God, particularly in their lusting after the corrupt religions of Canaan, would lead to swift and certain judgment, punishment, and rejection. Gomer, on the other hand, was a good time girl, the life of the party, quick to share her favors with friends old and new. We would call her a tease, a flirt, even a cheat, for there was a hint of harlotry in her frivolous spirit. In lifestyle, she was everything that Hosea abhorred, which explains the chagrin he must have felt when the Lord commanded him to take her as his wife (Hos. 1:2). To be sure, it would shock the entire community, but it shocked him most of all.

So why did Hosea agree to obey the divine imperative? Clearly this woman needed the ethical earnestness that he had to offer. True, her reputation was a bit tarnished, but his puritanism would eventually reform her promiscuousness. After all, they would be pledging sacred vows to each other that she had never made before. Living with him on a daily basis would be enough to overcome her occasional dalliances in the marketplace. And why did Gomer agree to accept his strange proposal? Already she was beginning to realize that passions quickly squandered are just as quickly forgotten. What would she do when her charms hardened with age and a nubile competitor showed up to claim her territory? Life with Hosea would be confining, even boring at best, but at least he offered her security and the chance to rehabilitate her reputation, which was more than she was getting from the men who tickled her fancy on Friday nights. Perhaps the odd couple could complement each other and maybe—just maybe—learn to love each other.

Make no mistake, this was a marriage with nothing going for it except a handful of risky possibilities. Centuries later the Apostle Paul would pen the

core insight struggling to find expression here: “love . . . hopes all things” (1 Cor. 13:7). Hosea married Gomer in the hope that their union would impart to her the integrity and character that she lacked. The more his own experience forced him to think about it, the more he came to realize that God’s relationship with his people had begun in exactly the same way (Hos. 11:1-4). Israel was loved before the people were ready to realize it. The Lord had led them out of slavery in Egypt and taught them to stand on their feet and walk despite their continued infatuation with the idolatrous practices of their former masters. Just as Hosea vowed fidelity to Gomer in an effort to help her mature, so God entered into covenant with his people to make them strong. He knew all the weaknesses of their long bondage in the past but, because he loved them, he hoped to give them a better future.

As the curtain falls on Act I of our drama, we have learned for the first time in Scripture that God is a passionate lover with high hopes for his children. The marriage of Hosea to Gomer not only enabled him to give tangible expression to this truth for his time, but also to anticipate the very essence of the ministry of Jesus who, in everything he said and did, was proclaiming “God believes in you because he loves you!” That is why his followers set off an explosion of hope in a jaded and cynical world. You can see it in the way that the early church dared to make incredible claims for the misfits and rejects of the Roman Empire. It says to us that true religion is not so much a code to be obeyed or a ritual to be performed as it is a rela-

tionship to be embraced. Why do we want the best for those whom we love regardless of their failings? Because we are made in the image of God who wants the same for us.

Act II: Love Hurts

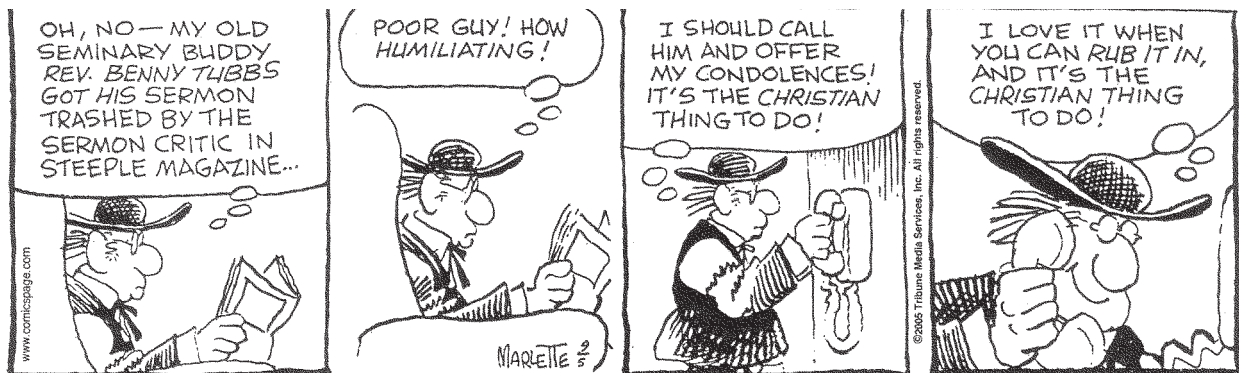
If ever there was a marriage made in heaven it was that of Hosea to Gomer. Once God said, “Go, take for yourself” a risqué wife, “so he went and took Gomer” (Hos. 1:2-3). There was no dating, courtship, or engagement to encourage romance, only a divine command to be obeyed without delay. Indeed, their domestic arrangement became little more than an extension of his prophetic ministry. Immediately he set about having children to whom he gave Hebrew names that sounded like the titles of his judgmental sermons. The first, a son, was named *Jezreel*, referring to a battlefield where God would soon punish his people by putting an end to their nation (Hos. 1:4-5). The second child, a daughter, was named *Lo-ruhamah*, meaning “not pitied,” because God would no longer have pity on the Israelites to forgive them (Hos. 1:6). The third child, another son, was named *Lo-ammi*, or “not my people,” for they could no longer claim the Lord as their God (Hos. 1:8-9).

Let us concede that Hosea may have overdone it a bit in using his infant children to curse the society into which they had been born. Imagine them having to explain such names for the rest of their lives! Notice how each was more severe than the one before: the first said that the people would be punished by defeat in battle, the second that they would no longer be forgiven for their follies, the third that

they had been completely disowned by God. This may suggest that, in the early months of his marriage, Hosea was becoming ever more morose as his message failed to receive a favorable hearing. We can almost hear him gritting his teeth as he named the children, muttering to himself, “Maybe this will get their attention!” People sometimes express their underlying values in the way that they name their children, but Hosea was doing it with a vengeance! It was not easy for him to keep a light touch when living in desperate times.

And what about Gomer: how was she adjusting to life with a gloomy prophet? Our account is silent, but it is not hard to read between the lines. From the outset she was saddled with three babies in swift succession. As soon as one was weaned, another was on the way (Hos. 1:8). No time for the fun-and-games she had enjoyed before marriage. Hosea was gone a lot trying to get his message out across the northern kingdom before it was too late, leaving most of the household chores for her to do. When he was there, he brooded about the fate of the nation whereas Gomer was more interested in finding a little happiness within their family circle. To be sure, she wanted her reputation upgraded from what it had been, but she was not trying to become a saint overnight! This subtle clash of temperament made her wonder if she really was cut out to be a prophet’s wife. The constant pressure to live a cut above the crowd, to prove every day that now she was different, began to wear upon her spirit, but Hosea was unrelenting in his expectations.

We do not know how long it was



before the hair-line cracks in their relationship became an open break. Perhaps it was on one of his longer trips away from home that she went back for the first time to the marketplace at night. In any case, once the rupture came it was swift and complete. Hosea was broken and embittered, made worse by that “I-told-you-so” look in the sidelong glances of his neighbors. Gomer’s fall, if anything, seemed to confirm his message of judgment (Hos. 11:5-7). He had kept every promise, but she had played fast and loose with her vows and it had led her into lasciviousness. No longer the young beauty of earlier years, now she could market her charms only as the village tramp. She had laughed in the face of decency; now she would cry on the pillow of remorse. She had sown the wind, now she would reap the whirlwind (Hos. 8:7).

If anything, however, Hosea’s sense of shame was greater than hers. For in that ancient patriarchal culture the male was responsible to protect, defend, and insure the virtue of the female, whether it be his wife, unmarried daughter, or widowed mother. So serious was the maintenance of chastity that adultery was a capital offense. Since a husband’s honor depended upon his wife’s fidelity, for Gomer to become promiscuous meant public humiliation for Hosea.¹ But underneath the disgust and disgrace of it all lay a new kind of loneliness, a sense of forsakenness that he could never have known until he gave his heart to her in hope. Indeed, it was precisely because of those dashed hopes that he hurt as never before. And as he pondered that pain he had to ask himself: “Did God get me into all of this because he wanted me to feel his own forsakenness? Is there a hurt like mine deep within his own heart?”

In searching for an answer, Hosea came to realize that sin at its deepest level is an alienation of the affections, a violation of sacred vows, a harlotry of the heart. Jesus carried forward this insight by referring to his fickle contemporaries as an “adulterous and sinful generation” (Mk. 8:38). And if

infidelity lay at the root of the problem, it could be overcome only by the achievement of true intimacy. Hosea’s chief complaint against the people had been that they did not know God (Hos. 5:4). But the Hebrew language of that day also used the verb “know” to signify the conjugal relationship in which two lovers seek to bond with each other at the deepest level of their being. In the abyss of his abandonment, a stern prophet was learning that God does not want just to be feared and obeyed but that he also wants to be loved with all of the passion and tenderness and sympathy of marital love (Hos. 2:20).²

Now Hosea understood the high risk involved in a religion of love. He had failed to keep Gomer’s love just as God had failed to keep Israel’s love, for love, by its very nature, can be neither coerced nor controlled. To love anyone is to be vulnerable to heartbreak, for spurned love is the cruelest cut of all. That is why the love that “hopes all things” also “endures all things” (1 Cor. 13:7). It is here that we come to the cross in the heart of Hosea long before it cast a shadow over the Savior at Calvary.³ So have we reached an impasse that our story is powerless to resolve? Is every hope that love awakens cancelled by a hurt that love inflicts? Is the human heart just too fickle to be mastered even by the love of God? Where would Hosea take his heartbreak? Back to the old message of defeat, punishment, and rejection summarized by his children’s names, or forward to a new unimaginable breakthrough that might change his message and prepare for the gospel of Jesus?

Act III: Love Helps

Gethsemane is the agony of struggling with impossible options. For Jesus it was the intolerable choice of escaping disaster by compromising his message versus the equally intolerable choice of being crucified as a common criminal. For Hosea it was the unthinkable alternative of having anything further to do with the disgraced Gomer versus the equally unthinkable alternative of living the rest of his life with the

crushing pain of a broken heart. The prophet had reached an impasse in his understanding of love. At first he had learned how much it could hope, but now he knew how much it could hurt. These two warring emotions of desire for the best and despair over the worst seemed to cancel out each other, leaving only bitter ashes in their place. He had risked everything on the power of righteous love to reform Gomer’s wayward heart, but that strategy seemed to have failed him. God had gotten him into a mess from which he could not extricate himself!

Clearly, therefore, the next move was up to God and, when it came, Hosea could not believe his ears. Hard as it had been to marry Gomer, and even harder to give her up as a failure, what God now proposed would be hardest of all to do: “Go give your love back to the woman who betrayed you despite the fact that she is now an adulteress, the paramour of her latest boyfriend” (Hos. 3:1). The arguments against such a reckless reclamation project were compelling indeed. Hosea had already done everything he could for Gomer, having kept every promise and honored every vow. Why would yet another effort be any more likely to succeed? Gomer had become such an object of contempt in the community that any association with her would certainly discredit Hosea’s message of righteous judgment and might well wreck his entire prophetic ministry. Up to this point the children seem to have taken their father’s side, but to bring that hussy back into the house could cause them to leave. Obviously it was foolish even to consider such a possibility.

So why did Hosea agree to do it? Because he realized that it would dramatize the deepest truth about divine love, namely, that God never gives up on his beloved no matter how faithless they become. Now Hosea’s challenge was to learn to love Gomer in the same way that God loved Israel. His well-known domestic tragedy would enable him to incarnate the kind of love that forgives without limit. At the moment, the people were infatuated with false

gods whose worship offered them the immediate gratification of supposedly sacred raisin cakes (Hos. 3:1). But as Hosea thought back over the centuries to the beginning of the covenant in the wilderness, he could not count the number of times that the chosen people had been seduced by superficial religions offering such momentary pleasures as temple prostitution. In light of their recurring relapses, what chance would Israel ever have of keeping the covenant unless God provided them with an endless number of fresh starts?

Trying to answer that question brought Hosea to the sticking point in the whole proposition: “go love her again . . .” (Hos. 3:1).⁴ We all know from the testimony of divorcees that shattered marriages are almost impossible to mend. Once love is spurned it usually dies or turns into hatred. When the prophet cried out, “It is not human nature to love like that!” God replied, “I am not asking you to love like humans do but like I do—and I am different from you” (Hos. 11:8-9). Just as Israel had been given many a second chance, so God was asking Hosea to give Gomer another chance, to not let their failure become final (Hos. 2:14-15). As Jesus would later explain to Peter, forgive again and again, so many times that you can’t keep track of the number (Mt. 18:21-22). In a word, Hosea was being told to love her with an *everlasting* love. As Frederick Buechner put it, “God is love . . . and there’s no end to it.”⁵

Does this mean that God was setting up Hosea for an endless succession of heartbreaks? If so, it would be no worse than God himself had endured for centuries. But the implementation of this reconciliation involved a number of remedial strategies designed to minimize that possibility. Unlike the first time, when Hosea was told to “take” Gomer as his wife (Hos. 1:2-3), this time he was bidden to “love” her as the Lord loves Israel (Hos. 3:1). This would be a costly love that required him to purchase her out of servitude (Hos. 3:2). To secure her as his “wife forever,” he would need not

only to free her from the claims of others but to also give her a spiritual dowry made up of righteousness, justice, steadfast love, and mercy (Hos. 2:19).⁶ She, in turn, to prove her good faith, would be sequestered for a season, overcoming her addiction to promiscuity by total abstinence from all sexual activity, even with him as her husband (Hos. 3:1). Together they would break the vicious cycle of proving her self worth by dispensing cheap intimacies to others.

This austere regimen was what we today would call “tough love.” Why was such a strategy not followed during Hosea’s first marriage to Gomer when she obviously needed greater discipline? Back then, he expected her to measure up just because of the terrible consequences if she failed to do so. He had not yet had his heart broken or realized that God would want him to love again the one who broke it. At first he experienced a love that hoped, then a love that hurt, but now, precisely because she was back again in worse shape than ever before, he needed a love that helped. If he could never quit loving her, he would have to do everything possible to help her become more lovable. If we were labeling this journey we might say that Act I describes the *optimism* of love, Act II the *pessimism* of love, and Act III the *realism* of love.

As the curtain falls on our drama, we in the audience are left with the question of how we shall love. There are three options offered by its three actors.

We can love like Hosea, expecting it to be requited in full measure or, failing that, to be withdrawn. The problem here is that we humans are so self-centered that we often fail to reciprocate the love we receive even from parents and spouse, plunging us into loneliness and bitterness when others treat us the same.

Or we can love like Gomer, expecting nothing in return but the pleasures of the moment. The problem here is that we end up frittering away our heart until it finally belongs to no one.

Or we can love like God, expecting covenant fidelity from the beloved but freely forgiving when it is not forthcoming as the basis for a fresh start. The problem here is that human nature has too much pride to practice such radical grace. But we can overcome that pride if, like Hosea, we realize that we are already loved by the Lord of the universe just like that! ■

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- 1 Gale A. Yee, “The Book of Hosea,” *The New Interpreter’s Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996), 7:206-9.
 - 2 Abraham J. Heschel, *The Prophets* (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), 57-60.
 - 3 H. Wheeler Robinson, *The Cross of Hosea*, ed. Ernest A. Payne (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1949).
 - 4 John Mauchline, “The Book of Hosea: Introduction and Exegesis,” *The Interpreter’s Bible* (New York: Abingdon, 1956), 6:594-5.
 - 5 Frederick Buechner, *Peculiar Treasures: A Biblical Who’s Who* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1979), 44.
 - 6 Norman Snaith, *Mercy and Sacrifice: A Study of the Book of Hosea* (London: SCM, 1953), 70-87.

Can Good Muslims Be Good Americans?

By Jim Shoopman, Instructor in Comparative Religions and Ethics Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University

Because I am a former pastor who teaches a world religions course, my former church members frequently send emails and articles that they suspect might be of interest to me. The most disturbing trend I've seen among such emails, in the wake of 9/11, has been the explosion of virulent anti-Muslim hatred circulating as Christian sentiment within and beyond the Christian community. Middle Eastern Muslims have been demonized in western culture since the time of the crusades, but reaction to the horrible events of 9/11 truly brought hatred of the Arab to a new level, and people began to broadly circulate statements that were not merely anti-Arabic, but more specifically anti-Muslim.

The most recent email that got my attention because of its pretension to rational discourse and scholarship was a tirade that insists good Muslims, by nature, cannot be good Americans. It ended with the ominous words, "Therefore, after much study and deliberation . . . perhaps we should be very suspicious of ALL MUSLIMS in this country. They obviously cannot be both 'good' Muslims and good Americans."

The basic question, "Can good Muslims be good Americans?" is worth addressing in this current atmosphere of doubt and suspicion. Adding further reason to explore the question are the results of a recent poll conducted by the Pew Research Center, which revealed that "While nearly 80% of U.S. Muslims say suicide bombings of civilians to defend Islam cannot be justified, 13% say they can be, at least rarely." More disturbing, "One in four younger U.S. Muslims said . . . that suicide bombings to defend their religion are acceptable, at least in some circumstances, though most Muslim Americans reject the tactic and are critical of Islamic extremism and Al-Qaeda."¹

Those are certainly disquieting numbers, and those who have already made up their mind that suspicion of all Muslims is warranted will no doubt make much of this information, but such anti-Muslim thinkers may very well have created this situation themselves. I suspect the number of American Muslims who would entertain religious violence would not have been anywhere near so high before 9/11. Muslim Americans have been far more frequent targets of harassment and bullying since that event. According to the FBI, the federal government successfully prosecuted 28 anti-Muslim hate crimes in the year 2000. In the year 2005 (the latest date for which the stats are presently available) the government prosecuted 128 anti-Muslim hate crimes.² This is more than a 300% increase in reported anti-Muslim incidents that reach the attention of the federal government. It doesn't reflect but may be indicative of many more incidents that likely go on among young people in schools and recreational centers around the country. Such open hostility and suspicion would naturally lead many young Muslims to conclude that serious efforts at self defense might well be warranted if anti-Muslim sentiment in America ever got worse. Anti-Muslim tirades, harassment, and yes, hateful emails, could well create the very thing we fear most, in response to our growing prejudices.

So, it would be both wise and useful for Christian preachers and teachers to work toward a more gracious attitude. We can start by more fully appreciating the vast majority of American Muslims who would never in their wildest dreams entertain anything like suicide bombings or religious violence of any sort.³ Sadly their large numbers will rarely be emphasized or appreciated. According to *The Atlas of Religion*, there are over 5.2 million Muslims in

the United States.⁴ Other sources estimate lower—under 3 million. By all accounts they have been peaceful and productive neighbors. It is with that in mind that I argue the thesis that indeed, most good Muslims already are good Americans.

The issue is more important to the ethical treatment of Muslims than one might think. After the early nineteenth century revolutions for liberty in Europe, similar questions were raised about Jews. When progressives fought to grant full citizenship to Jews, conservatives argued that they couldn't possibly be good Jews and at the same time be good Frenchmen, Germans, Poles, Swedes, etc.⁵ In those nations where gentiles were able to imagine Jews assimilating into the mainstream of national citizenship, ethical behavior pretty much prevailed, and in nations where people still had a hard time imagining Jews as fellow countrymen, terrible evils followed in the twentieth century. In a recent article, a Baptist chaplain urges us to "consider a Gallup poll that was taken in the summer of 2006 that found that thirty-nine percent of Americans surveyed favored requiring Muslims in the United States, even those who were American citizens, to carry special identification. . . . Most of these thirty-nine percent would be appalled if one compared their attitude toward Muslims to the anti-Semitism prevalent in Nazi Germany before and during the Holocaust."⁶ So, perhaps the first step in the ethical treatment of Muslims is to begin by understanding that they can be good Americans after all.

The first step in proving this thesis would be to define what we mean, or what we ought to mean, by a "good American." I suspect most people today, conservative and liberal, would define a good American as a citizen who respects and obeys the laws, and

who participates, at least by voting, in the political process of this nation. A good American might further be defined as a person who appreciates the process of democracy as practiced here—a person who appreciates his own freedom and is willing to defend the freedoms of others, through political, social, or military service.

Therefore, can a “good” Muslim faithfully do that?

What Is A Good Muslim?

What then do we mean by a “good” Muslim? In the virulent email explaining why good Muslims can’t be good Americans, the (naturally) anonymous writer arrived at negative conclusions about Islam by deferring to the experience of “a friend who worked in Saudi Arabia for twenty years.” This anecdotal evidence sounds authoritative. However, the writer does not take into account the enormous variety within Islam. Saudi Arabia is not necessarily representative of Islam elsewhere. People who’ve learned all they know about Islam through a study of the Saudi form sometimes assume that the beliefs of strict Wahabi Muslims in Saudi Arabia are normative everywhere, hence they conclude that all Muslims will prosecute those who convert from Islam to any other religion, cut off the hands of thieves, and seek to control the rank and file through a secret religious police force that spies on the behavior of the populace. But this does not even begin to describe the values of all Muslims in Saudi Arabia, much less Muslims in Turkey, Nigeria, the United Arab Emirates, or Muslim behavior in the United States.

Another related problem is that Americans sometimes assume Muslims in this country are under the religious control of anti-American clerics in other parts of the globe. Certainly there are Mullahs and Imams around the world who preach for the destruction of the United States, but even in those foreign countries Muslims are not obligated to follow them.

It is also vital for people to understand that the most common interpretations of Muslim sacred literature

do not allow for the violent destruction of innocent non-combatants. (Muslims who condemn terrorism cite Quran 2:190, 5:32 and various sayings of Muhammad from the Hadith, in which the Prophet condemned attacking non-combatants during warfare.) Therefore, taking into account the diversity within Islam itself, it should be clear that a violent, hateful religious fanatic is not defined as a “good” Muslim in most places.

So then, what can it mean to call someone a “good” Muslim—someone who loves his faith and takes its teachings seriously? Probably all Muslims everywhere, Sunni and Shia, would agree first of all that a good Muslim strives to live by the five pillars of Islam—the sincere confession of faith, five prayers a day, offerings to the poor, keeping the fast of the month of Ramadan, and at least one pilgrimage in one’s lifetime to Mecca, if possible. The good Muslim would furthermore know and try to practice the teachings of the Quran and would take Muhammad, as revealed in the stories of the *Hadith*, as the ultimate model of Muslim virtue.

On a practical level, all this looks a little different in each Muslim country and among different sects of Islam, just as “following Jesus” looks different, even among differing types of Baptists, Methodists, and even Catholics. Therefore, a *good* Muslim in America may be quite different in dress, ideology, and daily behavior from a *good* Muslim in Saudi Arabia.

So, the first point in my argument for good Muslims as good Americans is the simple observation that there is no monolithic Muslim ideal, but many interpretations of this ideal, including varieties of Islam that allow for loyalty to American ideals and principles.

Can Good American Muslims Protect American Interests?

If simple loyalty to basic Muslim ideals is not a stumbling block to patriotism, isn’t Islamic loyalty to the universal Muslim community something so powerful that it would transcend loyalty to country? Can good Muslims support the national interest

when it involves war or police action against fellow Muslims?

To address this concern, let’s think about how Christians have behaved when faced with military action against other Christian nations. Through World War I, nearly every major American war was against predominantly Christian countries: the British, Mexico, secessionist southern states, Spain, and Germany under the Kaiser. Evidently we simply concluded that these enemies were not acting in a genuinely “Christian” fashion. If Christian Americans can evaluate national policy with that sort of rational detachment, it is also perfectly possible for Muslim Americans to view an American military or police action rationally, and support the best interests of the country, even if the enemies happen to be of their general religious belief.

Remember, several Muslim nations joined in the action against Saddam Hussein during the First Gulf War, when that dictator sought to swallow up the small neighboring nation of Kuwait. There is no inherent religious reason why American Muslims cannot support sound and sensible policies of American self defense, even against fellow Muslims in another part of the world. According to the Muslim Chaplains Association website, there are at least 4,100 Muslims who did just that, serving the defense of our country in the armed forces.⁷

Can Good American Muslims Embrace Democracy?

Despite reason and evidence that American Muslims are willing to defend their nation’s best interests, thinkers might reasonably argue that “good” or genuinely devout Muslims would naturally have a difficult time supporting the very principle of democracy, since their ultimate model of perfect government is Muhammad as the absolute theocratic ruler of Medina. After Muhammad’s initial call to prophecy, he became the leader of a small, persecuted minority in Mecca. Because he preached anti-idolatry and greater fairness to the poor, he was nearly assassinated by

the Meccan leadership. However, he was invited to become the ruler of a smaller city 200 miles to the north of Mecca, Yathrib. He accepted the invitation and for the next ten years ruled that community as “Medina,” meaning *city of the Prophet*. All Muslims look back on this era as a kind of golden age in the spiritual life of the sacred community. Medina under the prophet is the ultimate model for the truly Muslim society. That being the case, would Muslims not find any non-Islamic government to be a pale spiritual failure in comparison?

It is certainly true that Muhammad’s theocratic leadership of Medina is a precious memory in the minds of all devout Muslims, but the value of that sacred memory need not undermine support for American democracy. To understand why, let’s look at how we Christians have evolved in our own thinking about human governance. The Bible enjoins us to “honor” the earthly king (1 Pet 2:17), and there is not one passage in the Christian Bible that specifically calls on Christians to govern themselves through democracies. Devout Christians still revere those scriptures and regularly refer to Jesus as *Lord*. We nonetheless revere democracy and sometimes even idolize it as a “Christian” ideal. The anti-Muslim email that inspired this article even insists that “the constitution is based on the Bible.”

Rather than argue that specious point, let me use it as “exhibit number one” in my argument. If the most biblically conservative Christians can, for various reasons, see support for the basic ideals of democracy in the Christian Bible, than Muslims can see the same sort of thing in the Quran and the Hadith. Most religions have a way of evolving and adapting to new ideas of human governance. For example, over the last 300 years Christians moved from supporting “the divine right of kings” to “a government of, by and for the people.” Something similar goes on in Islam. While it is true that most majority-Muslim nations are dictatorships and oligarchies, there are at least seven majority-Muslim

nations around the world that can be defined as genuine democracies: Turkey, Indonesia, Senegal, Mali, Bangladesh and Malaysia are all governed as parliamentary republics, and Pakistan will probably revert back to a democratic government someday in the future.

Christians find inspiration in the Bible for basic underlying concepts vital to democracy, like the ultimate equality of all men before God. These same ideals of equality and justice can actually be found in the Quran, and many American Muslims are eager to stress this. I’ve encountered one website for the MPAC (Muslim Public Affairs Council), a Muslim organization devoted to patriotic ideals. Their vision statement, citing passages from the Quran for religious legitimacy, is worth quoting in full: “To establish a vibrant Muslim American community that will enrich American society through promoting the Islamic values of Mercy (21:107), Justice (4:135), Peace (8:61) Human Dignity (17:70), Freedom (2:256) and Equality for all (49:13).”⁸

Quranic Surah 49:13 is quoted in a number of sites where the authors stress that the Quran supports the concept of human equality before God. The passage reads: “**O you men! Surely We have created you of a male and a female, and made you tribes and families that you may know each other; surely the most honorable of you with Allah is the one among you most careful (of his duty); surely Allah is knowing, aware.**” That passage stresses that religious devotion to God (one’s duty) is far more important than national origin.

One passage from the Hadith reports Muhammad to have said, **O people! Your God is one and your forefather (Adam) is one. An Arab is not better than a non-Arab and a non-Arab is not better than an Arab, and a red (i.e. white tinged with red) person is not better than a black person and a black person is not better than a red person . . . except in piety.**⁹ This passage also stresses that all people are the same

before God, and the only “difference” of significance is devotion to God.

Along with the Quran’s validation of concepts like human equality before God, there are hints of democratic government in the early Muslim historical tradition. After Muhammad died, a minority of Muslims sought to pass the leadership of the Muslim community on to the descendants of Muhammad. (These thinkers eventually became the Shia.) However, the Sunni leaders believed it was best for the community to arrive at a consensus on who was *most qualified* to lead the people, and put the matter to a vote among tribal leaders.¹⁰ Now, after that vote, the elevated Caliph was certainly given the full authority of an absolute monarch, but this initial decision on the part of the Muslim community to *select* the most qualified leader is a part of Muslim spiritual heritage (similar to the Acts of the Apostles in the Bible), and as such serves as early validation of the possibilities for democratic government.

With the Quran’s support for equality before God and the presence of some democratic governance in the sacred historical tradition, any American Muslim, born or naturalized, can give spiritual support to the democratic ideals of equality and self-determination that are precious to this nation. If young Muslims are raised in America, with wise rearing they can grow to revere their country as naturally as any descendent of the Puritans on the Mayflower. As many Muslims fled religious persecution themselves, they can *feel* the impact of the story of the Mayflower pilgrims far more powerfully than we can. That alone makes the American ideal precious to many Muslim citizens of the United States. It is worth mention, that according to numerous websites, and the interesting new book *American Islam: The Struggle for the Soul of a Religion*, “4 out of 5 [Muslims] are registered to vote.”¹¹ Few other religious communities can make that claim. So, my second argument for good Muslims as good Americans is that a commitment to Islam is not inherently antithetical to the laws and ideals of this country.

Can Good Christians Extend Grace To Muslim Neighbors?

My final argument is about why we in the Christian community have a vital mission to affirm and encourage all that is best in our fellow Americans who are Muslim. There are at least three reasons why we should actively extend Christ-like acceptance to our Muslim neighbors.

First, when we only expect the worst of people, they have nothing to lose for they will certainly no longer fear disappointing us. If we bully, harass, and denounce our neighbor, we are likely to *create* the very thing we fear most—radicalized Muslims who are convinced Americans hate them simply because they are Islamic.

Second, as Muslim immigrants come to our shores we have a wonderful opportunity to share the love of God in Christ Jesus, but no Muslim will listen to Christians who talk hatefully of Muhammad and Islam. Hateful talk from leaders and laity sets back the cause of Christian missions among Muslims in America and around the world.

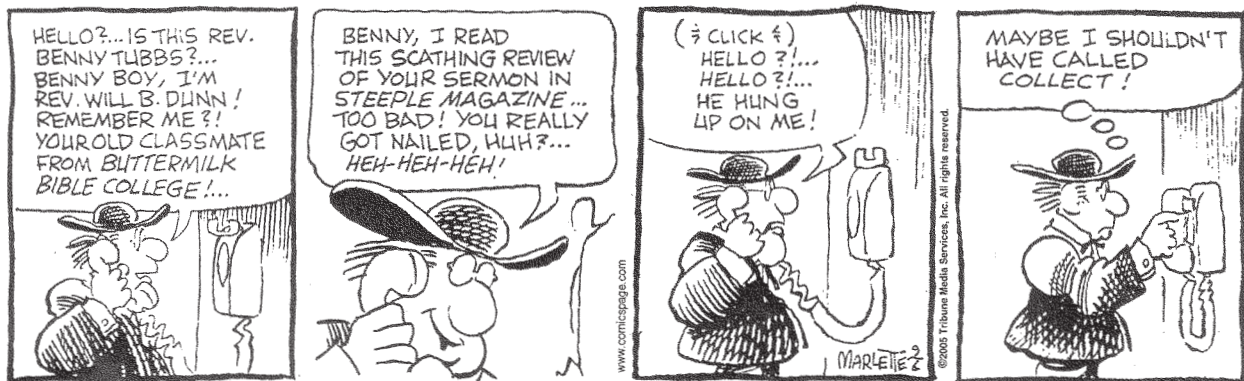
Third, Jesus declared, “Anyone who says to his brother ‘raca’ is answerable to the Sanhedrin but anyone who says ‘you fool,’ will be in danger of the fire of hell,” (Mt. 5:22). The phrases “raca” and “you fool” are pejoratives of contempt that mark someone out as

a worthless being of no value in the world. Jesus suggests that a person who uses such language cannot be in a good relationship with God. Why? Because the dehumanization of our neighbor inevitably turns us into individuals who cause needless suffering for other innocent people. Jesus calls on us to love our neighbors as we love ourselves (Lk 10:27).

Through teaching, preaching, and personal example, Christians must faithfully educate our own community of believers. Too many Christians are succumbing to fear, and fear can quickly turn to hatred. The beloved apostle John reminds us, “Perfect love casts out fear” (1 Jn 4:18). For the sake of our country, God’s kingdom, and our own moral influence, we need to understand that *good* Muslims can indeed be *good* Americans. ■

- 1 *Daytona Beach News-Journal*, “1 in 4 Muslims: Suicide bombings OK, poll says,” May 23, 2007, 2A.
- 2 <http://www.fbi.gov/ucr/ucr.htm>, for incidents in 2000. <http://www.fbi.gov/ucr/hc2005/table1/htm>, for year 2005.
- 3 *Daytona Beach News-Journal*, 2A.
- 4 Joanne O'Brien and Martin Palmer, *The Atlas of Religion*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007, 24.

- 5 Richard Rubenstein and John K. Roth, *Approaches to Auschwitz: The Holocaust and its Legacy*, Atlanta, John Knox Press, 1987, 69-89.
- 6 Karen Thomas Smith, “God is So, So Big,” *Review and Expositor*, Vol. 104, No. 1, Winter 2007, 148.
- 7 <http://www.muslimchaplains.org/faq.php>. Muslim sources claim 9 to 10 thousand serve in the armed forces.
- 8 <http://www.mpac.org/about/vision-mission>.
- 9 <http://www.islamreligion.com/articles/245/> “Human Rights and Justice in Islam,” quoting from Hadith, narrated in *Sabeeh Al-Bukhari #1739* and *Mosnad Ahmed, #2 037*.
- 10 Karen Armstrong, *Islam: A Short History*, New York: the Modern Library, 2002, 25.
- 11 Paul M. Barrett, *American Islam: The Struggle for the Soul of a Religion*, New York: Ferrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007, 9. However, this common belief that approximately 80% of all Muslims are registered to vote may be a “best case” scenario. Since no one knows how many Muslims there really are in the U.S., we can’t really know what percentage of them are registered to vote.



Honoring the Memory of Dale Moody

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

My journal places the adventure on the eighth day of the Yom Kippur War and that would date it Sunday, October 11, 1973. Baptist Missionary to Israel Norm Lytle pulled his Volkswagen Bus to a stop on the eastern slope of the Arab village of Silwan, just south of the old city of Jerusalem. Out climbed two men by the name of Moody. The older of the two was the famous and influential Christian theologian Dale Moody; the other was a fresh-out-of-college ministerial student named Dwight A. Moody. That would be me.

“Mr. Moody and I plunged into the chilling waters of Gihon Spring,” my journal records, “and wound our way under Mt. Zion to Siloam.” We had only our flashlights during our walk through what may be the most authentic remains of the entire biblical record: Hezekiah’s Tunnel.¹ The tunnel diverts the water of the spring through a 1749-foot, s-shape channel cut through solid rock into a pool on the western slope of the ridge that once was known as Zion, the City of David.

Dale Moody and I talked about all of this as we walked slowly through the water tunnel. The rock walls touched our shoulders on both sides; at one point, the rock ceiling was so low only 15 inches separated the rock above our heads and from the chest-high water through which we were walking. When his flashlight failed, I slowed the pace so my single light could illuminate his way as well, although in that pitch-dark place we had little choice about where to walk and how. We noted as we walked, the suddenly-elevated ceiling, giving evidence of some miscalculation by the ancient engineers. We stopped at the place where the two work parties met, feeling with our hands the abrupt change in direction of the pick grooves in the stone

walls. We pointed to the place where the original commemorative inscription had been first chiseled into the wall and then, two and a half millennia later, chipped from the wall (and hauled off to a museum in Istanbul). Finally, we passed through an iron gate and up the stone stairs where our good missionary friend was waiting to take two dripping-wet explorers to a change of clothes in his home on the Mount of Olives. “It took me over an hour of hot tea and Lytle hospitality to restore my equilibrium,” is the way my journal describes the aftermath.²

Dale Moody had advised me against our trip to Israel, suggesting I first get some seminary under my belt. I wrote for his judgment on the matter because three years earlier he had entered my life as the energetic, entertaining expositor of Paul’s letter to the Ephesians. It happened this way.

In the fall of 1970, I led a delegation of Georgetown College students to Louisville to invite Dr. Moody to come to our campus and speak to the students. We wanted teaching from the book of Philippians, but he countered with Ephesians, with the theme, “Christ and the Church.” Students were promised “small reaction groups led by members of the college family . . . to give . . . an opportunity to discuss the content of Dr. Moody’s lectures . . . as well as sharing, praying, studying and growing as Christian Students.”³ He was delighted at the opportunity and indifferent to the paltry sum we promised him. For six of the next seven weeks he spoke to standing-room crowds in the Science Center lecture hall. I remember very few speakers who stood on the various platforms of our college in those days—two others who made a lasting impression on me were Ken Chafin and Charles Malik—but I have vivid memories of Dr. Moody, with Greek testament in hand, standing behind

the waist-high lecture counter quoting the text, telling a story, slicing the air, raising his voice, ranging over centuries, cultures, and commentaries to drive home one memorable point after another to a mesmerized young ministerial student on the front row. It was intoxicating!

Later it was thrilling to discover that Dale Moody and his wife Mildred would be on a six-month sabbatical in Israel during the ten months that my wife Jan and I spent in that same location. We lived on Mt. Zion at what was then called the American Institute of Holy Land Studies (and later the Jerusalem University College). They lived to the south of us on the road that leads from Jerusalem to Bethlehem, at the Ecumenical Institute for Advanced Theological Studies at Ton Tur. Together we hiked the countryside, explored the cultural and religious wonders of the Holy Land, and shared many meals.

I remember one day when he and I drove out to the Plain of Benjamin, just north of Jerusalem. We climbed the stairs to the upper level of the mosque at Nabi Samwil. I had with me a paperback copy of the 1931 edition of George Adam Smith’s classic *The Historical Geography of the Holy Land*. As I read aloud from chapter 13, Dr. Moody traced with pointed finger and focused eyes the movements of General Sir Edmund Allenby and his British troops as they advanced up the Ascent of Beth Horan toward Jerusalem in November of 1917. Smith concluded his description with this memorable sentence: “This capture of the city was the thirty-fourth or thirty-fifth in her history.”⁴

Dr. Moody taught the Bible each week during the Bible study hour at the West Jerusalem Baptist Church on Narkis Street. We were faithful learners each Saturday (Shabbat) morning as

he expounded his theory of the quinquennial organization of the Acts of the Apostles. He contended that the book is divided into six sections, each representing five years, modeled on the five-year Olympiad pattern of the Roman Empire.⁵ I will never forget the day when, in the middle of his lesson and after I had asked a question, he leaned in my direction and said with a smile and a wink: "I am saving a seat for you in my theology class at Southern Seminary."

Seminary in Louisville had not been in my plans but that is where I enrolled in the fall of 1974. During my first three years on campus I had not one single class with Dale Moody although my father and I, when he was on sabbatical from his ministry in Murray, Kentucky, sat in on Dr. Moody's summer-term lectures on the Holy Spirit. Even with such limited classroom contact, I felt his interest in me and valued his influence upon me. At my suggestion, my home-church pastor Dr. Bill Whitaker invited him to preach my ordination sermon at the First Baptist Church of Murray on June 19, 1977.

That itself is a story, not least so because the Murray church had been, decades earlier, the epicenter of the Landmark movement whose lingering influence among Baptists Dr. Moody so vigorously opposed.⁶ The charge to the candidate that morning was delivered by my father, now an Alzheimer patient in Louisville. He challenged me to love the book, love the Lord, and love the people, a message consistent with his own life and ministry. Dr. Moody took as his text the entire book of 2 Timothy and with his robust dignity delivered a sermon whose simple outline I recall clearly: spirit, strength, scripture, and sound doctrine. I am sure it was a sermon he had preached many times for many young men. During the introduction, he described me as "brilliant and devout," neither of which was true then nor now, but it lingered with me as a blessing and has reverberated in my mind for thirty years as a treasured affirmation. Every now and then I

pull out the "old technology" recording—a cassette tape—and listen once again to Dale Moody exhorting me to be the person he thought I could be and the minister I aspired to be. Afterward Dr. and Mrs. Moody came to the home of my parents on Olive Street for dinner and conversation.

It was not until doctoral work that I had my full dose of his immense learning and enthusiastic classroom style. As one of his Garrett Fellows, I often walked with him to and from class, and even though these hallway discussions were memorable, what is most deeply embedded in my imagination are the days I sat in the large lecture hall at the seminary and listened as he explained the text of Holy Scripture and expounded the doctrines of the Christian faith. He routinely began class with a prayer that was as deep as his love for the Bible and as wide as his hospitality to all people and all learning. He seemed always to wear the same suit, having never developed a desire to impress anybody with the way he dressed. With his white hair and stout frame, he looked good in a light grey suit, white shirt, and tie, and it always seemed to be the same suit, shirt, and tie. But what was always new, even startling, was what he said when he strode into class and started talking, often without opening either a Bible or his notes—it was all in his head. "If every copy of the New Testament was lost," I have heard him say more than once, "I could get together with a few others here at the Seminary and we could reconstruct ninety-five percent of the Greek text."

Most students did not think about this when they raised a hand to challenge Dr. Moody on some point of theology or biblical interpretation—which happened quite often. They would refer to some text other than the one Dr. Moody had read, thinking it was sufficient to correct his theology. Without losing stride Dr. Moody would quote and identify the text, comment on its Greek construction, and rehearse the various ways it had been translated in both the older

and new versions. It was a *tour de force* that demonstrated his dexterity with the biblical text and the seriousness with which he had studied every portion of it.

Hallway conversation and classroom lectures were not the only episodes of influence. One day in 1981, shortly after the death of Clyde Francisco, Dale Moody and I (and mutual friend Badgett Dillard, then vice president of the Seminary) drove to Cave Hill Cemetery. This was my introduction to the famous burial ground in Louisville. He took me to see the markers of such people as George Rogers Clark (brother of William Clark of Lewis and Clark fame) and Col. Harlan Sanders (of Kentucky Fried Chicken fame). But it was our visit to the burial plots of the seminary family that made the most lasting impression.⁷

We stood in the original site, dominated by the obelisk of James P. Boyce and the graves of such luminaries as John A. Broadus, Basil Manly, Jr., W.O. Carver, A. T. Robertson and John R. Sampey. Moody pointed to the space between Carver and Robertson, his two most valued predecessors at the Seminary, and said: "Here is where I will be buried." There was a long silence.

Later, as we completed our examination, he said: "E. Y. Mullins bought a new burial plot." "That is fitting," I replied, "because Mullins also wrote a new systematic theology for the Seminary."

Mullin's book, *The Christian Religion in its Doctrinal Expression*, replaced, as a classroom textbook, the older work by Southern Seminary founder and first president, James P. Boyce, *Abstract of Systematic Theology*.⁸

As we stood in that second seminary section before the memorials to E. Y. Mullins and Ellis Fuller, both presidents of Southern Seminary, we discussed two other significant accomplishments of the Mullins presidency: the relocation of the seminary from the center of Louisville to its current location on Lexington Road, and

the adoption of the *Baptist Faith and Message*, a basic doctrinal statement of the Southern Baptist Convention. Mullins served as the chairman of the committee that adapted and expanded the older *New Hampshire Confession of Faith* into a document less Calvinistic than the *Abstract of Principles* used as the doctrinal standard of our seminary. Later, such friends and colleagues of Dale Moody as Leo Crismon and Eric Rust would be buried in this second cemetery section.

Little did we know on that pleasant day in 1981 that Badgett Dillard would buy the third seminary burial site in 1984. It sits on the elevated eastern edge of the cemetery and offers a view, through the trees, of the spire of Norton Hall, the central building of the seminary campus. Two years later, on March 29, 1986, Dillard himself became the first to be buried in the new plot. Now, it includes the remains of other seminary scholars, such as Allen Graves, James Blevins, Harold Songer, Page Kelly, J. J. Owens, Roy Honeycutt and, surprisingly, Dale Moody. As it turned out, there was insufficient room for Dr. Moody to be buried between his two great heroes in the original Seminary site, and not long before death, he purchased a double plot at the new site.⁹

I was pastor of Third Baptist Church in Owensboro, Kentucky when I received word of Dr. Moody's death on January 22, 1992. Jan and I attended the funeral at Crescent Hill Baptist Church in Louisville. As providence would have it, I had just begun preaching through Paul's letter to the Ephesians, and on the following Sunday morning I spoke of my affection for Dr. Moody and dedicated the sermon series to his memory.

I am sure many of his students mourned his passing; but few, if any, can claim to have lived with him at any time during his long and illustrious career. Here is how it all began. In May of 1981, I stopped Dr. Moody in the hallway near the seminary post office.

"I am not getting my research done," I said, referring to my doc-

toral dissertation. "I am resigning my church in Indiana and moving back to Louisville."

He turned and looked at me a long time, then asked: "Where are you going to live?"

"I don't know," I replied.

To which he said, "Come and see me next week. I have an idea."

Unbeknownst to me, he and his wife were leaving their long-time home on Grinstead Avenue and moving to Old Cannons Lane.

"In our new home," he explained the following week, "we have an entire apartment complete with private entrance and kitchen. Why don't you bring your family and live with us?"

And so it was that I painted the ground-floor room that was designated as his library, installed the shelves, unpacked the books, and arranged them around the walls. Then I set up the bunk beds for my two sons, Allan and Isaac; they were seven and five years old and, of course, had no awareness of the significance of their sleeping quarters. My wife and I took our newborn baby into the second bedroom and there we all lived for seven months, until I completed my research and was called to be pastor of the North Park Baptist Church in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. I began my work there in January of 1982, defended my dissertation April 20 (the very day Roy Honeycutt was inaugurated as president), and graduated on May 21.

In the meantime, his great work of theology was published: *The Word of Truth: A Summary of Christian Doctrine Based on Biblical Revelation*. I am proud that my name is included among those who "made the final corrections on the proofs and compiled the indexes."¹⁰ Then and now, I consider the book one of the truly significant contributions to the Baptist theological tradition. It was part of a great wave of systematic theology that swept through the Protestant world during the last quarter of the twentieth century.

Not everyone felt so fine about Dr. Moody's new book, for his chapter on "Salvation and Apostasy" resurrected

a controversy that had dogged him throughout his illustrious career. My last days in his company were spent discussing his adversaries in Arkansas and the wavering support of the new seminary president, Roy Honeycutt.¹¹

"The man we need," he had said to me in 1981, when the school was in the hunt for a new leader, "is already on our faculty. His name is Roy Honeycutt."

But President Honeycutt could not defend a professor, even a senior professor of Dr. Moody's stature, who constantly challenged the doctrinal statement of the seminary and consistently called for its revision on many issues, but especially as it related to perseverance and apostasy. My files are filled with articles, letters, interview transcripts, and newspaper clippings about the turbulent years between 1979 and 1983. These years coincide almost precisely with my own doctoral research on "Doctrines of Inspiration in the Southern Baptist Theological Tradition." For this I recorded and transcribed an interview with Dr. Moody, gathered into one collection the various letters, articles, documents relevant to the subject, and wrote a chapter about Dr. Moody.¹²

Dr. Moody's last annual contract as Senior Professor of Christian Theology expired without renewal on June 9, 1983, just eight months after he traveled to Arkansas to engage in a pulpit battle with his detractors. There, on November 15, he preached a sermon on Hebrews 10:26-31 entitled, "Willful Sin."¹³

The sermon ends with this memorable and typical flourish: "As long as God gives me breath to breathe, I'll hold this [Bible] in my hands and I'll be preaching it in my last breath because I think I will be accountable for what I said today and what I said over the years and in the resurrection. Some ask me, 'Why are you so happy: because your burial plot is between W. O. Carver and A. T. Robertson?' I'll tell you why I'm so happy about it: because both of them are going to get up on resurrection morning and say, 'That boy was right all the time.'" ■

- 1 See 2 Kings 20:20, which reads: "The rest of the deeds of Hezekiah ... how he made the pool and the conduit and brought water into the city, are they not written in the Book of the Annals of the Kings of Judah?" See also articles on Hezekiah and the Siloam Inscription in most Bible dictionaries.
- 2 The quotes in this description of our walk through Hezekiah's tunnel are from the unpublished journal which I kept during the time my wife and I lived in Israel, from July 1973 to May 1974. Dale and Mildred Moody were there also for the fall of 1973.
- 3 "Dr. Dale Moody Lectures" by Dwight A. Moody, "The Georgetonian," volume 85, issue 6, October 6, 1970, 1.
- 4 George Adam Smith, *The Historical Geography of the Holy Land* (New York: Harper & Row, 1966, 198-202).
- 5 His work on that subject was published as "A New Chronology for the Life and Letters of Paul" (Finegan Festschrift," ed. Jerry Vardaman, Winona Lake, Indiana: Eisenbrauns, 1987)
- 6 See the chapter on Dale Moody in Dwight A. Moody, "Doctrines of Inspiration in the Southern Baptist Theological Tradition," (unpublished Ph. D. dissertation, Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1982), 179-206. Dale Moody spent his career fighting Fundamentalism, Landmarkism, Calvinism, and Dispensationalism, three of which have made a serious and sustained reentry into the life of both the denomination and the seminary that Dale Moody served.
- 7 Phone conversation on November 26, 2007 with Michael Higgs of the staff of Cave Hill Cemetery; according to Higgs, the first seminary plot (in section T) was purchased on April 11, 1889, the second (in section 4) on March 15, 1915, and the third (in section 37) on March 5, 1984.
- 8 *Abstract of Systematic Theology* (1887) was the published version of Boyce's lecture notes; it was a mildly-baptized version of the Calvinism he had learned at Princeton Seminary; *The Christian Religion in its Doctrinal Expression* (1917) was Mullins' attempt to pull the Seminary away from the strict Calvinism of its founders toward a more experiential approach to theology.
- 9 Phone conversation with Wayne Ward, long-time friend of both Dale Moody and me, December 3, 2007. Ward, perhaps more than any other person, carries the memory of the life and legacy of Dale Moody.
- 10 Dale Moody, *The Word of Truth: A Summary of Christian Doctrine Based on Biblical Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981), xii.
- 11 The best account of this end-of-career controversy is written by E. Glenn Hinson, "Dale Moody: Bible Teacher Extraordinaire" in *Perspectives in Religious Studies*, vol. 14, no. 4 (Winter 1987), 3-18. See also "Perspectives on Scripture and Tradition: A Response by Dale Moody," vol. 15, no. 1, Spring 1988, 5-16. See also the complete bibliography of Dale Moody's writings compiled by Paul Debusman in 1986 and available in the library of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary.
- 12 See Dale Moody, "The Inspiration of Scripture," edited by Dwight A. Moody, 1982, unpublished manuscript in the library of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary.
- 13 See "Willful Sin," *ibid.* A more complete presentation of Dale Moody's teaching on salvation and apostasy can be found in his little book, *Apostasy: A Study in the Epistle to the Hebrews and in Baptist History* (Macon: Smyth & Helwys, 1986).



President Bill Clinton's Message to Baptists

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

Note: President Clinton delivered this closing message to 16,000 Baptists attending the New Baptist Covenant Celebration on February 1, 2008, at the Georgia World Conference Center.

If President Bill Clinton ever had a prayer with the leadership of the Southern Baptist Convention, it was right after a meeting on Sept. 16, 1993, with then-SBC president Ed Young. Clinton described that meeting in previously undisclosed detail in personal remarks Friday night to close out the three-day New Baptist Covenant Celebration in Atlanta.

Though he was a member of a Southern Baptist church, Immanuel Baptist Church in Little Rock, Ark., while in office, the 42nd president of the United States was never invited to speak at an annual meeting of the nation's second-largest religious organization during his eight years in office.

The SBC issued resolutions critical of Clinton's policies on homosexuality and abortion, and in 1993 there was an unsuccessful attempt to deny seating to messengers from his church—"not because I was a sinner," he recounted, "they conceded we all are, but because my positions were not correct."

Because of that, and a seminary professor he knew and respected who was purged for political incorrectness, Clinton confessed he was "quite alienated" when Young, pastor of Second Baptist Church in Houston, reached out to him and asked if he and Vice President Al Gore would have breakfast with him and if Clinton would take him jogging on the Washington Mall.

During breakfast outdoors on the Truman Balcony at the White House, Clinton said, Gore, also a Southern Baptist, engaged Young in a point of theological debate.

"You know, I love my Baptist roots," Gore told Young, "but I have three daughters and a son, and I don't think it's right that only my son can become a minister."

Clinton said he tried "to keep things from getting out of hand" as the two men had a "good" and "respectful" argument.

Clinton said he liked Young, admired his sermons and still watches him preach on television when he can. At one point, Clinton said, Young looked at him and said: "I want to ask you a question, a simple question, and I just want a yes or no answer. I don't want one of those slick political answers. Just answer me yes or no: Do you believe the Bible is literally true, yes or no?"

"I said, 'Reverend Young, I think it is completely true, but I do not believe you or I or any other living person is wise enough to understand it completely,'"

"He said, 'That's a political answer,' and I said, 'No it's not. You asked a political question.'"

The two talked on, and Clinton explained his answer by quoting First Corinthians 13:12, the verse before the passage commonly read at weddings, "and now there abide faith, hope and love, and the greatest of these is love."

"I said: 'Why could that [love] possibly be more important than faith, when the Baptists preach that belief in Jesus leads to salvation? What could Paul have possibly meant?' I said I'm not a minister. I just read and think. All I know is what I think."

"But in the King James Version, in that verse, Paul is comparing life on earth today as it is, with all its warts, as we find it, with life after death in God."

"For now I see through a glass darkly, but then face to face," Clinton quoted verse 12. "Now I know in part, but then I shall know even as I am known."

The reason we have to put love above everything else is because we see through a glass darkly and know in part," Clinton said. "Therefore it almost doesn't matter whether the Bible is literally true, because we know in part; we see through a glass darkly. The reason we have to love each other is because all of us might be wrong. We might all be wrong."

Young reported on that same meeting four days after it occurred, at a Sept. 20-21, 1993, meeting of the SBC Executive Committee. Young described eating and jogging with the president, but he did not volunteer any details of what they discussed.

Young called for SBC churches to pray for Clinton and Gore for 40 days beginning Jan. 1, 1994.

"There is a heart there—a spiritual cross-pull—in the life of our president," Young said. "Who knows what the Lord will do?"

Clinton said he believed his conversation with Young went to the "nub" of the challenge to reconcile Baptists with differing opinions.

"We all believe that we are fulfilling God's will in our lives," he said. "The point I want to make is, so do they. They read the obligations of Scripture in a different way."

"We have to meet this schism with respectful disagreement," Clinton said. "President Carter aided the search for reconciliation by writing that book. He did not impede it. *Our Endangered Values* helped us all to clarify what we think, but we must approach those who disagree with an outstretched hand, not a clenched fist." ■

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Dethroning a King

By Tripp York, Visiting Assist. Prof. of Religious Studies | Elon University, NC.

"A dangerous Negro, now a national hero. How shall we work with that?"

Vincent Harding

In a brief essay entitled *Martin Luther King, Jr.: Dangerous Prophet*,¹ Vincent Harding (a colleague of King) reminds his readers that as easy as it is to forget that Jesus was an executed criminal who undermined the very politics that makes this fallen world turn, so too is it both easy and tempting to twist King into our own image, who is no longer a prophet, but an idol that serves rather than questions our interests.

In 1963 Martin Luther King, Jr. was called the most dangerous Negro in the United States because he posed a threat to the very precious ideals that, unfortunately, continue to underwrite our socio-economic and political culture. This same man is now revered as a national saint. The question that must be asked is: Did we undergo the changes that King demanded—an alternative economy, the practice of nonviolence, and the ceasing of imperialism? Or, has his message somehow changed since his death so that it can accommodate that for which he gave his life in protest?

For instance, how is it possible that a man who once preached against the evils of capitalism be awarded heroic status in a capitalist culture? How is it possible that a person who decried the wickedness that is war be remembered as a patriotic saint in the world's strongest warring machine? How is it that

a Christian pastor, who so intuitively understood how racism, classism, and militarism go hand in hand, be remembered as an icon in a culture perpetually divided by these oppressive horrors? Finally, how is it possible that organizations such as GM Motors, Tommy Hilfiger, Exxon, Coca-Cola, Disney, Wal-Mart and McDonalds, seven of the greatest purveyors of Western imperialism in existence, be major benefactors for a one hundred million dollar plus memorial in his name? This is, ironically, a memorial that will be placed in a city known throughout the world as having a serious homeless problem.

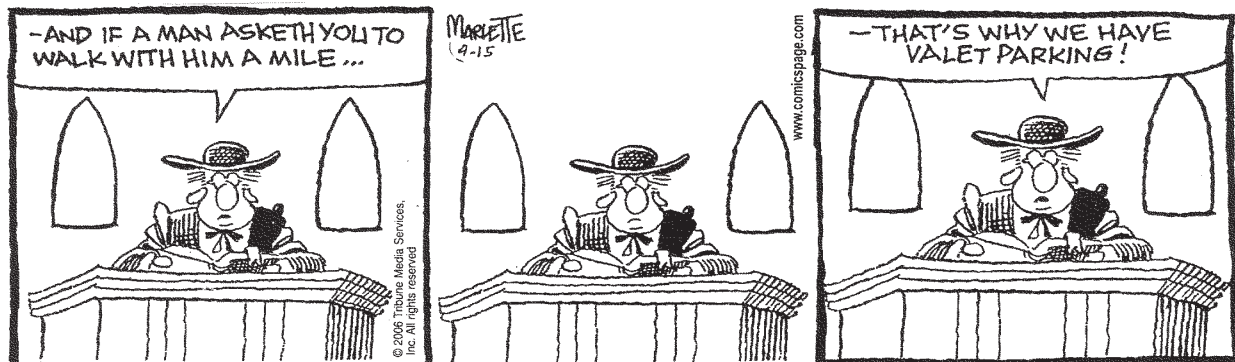
Would King not be appalled by the very idea of spending so much money on a monument *in his name* in D.C., while countless people in that same city go to bed cold and hungry? Is this memorial actually talking about the same Martin Luther King, Jr. who argued that the United States, if it is to achieve equality, requires a completely restructured economy (in his words a "modified socialism")? Will this memorial serve to remind us of who King is or, in its very utilization of such vast economic resources, will its very existence actually make it easier to forget who he really was?

Apparently the King so often touted today is not the same man as the King of 1963. For the King who was hated and eventually assassinated for his dangerous and subversive ideals (that is, standing with the poor) has now become a part

of the very machine he protested. In a sense, it is pure brilliance on the part of the empire. The best way to deal with a dangerous radical like King is to domesticate him. Claim him. Say you love him. Give him a national 'holy' day, and in doing so, you can stand free from any claims he might have upon us. He no longer stands above the American people holding us accountable for our jingoist practices. He no longer stands apart from us demanding that we restructure our society so that there need not be any poor among us, rather we have become exactly that which he was attempting to avoid: richer, yet poorer.

King had no interest in liberating minorities so that they could simply participate in the evils that white people had perfected; rather, he wanted to overturn the entire edifice so that all people could practice justice, charity, and love toward one another. But now, warring presidents gleefully quote him, 'supporters' cash in on his name, and the largest capitalist corporations on the planet support the building of a monument that, it seems, only the wealthy could truly enjoy. For what will the starving poor person think about as he or she peers at the expensive image of Martin Luther King, Jr.? I imagine they will think that the 'King' is dead. ■

1 The essay is located in Jim Wallis & Joyce Hollyday's, *Cloud of Witnesses*, (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2006), 81-89.



Prophetic Challenge to Capital Punishment

By Cody J. Sanders, McAfee School of Theology, Mercer University, GA

Citizens of the United States are no strangers to the explosive issues raised by Christians in the political arena. Rhetoric concerning abortion, homosexuality and war consistently captures the public mind, especially during election season. The issue of capital punishment, however, seems seldom raised by the Christian sector. In fact, support of the death penalty maintains a position of popularity among multitudes of Christians in the U. S. Evangelical Christians, now by far the most influential Christians on the American political scene, are among the strongest supporters of the death penalty, maintaining its widespread acceptance. During 2005, 60 executions took place in the U.S., bringing the total since 1977 to 1,004 executed prisoners. As of January 1, 2006, 3,400 prisoners await their death in prisons across the country.¹

On the worldwide scene, the issue of the death penalty has been largely settled. Sixty-eight countries and territories still utilize the death penalty as the maximum punishment for serious crimes. In all, however, 88 countries have abolished the death penalty totally, 11 have abolished its use for all but extremely exceptional crimes and another 30 countries retain death penalty laws but have not executed an individual during the past ten years. Jimmy Carter reports that 90% of all known executions occur in only four countries: China, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and the U.S.²

The institution of the death penalty is a reality that American Christians must face on a far more personal level. With no uniform approach to the issue, each Christian must assess the ethical implications of the death penalty with as much vigor as he or she tackles the more popular ethical issues of abortion and sexuality. In creating a foundation for discussing the death penalty, one might give attention to

the context of the Hebrew scriptures upon which a Christian defense of the death penalty is often predicated, as well as the prophetic voices of Jesus and the New Testament writers. In addition to the resources of the Christian scriptures, one may benefit greatly from the conversation partner of the social sciences.

A Historical Overview

It is difficult to discern the historical position of the earliest Christians on the subject of the death penalty due to the dearth of extant writings concerning the views of the pre-Constantinian Church. It is well known, however, that Christians were frequent targets of the death penalty as adherents to an illegal religion.³ It may be surmised that the support from early Christians for the death penalty was scant, to say the least, though opposition may have stemmed from far more practical purposes than theological ones.

Whatever views the early Church held, penal codes became quite cruel after the legitimization of the Christian religion under Constantine. Death penalty historian, James Megivern, attributes this shift to the combination of the Bible and Roman law during the period of Imperial Christianity. No longer employed to persecute Christians, Roman law was used as an evangelistic tool of sorts to Christianize the Empire, waging war against barbarians, pagans and even heretics within the Christian Church.⁴ During this era Church and Empire aligned, resulting in the justification of extremely harsh punishment, including the death penalty. The Church gained unprecedented influence throughout the Empire, while the Emperor benefited from the unification of the Empire under the Christian banner.

In light of the entangled history of the Catholic Church and many successive governments after the Roman Empire, whose harsh penal code served

to extend the Catholic influence, it is ironic to note the strong opposition to the death penalty put forth by Catholics in the U.S. today. Not so among Evangelicals. In an interview with Larry King, president Al Mohler of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary stated, "Scripture clearly calls for the death penalty...[it] is the appropriate penalty for those who take life and for those who commit the crime of murder."⁵ Mohler justifies this statement using both the Old and New Testaments.

Lex Talionis and the Hebrew Bible

A typical conception of the death penalty's efficacy is the ancient principle of *lex talionis*. Deuteronomy 19.21 typifies *lex talionis*, stating, "life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot."⁶ The reasoning behind this ancient "law of retaliation" is that one's punishment should be equal to the crime committed. *Lex talionis* is expressed in the three law codes of the Old Testament (Exodus 21.23-24, Leviticus 24.20 and Deuteronomy 1.21) and in the Code of Hammurabi. Genesis 9.6, "Whoever sheds the blood of a human, by a human shall that person's blood be shed," is often cited in conjunction with the three passages from the Pentateuch as support for the death penalty. Though seemingly harsh, *lex talionis* is actually a restrictive legal device, prohibiting an individual injury inciting a violent feud among entire families. The story of Dinah's rape in Genesis 34 provides a lucid example of the harsh and unfair nature of the ancient legal system, where homicide could avenge most any crime.⁷ Instead, *lex talionis* allowed equal injury to the crime committed and exacted punishment only on the perpetrator of the crime and not upon innocent family members. It also set limits that equalized the upper and lower classes, prohibiting the payment of blood money for crimes committed

by upper class perpetrators upon lower class victims. All members of society paid equally for the crime of murder.⁸

There are several scriptural difficulties in supporting the death penalty with the Old Testament. First, it is difficult to locate examples in which *lex talionis* is enacted in legal cases in the Hebrew Bible. In fact, the very opposite often occurs. The Hebrew Scriptures recount several cases where God intervenes against the justified use of the death penalty. Cain, Moses and David all committed acts of murder punishable by death. Yet, God purposefully spared their lives. Further, neither the Prophets nor the Writings of the Hebrew canon ever call for the death penalty.⁹

Jesus, The Sermon on the Mount and Lex Talionis

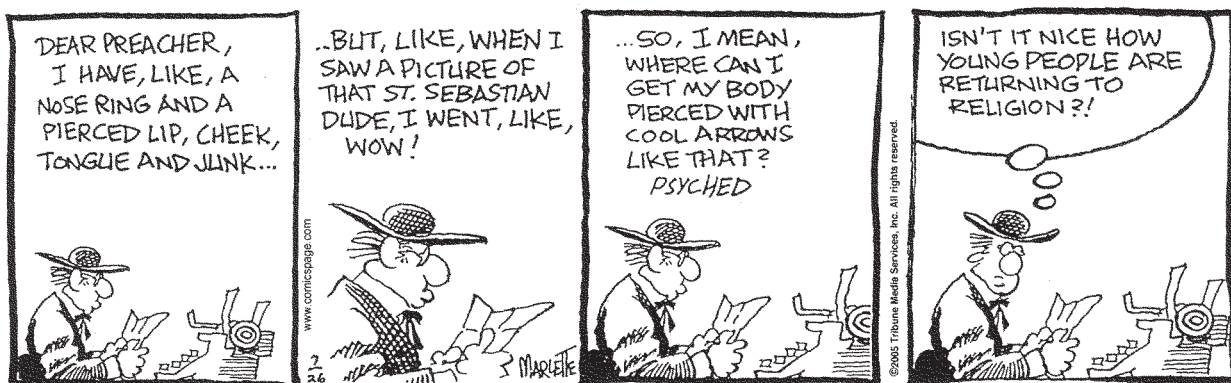
In the gospel accounts, the message and ministry of Jesus emerge from the tradition of the Hebrew prophets. Both the Hebrew prophets and Jesus speak against existing structures of oppressive power that oppose the fundamental nature of the Kingdom of God.

While the primary basis of the teachings of Jesus is the Hebrew Scriptures, Jesus “avoids the violent parts of the teaching so systematically that it cannot be happenstance.”¹⁰ In four distinct instances, Jesus prophetically decries the use of violence as a means of legal justice. First, in Matthew 5.21-24, Jesus gives an even stricter interpretation of “you shall not murder” from the Ten Commandments. Instead of stopping with this historic Jewish teaching, Jesus adds “But I

say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment” (Matt 5.22). Upholding the importance placed on human life in the Hebrew Scriptures, Jesus uses the text to circumvent the very cause of murder by dealing with the issue of anger. Second, Matthew 5.38-42 pictures Jesus reiterating the *lex talionis* but taking the opportunity to teach against its retaliatory nature. Jesus suggests that one not resist evildoers, but instead turn the other cheek. A third teaching is found in Matthew 5.43-48 where Jesus responds to the traditional teaching to love one’s neighbor and hate one’s enemy. To this teaching, Jesus issues a reversal of traditional sentiment in which one is to love one’s enemies and pray for one’s persecutors. Finally, Jesus is confronted directly with the question of capital punishment in John 8. After the scribes and Pharisees present Jesus with a woman caught in adultery they recite the Law of Moses commanding the death penalty and inquire of Jesus what course he would advise. Jesus, at first seeming to ignore the query, eventually stands and says, “let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her” (John 8.7). Confronted directly by the question of capital punishment in this specific case, Jesus makes the imposition of such violent retribution against the woman impossible for her accusers.

Some also use Romans 13 as Christian support for the death penalty. The text states, “let every person be subject to the governing authorities...those authorities that exist have

been instituted by God...the authority does not bear the sword in vain” (Rom 13.1, 4). Evangelical pro death penalty spokespersons argue that if one is to support the governing authorities bearing the sword, then Christians should not stand in opposition to capital punishment. Former professor of theology at the University of Notre Dame, John Howard Yoder, views the text quite differently, however. A few of Yoder’s arguments may be distilled to clarify the (mis)conception of evangelical Christians concerning Romans 13. First to note among many important aspects of the text is the word translated “sword” in verse 4. The word “sword,” *machaira*, denotes not the sword of a warrior or the tool of an executioner; rather it speaks of a small dagger worn by judicial authorities or police.¹¹ This distinction is made obvious when one takes into account that at the time of the writing of Romans, the preferred method of execution for the Roman Empire was crucifixion and that of the Jews was stoning. Further, the context indicates that Paul does not make a statement concerning the moral nature of the political reality, rather only states its place of civil authority. Jesus clearly demonstrates in his continued challenge of the authorities that the government is not always correct in its proclamations or concepts of a just society. Finally, as one attempts to understand the modern support for the death penalty using Romans 13 as proof text, the question should be asked: would this reading of the text be the same during the first few cen-



turies of the Church when Christians were primary recipients of the death penalty? It is difficult to surmise that Paul was advocating for the power of the Roman Empire to take the lives of whomever it saw fit to execute.

A Prophetic Dialogue with the Social Sciences

Perhaps the most glaring flaw in the institution of capital punishment is its clearly prejudicial nature. Capital punishment has always been profoundly affected by race; so much so that “race is more likely to affect death sentencing than smoking affects the likelihood of dying from heart disease.”¹² As of 1997, 12% of the population of the U.S. was African American while 41% of death row inmates were black. Making even more difference in death penalty usage than the race of the perpetrator of a murder is the race of the victim. Eighty-six percent of executions since 1976 have been people convicted of killing whites, though nearly half of all murder victims in the U.S. are black.¹³ In addition to racial bias, death penalty cases seem inherently biased against those of lower socioeconomic status. With the most common errors in death penalty sentences being incompetent defense lawyers and suppressed evidence, it is easy to see why one with greater resources stands a better chance of having his or her case treated with more efficiency than one who must rely on an overworked public defender.¹⁴

A second but no less important flaw is that the death penalty does not deter crime, nor is it consistently imposed on the true offenders.

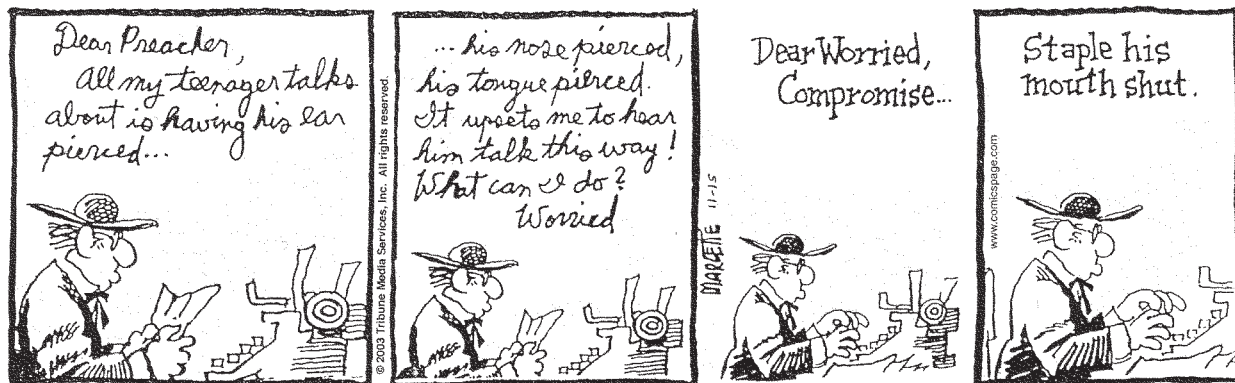
Amnesty International reports that in Canada, the homicide rate in 1975 was 3.09 per 100,000. The following year Canada abolished the death penalty and by 1980 the homicide rate was 2.41 per 100,000. In 2003 the Canadian homicide rate was down to 1.73 per 100,000, a total of 44% lower than in 1975.¹⁵ Similarly, in states of adjacent geography sharing similar history, culture and economy, the results of country-to-country comparisons are almost replicated. Between 1920 and 1955, North Dakota, a state without the death penalty, was found to have a lower homicide rate than South Dakota and Nebraska, both states with the death penalty. In more recent studies, the average murder rate in states with the death penalty was found to be 8.64 per 100,000 people. In states without the death penalty, the murder rate was 5.35.¹⁶

Contrary to expectation, the death penalty does not reduce the murder rate. Rather it has an imitative effect on other potential murders by setting “an official governmental example that killing someone is a proper way to resolve feelings of resentment.”¹⁷ This has been statistically demonstrated to the point that “some researchers believe that the data are consistent enough to demonstrate that the presence of a death penalty in a state creates a brutalization effect, in that human life is held less sacred.”¹⁸ This brutalization effect is fueled by the very cheapening of human life that the prophetic voice of Jesus was guarding against by teaching love and forgiveness in a culture saturated with

the ethic of vengeance and retaliation.

Jesus constantly emphasized the innocent who suffer at the hands of an unjust society as central in the Kingdom of God. It is no surprise that in a judicial system inherently weakened by fallible human beings one finds the innocent suffering too often under unjust circumstances. The Death Penalty Information Center cites cases of 123 people in 25 states who have been released from death row convictions due to evidence proving their innocence since 1973.¹⁹ If for no other reason, the overwhelming rate of conviction of innocent suspects should elicit great caution concerning the efficacy of capital punishment in the United States.

Even when used against the guilty, there is no punishment as severe as the starkly atypical punishment of death. Not only is death the most extreme form of punishment in the United States, it is also the only form that is completely irrevocable. Taking the life of a human being can rarely be accompanied by complete certainty of his or her guilt. Yet this punishment includes the psychological torture of anticipating one’s own death and ends with human beings taking a life that they neither gave nor are capable of returning if a mistake is made.²⁰ In its brutal extremity, capital punishment fails to fulfill the purpose of justice, especially as understood in the prophetic message of the Kingdom preached by Jesus. Nothing could stand in more antithetical contrast to the life-giving and life-affirming prophetic message of Christ than the destruction and devaluation



of human life that results from the death penalty in modern America society. Thus a way forward must be forged with the prophetic voice as guide.

A Way Forward

Until recently, most surveys given to voters failed to ask about alternative punishments for the death penalty. When given alternatives, however, support for capital punishment drastically decreases. A forced choice between life without the possibility of parole and the death penalty shows Americans almost evenly split between the two possibilities. Moreover, when given a third alternative of life without the possibility of parole plus restitution, including all or part of a murderer's prison labor earnings going to support the victim's survivors, a majority of Americans support this alternative.²¹ In this case, the crime is punished, the murderer is removed from society and given the possibility of rehabilitation within the context of the prison system, and the families of victims receive support after the grave loss of a loved one. Among other possibilities, this alternative seems to fit the aims of the criminal justice system and fulfill the prophetic ethic of life-affirming love and restoration.

Though prophetic ethics cannot be adequately directed by opinion polls, it seems that a majority of Americans already support alternatives to the death penalty that contain the life-affirming and restorative elements of prophetic justice. Whatever restorative alternatives may arise to replace the inadequate system of capital punishment, the preservation and affirmation of life should remain at the forefront of Christian thinking in forging a way forward led by the prophetic voice of restorative justice. ■

1 "Facts and Figures on the Death Penalty," *Amnesty International*, Accessed 10 November 2006, Online: <http://web.amnesty.org/pages/deathpenalty-facts-eng>.

2 Jimmy Carter, *Out Endangered Values: America's Moral Crisis* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2005), 80.

3 James J. Megivern, *The Death Penalty: An Historical and Theological Survey* (New York: Paulist Press, 1997), 19.

4 *Ibid.*, 27.

5 Robert Parham, "Making the Crooked Straight In Moral Debate about Death Penalty," *Ethics Daily*, accessed 13 November 2006, online: http://www.ethicsdaily.com/print_popup.cfm?AID=1249.

6 All scripture citations are from the New Revised Standard Version.

7 Millard Lind, *The Sound of Sheer silence and the Killing State: The Death Penalty and the Bible* (Scottsdale, Pennsylvania: Herald Press, 2004), 36.

8 *Ibid.*, 70-71.

9 *Ibid.*

10 Stassen, "Deliverance," in *Leviathan's Choice*, 122.

11 John Howard Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1994), 203.

12 Glen H. Stassen and David P. Gushee, *Kingdom Ethics: Following Jesus in Contemporary Context* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 211.

13 Mark Constanzo, *Just Revenge: Costs and Consequences of the Death Penalty* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997), 80.

14 Stassen and Gushee, 211.

15 "Facts and Figures."

16 Constanzo, 97-98.

17 Stassen and Gushee, 196.

18 Lawrence S. Wrightsman and Solomon M. Fulero, *Forensic Psychology*, 2nd ed. (Belmont: California, 2005), 348.

19 "Innocence and the Death Penalty," *Death Penalty Information Center*, accessed: 14 November 2006, online: <http://www.deathpenaltyinfo.org/article.php?did=412&scid=6>.

20 Costanzo, 92.

21 *Ibid.*, 125-126.

"Book Reviews"

(continued from page 30)

a superior knowledge of science is not a barrier to faith. But my own faith is the result of experience gained from a personal "act as if" experiment.⁵ C. S. Lewis said that's what faith is, "really finding out by experience that it is true."⁶ The famous doctor, psychologist, philosopher, and Harvard professor William James observed many years ago that our most important beliefs are acquired that way—by acting as if something is true before we really know it is. Of course we didn't need William James to tell us that. We all say, "Experience is the best teacher," and "There is no substitute for experience."

Two essential parts of an experiment in faith are to pray and to practice charity. So far as we know, Antony Flew may be engaged in that kind of experiment right now. If he is, we wouldn't necessarily know about it. He may be following the instructions of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount: to pray in secret and not to make a show of charity (Mt 6:1-6). Let us hope that is what Flew is up to. And let us pray he will finally agree with his old friend, C. S. Lewis. ■

1 Copyright 2007 John R. Scott. This review contains some material from a forthcoming book.

2 Mark Oppenheimer, "The Turning of an Atheist," *New York Times*, November 4, 2007.

3 As quoted by Steve Laube, the literary agent for the book, as found on the website of Amazon.com

4 For examples of highly esteemed scientists who believe in God, see the section "Science and Religion" in the review of "Four Books by Three Atheists," *Christian Ethics Today*, Summer 2007, 30.

5 I summarized my experience in "Another Atheist Finds God," *Christian Ethics Today*, Fall 2005, 15

6 C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (HarperCollins edition, 2001), 146

Proud To Be Black

By Karen Wood, Freelance Writer, Waco, TX

Whoa. You're losing it. Get a grip, Karen. You aren't black.

But right now, I want to be. I received something a few days ago titled "Proud to be White." It could've come straight from a Ku Klux Klan playbook.

I'm in shock. News accounts tell about white supremacy gangs operating from prisons. People arrested for hate crimes. But those events are, well, "out there."

This vile diatribe actually crossed MY desk via email. I was asked to "pass it on." I'm sickened, thinking how many did so and how far it has traveled.

It came from whites venting they're termed "racists" if they call minorities by racial slurs. Well, DUH. They claim it's not so if it's the other way around. Oh, please.

They rail against the United Negro College Fund (UNCF), insisting a similar fund solely benefiting whites would be "racist." Gee. Wonder how many blacks benefited from scholarships before UNCF? Or how many whites benefited from scholarships before and after UNCF? Even with UNCF, I bet blacks haven't gotten a good deal.

These whites mock Martin Luther King Day. Black History Month. Caesar Chavez Day. Yom Hashoah. The NAACP. "BET" (Black Entertainment Television).

They counter whites would be "racists" if they had "WET," "White Pride Day," "White History Month" or organizations for whites only "to advance OUR lives."

Let's see. What might we call the majority of TV programming from its inception until recent years? How has history been taught in public schools, virtually from Day One, save from the "white man's" perspective? Why do whites need a special month when whole years, decades—centuries—

have been devoted to the advancement of whites over indigenous peoples?

This "White Pride" rant decries having a Chambers of Commerce for blacks or Hispanics when there is a "plain Chamber of Commerce." And they mutter about tax funds supporting the "black" or "Hispanic" Chambers.

Again, guess who's benefited from the "plain" Chamber of Commerce from its inception until just recently? Primarily white, male business owners, that's who. Hispanics and blacks had to create theirs to get their businesses on the economic radar screen.

These "White Pride" adherents assail the "over 60 openly proclaimed Black Colleges in the US," yet claim colleges catering to whites would be "racist." Gosh. Not quite sure how to break it to them. Until forced integration of higher education, the only well-funded, predominant colleges were "white." They were "racist."

The rant continues: In the "Million Man March," minorities believe "you were marching for your race and rights." But if whites held similar rallies or organized shows of "white" strength, such would be "racist."

I hate to keep repeating myself. But, um, er, well, let's see, now. What would you call Ku Klux Klan rallies? White police officers hosing down blacks on the streets of Birmingham, Ala., in 1963 when blacks tried to claim some civil rights? Or "white-on-white" rallies where white women marched for their right to vote when white men wouldn't allow it?

This line really got me: "You are proud to be black, brown, yellow, and orange, and you're not afraid to announce it. But when we announce our white pride, you call us racists." First of all, "orange"?

Whatever happened to that little Sunday school song? "Red and yellow, black and white; we are precious in God's sight. Jesus loves the little chil-

dren of the world." I don't recall it saying "Jesus loves little 'white' children of the world." Or "Jesus loves little 'black' children of the world." Ad infinitum.

Even the old Coke commercial got it. "I'd like to buy the world a home and furnish it with love; I'd like to teach the world to sing in perfect harmony. . . ."

But when I got to this part, I nearly lost it: "You rob us, carjack us, and shoot at us. But, when a white police officer shoots a black gang member or beats up a black drug dealer running from the law and posing a threat to society, you call him a racist."

I'm confident law enforcement officers will attest that robbers, car-jackers, gang members and "shooters" come in all colors, including white. And if a drug dealer is "running from the law and posing a threat to society," then, by golly, I want the officer handling it, no matter what the person's color.

Sure, I'm not black. But if anyone thinks this garbage would make me "Proud to be White," then get me a UNCF contribution envelope. An NAACP application. Honorary membership in the Hispanic Chamber.

And color me orange. ■

The American Beatitudes (From the Sermon on the Hill)

Matthew 5:1-16

By David D. Flowers, Satirist/Writer, The Woodlands, TX

5 One day as he saw the politicians gathering, Jesus went up the steps of the capital and stood behind a podium with The Statue of Freedom looming overhead. The Senate gathered around him,² and he began to address them.

The American Beatitudes

³ “Blessed are those who have a military-industrial complex and realize their need to secure their economic interests in the Middle East,

for the kingdoms of the world are theirs.

⁴ Blessed are those who are hedonistic, for they will be satisfied.

⁵ Blessed are those who are proud and arrogant,

for they shall rape and pillage the whole earth.

⁶ Blessed are those who lust for power and prosperity and call it “justice,” for they will have comforts.

⁷ Blessed are those who show no mercy,

for they will never be in need of it anyway.

⁸ Blessed are those whose hearts are peacefully wicked,

for they shall be gods.

⁹ Blessed are those who kill for peace, for they will be called the “good” children of God.

¹⁰ Blessed are the persecutors of evil men (those who threaten Pax Americana),

for the kingdoms of the world are theirs.

¹¹ Blessed are you when people burn your precious flag and curse you because you destroyed their homes and killed their loved ones. These evildoers simply have not understood the power and salvation of redemptive violence. My followers must understand, when we talk about war... we are really talking about peace.

¹² Be happy when people curse you for this! Be very glad! For great is your reward on earth. And remember, every

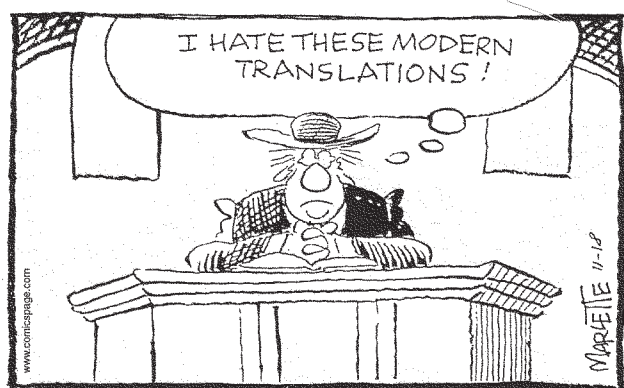
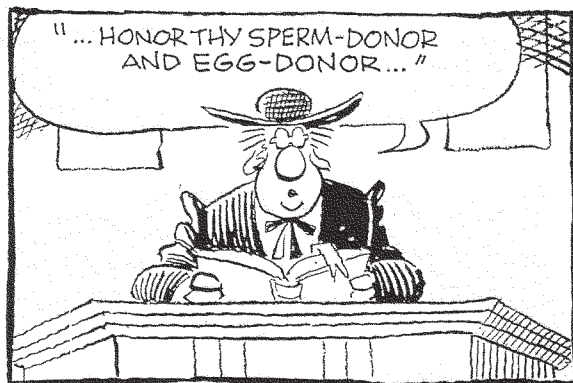
empire before you was cursed for the same things.

¹³ You and you alone are the salt of the earth. But what good is salt if it has been corrupted by dirty Mexicans from the South and cave-dwelling Muslims from the east? They should be shot like the Indians and dumped in the sea like slaves. They are worthless! This is your manifest destiny!

¹⁴ You and you alone are the light of the world—an idolatrous city on a hilltop that cannot be hidden.

¹⁵ No one buys alcohol and gets drunk alone. Instead they share their maddening wine with everyone in the world until everyone has had their fill!

¹⁶ In the same way, let your American ways spew out for all to taste, so that everyone will embrace carnal living and let freedom ring!” ■



CHRISTIAN ETHICS AND THE MOVIES

Reviewed By David A. Thomas, Assoc. Prof. of Rhetoric, Emeritus, University of Richmond¹

Health Care: *Sicko* (2007)

“I wouldn’t pay ten cents to see a Michael Moore movie,” a woman told me when I said that I had just seen *Sicko*. Michael Moore, Oscar winner for 2002’s *Bowling for Columbine*, also made *Fahrenheit 9/11*, an anti-Bush polemic in 2004 that infuriated many Republicans. Surprisingly, it crushed box office records when it earned over \$200 million world wide, and won the Palm d’Or, the Cannes Film Festival’s highest award in the bargain. So far, I’ve seen *Sicko* twice. Both times, the audience applauded. The first time, on the movie’s opening day, the audience interrupted the movie with applause frequently. But not everyone appreciates his movies.

There is no doubt that Michael Moore’s movies are rhetorical. They are intended to be social texts that influence public opinion. Moore is a political lightning rod who attracts visceral reactions, pro and con, whatever he does. His movies are opinionated, to be sure. He is passionate about the subjects of all five of his documentaries to date.

With regard to *Sicko*, Moore takes pains to be a degree or two less obnoxious than usual. In a two-part CNN interview with Moore on July 8-9, 2007, without editing, Wolf Blitzer said he thought the movie is “powerful.” Moore replied that in view of the media’s [read: CNN’s] never covering any good stories about France, Canada, or England’s health care systems, he is now the “balanced” source on the subject.

Sicko is the least partisan and most objective movie Moore has made to date. No one is “ambushed,” journalistically speaking. Moore excoriates politicians, as usual. This time he targets congressional members on both the left and the right side of the aisles who have sold out to the insurance

and pharmaceutical lobbies. That includes Hillary Clinton, known for her efforts to enact a universal health care system in 1993, to the ridicule of the whole country. Now she is the second highest recipient of the industries’ campaign contributions. Ironically, thanks to Michael Moore, today the country may be more receptive to her original idea; but will she still be positioned to resume a leadership role?

The major health debate in America today revolves around coverage for the enormous number of uninsured people. The number continues to rise almost exponentially as corporations drop benefits. In the last presidential campaign a couple of years ago, the figure of 36 million people was banded about as the size of the uninsured population. Today it is 50 million. Apart from group plans, it is generally difficult for anyone to obtain affordable health insurance coverage. There is nothing in place to halt this trend.

However, *Sicko* is not about the uninsured. From the beginning, Moore’s narrative directs attention to the 250 million insured Americans who believe, often wrongly, that their coverage is adequate. The first part of *Sicko* tells stories of tragic misadventures people have had with their health insurance. Moore claims that everyone in the audience has had such problems, or knows someone who has. Speaking for myself, that is a true statement. Insurance has proved to be less and less of a solution, as insurance companies multiply the number of illnesses they will not cover—seemingly the ones that people actually come down with—and also increase limits to the amount they will pay off.

For just one example, we see a well-insured middle-class couple who had successfully raised six children and educated them in top schools, only to lose everything to medical expenses

when their combined insurance ran out. They ended up moving into their grown daughter’s basement when they lost their home in bankruptcy. The movie shows other true horror stories where people suffered financially, even died, for lack of access to a necessary operation or medicine.

Sicko also spotlights the shameful stories of MDs and other medical professionals whose highly paid jobs are to meet quotas of denials of payment, solely in order to maximize HMO and insurance company profits. One tactic shown was when companies devise sophisticated methods for eliminating claims. For instance, although you might not have actually had some specific preexisting condition when you bought your insurance, one company says that as a “prudent” person you ought to have known that you would develop it, therefore your claim will be denied.

The most poignant stories in *Sicko*, the ones most people talk about after seeing the movie, revolve around a group of 9/11 volunteer EMTs who had worked to rescue victims at Ground Zero. They contracted devastating respiratory problems and are now disabled. Because they were all volunteers and not covered by New York City or other government insurance, they had no recourse and are not receiving any care. Moore chartered a boat and took them to Guantanamo, where he first requested the U. S. military to give these 9/11 heroes the same free medical care they provide to Gitmo’s detainees. Being rebuffed in that attempt, he took his patients to clinics in Havana, where they were welcomed and all received excellent care and medicines—for free. No one denies Moore’s resourcefulness resulted in Cuba providing what America’s health care system refused these heroes, but Moore has been attacked

politically for going to Cuba.

Many other Americans have also gone abroad to obtain the medical care that is priced out of reach at home. Moore takes us on a quick tour of Canada, France, and England, where universal health care is freely available to all, including expatriate Americans who moved there just for the purpose. In these scenes, Moore debunks the standard propaganda put out by the AMA and the health care industry lobbies about the evils of “socialized medicine.” There is a stark contrast between other countries and our system.

Ethical Considerations. Midway through the movie, Moore asks, “What has happened to us as a people?” Later, the movie ends with the question, “Why is the U.S. the only Western country that fails to provide free universal health care for everyone?” These are embarrassing, albeit legitimate questions. *Sicko* takes on the greed and inhumane decision making of the health care system, trading health care coverage for maximizing profits. *Sicko* focuses on the major HMOs and insurance companies, and to an extent, on the top pharmaceutical companies. *Sicko* will be a major catalyst for putting a national health service on the public agenda. Hopefully, serious attention will also be paid to price gouging (where it exists) by doctors, hospitals, HMOs, and Big Pharma. Assuming that the Bush Administration will have shifted the Iraq War policy to a major troop drawdown by then, public health could become just as important as Iraq in the 2008 presidential election campaign.

Sicko conflates the political with the ethical. We do not think twice about providing free schools, police, and fire protection. Why not universal health care? How, in principle, are they different? The answer lies in the private enterprise system that has four lobbyists for every legislator, and spends hundreds of millions annually to combat any reforms. That politicians rely on their contributions every election year doesn't help. ■

Seven Movies From 2007 Worth Seeing

There are several important movies from 2007 that I have not critiqued in this journal. Out of the ones that I could have chosen, I will discuss seven, with a note explaining why each has important social texts and ethical implications.

Three Iraq War Movies. Even with the Iraq War still in progress, this past year Hollywood made several probing feature movies about the conflict. The more substantive choices tended not to be box office hits. *Rendition* is the story of a scientist who was “rendered” (i.e., taken out of the country) by U. S. forces as a security risk, to an unnamed North African prison for harsh interrogation that would be illegal domestically. The suspect is stripped, isolated, beaten, and shocked. The movie includes some graphic scenes of “waterboarding.” The movie is clearly a commentary on the issue of torture. After a series of denials, the interrogation produces a manifestly false confession. The movie leaves open the bare possibility that the suspect just might possibly be guilty of something. Viewers are left to make their own judgments about torture as an instrument of official U. S. policy against terrorism, with precious little data to base a decision on, except that “waterboarding” and the rest of the torture techniques are bad, and they probably yield false information anyway. The movie played during the height of public hearings over Attorney General Alberto Gonzalez' defense of the Bush administration's position on torture.

Lions for Lambs is a thoughtful, sophisticated script directed by Robert Redford. The movie is structured as a three-act drama with a different cast and theme for each act. The three parts are connected loosely by the coincidental circumstance of happening simultaneously during a time frame of about an hour. In one act, Tom Cruise is a hawkish Senator being interviewed by veteran cynical newscaster Meryl Streep about the latest new Neocon strategy being imple-

mented to win the Afghan War once and for all. (It sounds like an Afghan version of the “surge.”) Their interview is very stimulating, with the major real political issues about the war clearly articulated by both sides. The second act is a combat scene involving a Marine assault on an Afghan target, which is the point attack for the new strategy under discussion. Due to an intelligence SNAFU, that mission comes to grief. The third and primary scene entails a liberal history professor (Redford) having a Dutch Uncle chat with his promising but slacker student over why he should become more engaged in the vital issues of the day, including the war. As luck would have it, the two Marines at the center of the Act II skirmish were former students of the professor. This movie is an excellent choice for a church discussion group.

In the Valley of Elah is my personal favorite among the war movies. Tommy Lee Jones and Susan Sarandon are the parents of a young returning Iraq War veteran who suddenly goes missing in a stateside assignment. Played out as a police procedural, as events unfold, it turns out that members of the young man's unit were involved in his fate. The movie respects the patriotism of those who support the war (Jones), yet clearly shows that the results of the war as actually being fought and experienced in Iraq are psychologically debilitating on the participants. The young man's life in combat conditions are reflected by the plot device of using the horrific pictures recovered from his cell phone. To me, it is clearly a movie about PTSD. The biblical allusion in the title is merely incidental to the story. The movie has a memorable image of the US flag being flown upside down at the local high school at both the beginning and the ending of the movie, symbolizing our national distress over this prolonged war.

Four Other Ethical Movies. One of the year's best movies is *The Great Debaters*, starring Denzel Washington and Forest Whitaker. Do not be misled into thinking this is a static, dull movie about academic debate. It is a civil

rights movie through and through. The story, based on an actual event, is about Wiley College, a small Black college in Texas during the Great Depression, that beat the national champions at Harvard. (In fact, it was Southern Cal.) But the real “great debaters” of the story are the tough debate coach (Washington), a hot blooded farm labor organizer, and the more cautious Methodist college president (Whitaker), over the ethics of civil rights activism in a dangerous Jim Crow era. In real life, the college president was the father of James Farmer, Jr., who subsequently went on to found CORE, a pioneering civil rights group in the South. James Farmer, Jr., was one of the school’s debaters that year. It’s just a great, inspirational movie, and a great commentary on civil rights. When I attended, the audience broke into spontaneous applause in the middle and again at the end. Take your teenagers.

No Country for Old Men is a modern day western based on a novel by America’s leading serious novelist, Cormac McCarthy, who was recently nominated for a Nobel Prize. The theme of the story is the overwhelming domination of individuals in our society by the bad guys who have superior

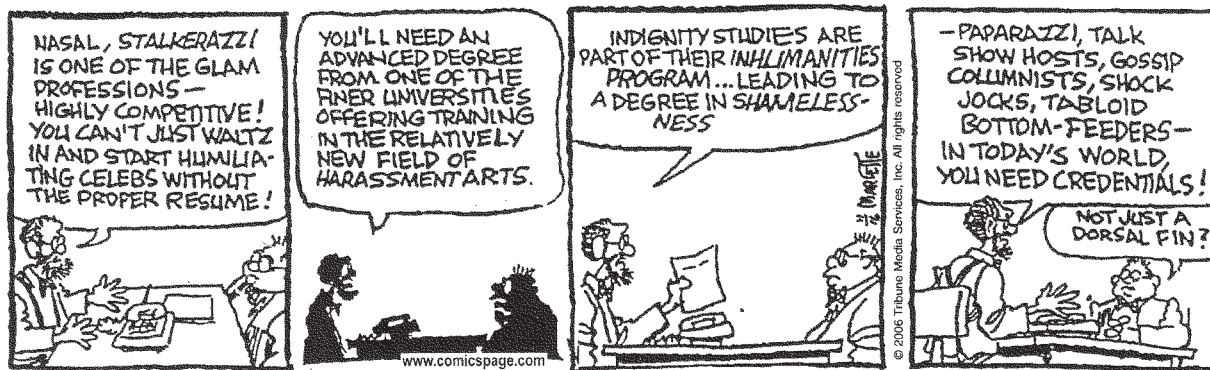
technological weapons. Tommy Lee Jones plays an aging traditional West Texas sheriff who has difficulty coping with the massive drug trade spilling over the Mexican border through his county. Javier Bardem, Spain’s greatest actor, plays a hit man who will probably join Hannibal Lector as one of the screen’s most memorable villains. The movie is very violent and not for the squeamish.

Juno is a small independent film about a pregnant teenager who confronts her moral issues of dealing with her parents, her boyfriend, and the prospective adoptive parents for her unborn baby. It’s a very honest, candid movie, with some light touches, though it never trivializes the basic situation. *Juno* does not come up with any pat answers. Given that the girl ought not to have become pregnant, but she did, so what then? Audiences will probably acknowledge the practical wisdom of the choices everyone ultimately makes. *Juno* will appeal to a lot of families, and it will generate frank discussions.

Finally, my personal favorite movie of last year is *Into the Wild*. Based on a nonfiction book by Jon Krakauer, the movie is about a bright young man who abandoned his privileged

upper class life to go off “into the wild” to find his identity and passion in the 1990s. It is a difficult movie to describe succinctly, but let me characterize it by saying that it is a textbook example of the *monomyth*, or the life path of every young man who leaves home, experiences many adversities, is taught by many mentors, and learns wisdom. In this case, the story ends tragically when the young man eventually starves to death in the wilds of Alaska. Along the way, he meets all of the major quirky archetypal figures that populate a good quest story and makes many mistakes due to his hardheaded naivete. Nevertheless, the movie conveys themes of redemption and atonement. On top of that, it is brilliantly adapted and directed by Sean Penn. The cast is superb, especially Emile Hirsch in the leading role, Hal Holbrook as the wise old man, and Catherine Keener as a retro hippie who served the young man as a surrogate loving mother figure. ■

- 1 David A. Thomas retired in 2004 and now resides in Sarasota, Florida, and he invites your comments at davidthomas1572@comcast.net.



Book Reviews

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

Red Letter Christians

Tony Campolo, Ventura, CA:

Regal Books, 2008.

Reviewed by Michelle D. Basich,
Ventura, CA.

Over the past couple of decades, evangelical Christians have been associated with the religious right and the most conservative positions of the Republican Party. Rebellious against this designation are those who prefer to be called Red Letter Christians, desiring to live out the red letters of Jesus' words in the New Testament. Believing that Jesus is neither a Republican nor a Democrat, these individuals transcend partisan politics and concentrate on issues viewed critically through a moral and biblical lens.

Into this arena of thought steps Tony Campolo, the powerful evangelist known for his passionate and prophetic sharing of the radical message of Jesus. In *Red Letter Christians*, Campolo examines many of the hot-button issues facing evangelicals from the perspective of Jesus' red-letter words in the Bible. These include the environment, war, the AIDS crisis, Palestine, education, gun control, the role of government and choosing the right kind of candidate. No matter where you fall on the political spectrum, Campolo will make you think and pray and act.

In *Red Letter Christians*, readers will discover:

- Why no political party has the corner on truth
- A *Red Letter Christians'* voting guide
- Why Christians should avoid being tied to a political party
- The problem of partisan politics
- The importance of being politically active
- Why being an evangelical does not mean you're a conservative Republican

Campolo is professor emeritus of Sociology at Eastern University in St. Davids, Pennsylvania, founder of the Evangelical Association for the Promotion of Education (EAPE), Associate Pastor of the Mount Carmel Baptist Church in West Philadelphia, and author of 35 books. ■

Shopping for God: How Christianity Went From In Your Heart to In Your Face

James B. Twitchell, New York: Simon & Schuster, 2007, \$26.

Reviewed by Aubrey Ducker,
Winter Park, FL

"If God had a face, what would it be and would you want to see, if seeing meant that you would have to believe. . ." The lyrics to Brian Withycombe's 1992 hit song ask, "if God were one of us," how would we react? Every Sunday morning evangelists, ministers, prophets and priests put their human face on God attempting to sell the church and salvation to sinners and seekers alike. James B. Twitchell sees a marketing opportunity, one which has been used for centuries, but now adds Madison Avenue techniques second to none.

If you could buy God, what would you pay? Where would you go "shopping" for God? Twitchell, Professor of English and Advertising at the University of Florida, answers these and numerous other questions. As the title implies, religion (or in particular Christianity) has changed from a deep feeling held in our soul to a showman like performance art intended to force conversion and compliance. Be like your friends and neighbors or be left out of the party!

Pastorpreneurs as Twitchell calls them are building "city-states of believers" as they use big box retail

practices to sell "low-cost rapture" seeking transfer growth from the "old-line suppliers," Methodist, Episcopal, and Lutheran. If all this seems particularly heathen or even offensive, perhaps that is because Christians do not usually consider their faith from a purely *marketing* perspective. Twitchell however sees religion as one big marketing experiment. Where best to purchase an afterlife? From a tried and true, tithing-required, robe-wearing church with elders and history, or from the fun-loving, people-pleasing pastor who plays golf with you on Tuesday, preaches prosperity on Sunday, and wears a mike like a rock star?

Certainly the prime marketing season running from Black Friday to End-of-Year markdowns, also known as the Christmas season, offers churches a unique revival period. From the first time the church decided to use the pagan festival of sun (Winter Solstice) as an opportunity to promote God, people have used this time as a marketing machine par excellence. The Twelve Days of Christmas highlight consumerism's link to the Cross as no other secular song, yet Christians continue the myth that the twelve days are a road to salvation hidden from Catholic police of the middle-ages. Even today, the battle of Merry Christmas versus Happy Holidays pits "real Christians" against those who would market the holiday to a secular world without offence.

Reading this book is both a challenge for the believer to accept much of the history of Christianity not taught in Sunday School and an introduction to marketing principles being mastered by the flourishing megachurches, as mainline denominations see continual decline from the glory days of 1950s revivalism.

Pastors and church growth ministers should read Twitchell's book

even if only to learn what others value and attempt. Some books should be neither tasted nor swallowed whole, but they should be read for their value and shared with others in need of the lesson. ■

Fulfilling Heart & Soul: Meeting Psychological and Spiritual Needs with Conscience

N.S. Xavier, M.D., Bloomington, IN:

AuthorHouse, 2006, \$26, \$15 (paperback).

Reviewed by Charles Kinnaird,
Birmingham, AL

The unexamined life is not worth living, as Socrates famously stated. Dr. N. S. Xavier has a remedy. He has given us a delightful book which can serve as a primer for healthy examination leading to a full and meaningful life. I had an “aha moment” right from the beginning as I read the introduction of *Fulfilling Heart & Soul*, where the author explains the difference between conscience and the superego. The conscience uses reason, fairness, and compassion in guiding the individual toward right thinking and right actions. The superego, on the other hand, is that inner guide that is shaped by family and society. There are times when the superego may actually be in conflict with the conscience if it arises from an unhealthy family or social system. Racism and fanaticism are two examples of unhealthy prompts from a superego shaped by unhealthy societal and religious traits.

The illumination continues with the opening chapter where Dr. Xavier demonstrates how Jesus helped others to get past their superego to make use of their conscience. In the case in which some men brought a woman caught in adultery to Jesus, demanding that she be stoned, Jesus was able to calmly diffuse the situation to allow the men to cease from their unthinking legalistic reaction. He showed them how to use their conscience to bring fairness to the situation.

Dr. Xavier is from India and has practiced psychiatry in Birmingham

for 29 years. He writes from a deep understanding of religion and spirituality and presents a well-articulated view of healthy psychology. In this text he draws upon examples from literature, various religious traditions, and historical figures as well as from his own experiences as a psychiatrist to illustrate healthy ways of meeting needs and finding fulfillment, offering insights from the likes of Lao-tze, Shakespeare, Victor Hugo, Boris Pasternak, Albert Camus, Jesus and the Buddha in order to stop self-defeating habits and move toward a healthy identity. There is also an intriguing story of the ancient king Asoka, who reassessed his life and legacy and was able to transform himself and his society to one of equity and fairness by embracing Buddhism and its principles.

Writing with humor and clarity, the author provides us with a practical guide for using the conscience in making right choices and enjoying the healthy pleasures of life. We are given psychological insight that is accessible to the layperson in matters ranging from self esteem, relationships, and sexuality to freedom and identity. Stick-on tabs may come in handy to mark particularly useful pages. There is a page that lists ways to improve self esteem and another that lists traits of self-actualizing people. One chapter has a table that compares healthy guilt vs. unhealthy guilt and another table contrasts authentic individuality with egocentrism and dependency. We are reminded also of the benefits of pleasure and the healthiness of laughter. For those interested in spiritual practice, an appendix includes introductory information on meditation and centering prayer.

There is advice in the book for integrating past experiences in beneficial ways rather than being trapped in unhealthy cycles. *Fulfilling Heart & Soul* provides means for achieving forgiveness and reconciliation as well as methods for finding hope. The author consistently demonstrates how conscience can raise self-esteem in cases where the superego may be causing unhealthy guilt. Of course, profes-

sional help is recommended for anyone with issues or problems that are beyond the scope of self examination.

In the search for deeper meaning, there is guidance for those in religious traditions as well as for those who are more secular in their orientation. The modern spiritual pilgrim will find affirmation in the concept of using conscience to integrate scientific knowledge with spiritual life. Whether we are religious or secular in our orientation, we can live lives of superficiality or we can find a deeper purpose. Self examination and conscience can help us to remove some of the spiritual and psychological defenses that often keep us from living at a deeper level.

Sigmund Freud gave us the concept of the superego. N.S. Xavier has liberated the conscience from the superego to give us method of examination for individual growth and societal development. He writes with a frankness and honesty not often seen in books on spirituality, and offers a practical application of spiritual values not always evident in self-help guides. We are shown how to better understand our own needs as well as others' needs, and then how to go about meeting those needs in a healthy way. *Fulfilling Heart & Soul* is a groundbreaking work of insight that will encourage the individual reader. It would also be a dynamic study tool for small groups or for courses in counseling, ethics, or spirituality/religion. ■

There Is A God: How The World's Most Notorious Atheist Changed His Mind

Antony Flew, with Roy Abraham Varghese,
New York: HarperOne, 2007, \$25

Reviewed by John Scott,¹
Dallas, TX

Many atheists have changed their minds, but none have attracted as much media attention as Antony Flew. That's because he had been the world's intellectual champion for atheism for more than fifty years. He wrote over thirty philosophical works, some

of which are considered classics by atheists. Then, in 2004, he made the surprise announcement that he now believes in God. His new book, *There is a God*, explains why he disagrees with his former self.

Part I of the book, "My Denial of the Divine," tells how Flew became an atheist despite growing up in a good Christian home as the son of a Methodist preacher. And he continued to be an atheist notwithstanding his association at Oxford with C. S. Lewis, the former atheist who had become a Christian apologist.

Part II, "My Discovery of the Divine," explains how science and reason finally compelled Flew to believe in God. In one of Flew's earlier works he took the position that those who say God exists have the burden of proof. Flew has not changed his mind on that point. But now he believes that burden has been met. He calls the evidence "compelling and irrefutable." Based in part on recent DNA research he says, "The only satisfactory explanation for the origin of 'end-directed, self-replicating' life as we see on earth, is an infinitely intelligent Mind." And he finally concedes that a Divine Mind is "the only viable explanation" for the origin of the laws of nature.

Flew does not personally disparage any of the currently popular atheists. But he does undercut their credibility by pointing out various misstatements in their books. I'll cite just one example. Richard Dawkins is generally regarded as the world's leading atheist now that Flew has relinquished that "honor." In his best selling book *The God Delusion* Dawkins takes several pages to convince his readers that Einstein was an atheist. Flew refutes Dawkins in a rather straightforward way—he uses an exact quote by Einstein that begins: "I'm not an atheist."

Is Flew Really the Author?

An article in the *New York Times* magazine, written as if it were an exposé, "revealed" that a friend of Flew did most of the actual writing on this book.² His name is Roy Abraham Varghese. That hardly qualifies as investigative journalism. The cover of

Flew's book plainly shows it was written "with Roy Abraham Varghese." And the practice of getting help with the writing of a book is extremely common. Walk into any bookstore and see how many autobiographies are written "with" another writer.

In any event, Flew shot back this response: "My name is on the book and it represents exactly my opinions. I would not have a book issued in my name that I do not 100 percent agree with. I needed someone to do the actual writing because I'm 84 and that was Roy Varghese's role. The idea that someone manipulated me because I'm old is exactly wrong. I may be old but it is hard to manipulate me. This is my book and it represents my thinking."³

The credibility of Flew's response is enhanced by his reputation for integrity, which is as solid as a blacksmith's anvil. Not even Christian scholars questioned that when Flew was an atheist.

Even before the *New York Times* magazine article was written, the following facts were well known and undisputed: The world's leading atheist had changed his mind and announced his belief in God. He made that announcement himself, in person and in public. No one made it for him. He did it at a symposium that was videotaped at New York University, and he granted several interviews afterwards in which he discussed his reasons. Those are the same reasons explained in his book. So there has never been any doubt that the thinking reflected in the book came from the mind of Antony Flew.

Flew's Position on Religion

C. S. Lewis stopped being an atheist before he became a Christian. That's where Flew is now. He accepts the existence of God, but is still pondering religious claims based on "divine revelation." And he says, "I think that the Christian religion is the one religion that most clearly deserves to be honored and respected . . ." But Flew still has questions. So he asked Bishop N. T. Wright to address those questions in an appendix. (Bishop Wright is the author of the highly acclaimed

740-page book, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*.) The questions are: How do we know that Jesus existed? What grounds are there for claiming, from the texts, that Jesus is God Incarnate? What evidence is there for the resurrection of Christ?

Following the Bishop's responses to those questions, Flew wrote: "I am very much impressed with Bishop Wright's approach, which is absolutely fresh. He presents the case for Christianity as something new for the first time." In my opinion, the appendix by Bishop Wright is worth the price of the book.

A Qualified Recommendation of the Book

Over the past 50 years I have read hundreds of essays, articles and books on both sides of the God debate. Most arguments for God's existence can be loosely divided into two broad categories: those based on scientific observation and those based on personal experience. After Francis Bacon formulated the scientific method, he said the best proof is still "personal experience." The path of science may lead to belief in a Creator, but the path of experience to faith in a Savior.

I would put Flew's book on the "must read" list in the first category—books that purport to prove the existence of a Creator through science and reason. However, I will not pretend that I understood all of it. I very much enjoyed those parts I did understand. But there is much in the book outside my body of knowledge. I am among the more than ninety-nine percent of the people on this planet who are not experts in physics, geology, chemistry, biology and astronomy. I know very little about DNA, which played a major role in Flew's thinking. And I don't have sufficient time to read, study, understand, verify, analyze, and draw confident conclusions from the massive volumes of complex data relied on by scientists who take conflicting positions in the God debate.

I'm glad to know that many of the world's most esteemed scientists believe in God.⁴ At least that proves

(continued on page 22)

FINANCIAL REPORT FOR 2007

The year 2007 was one of our best in the twelve-year history of *Christian Ethics Today*. A record number of **5400 subscribers**, a major **conference** (funded by the Piper Foundation) on “The Minister and Politics” in Washington, D.C. the production and distribution of more than **1000 audios and videos** of the conference, and the largest number of financial contributors ever!

During 2007, **898** contributors (an increase of 147 over 2006) gave **\$106,046** (an increase of \$17,361 over 2006). In addition, a one-time gift of \$10,000 came through the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship from a grant to provide *Christian Ethics Today* to several hundred ministers in mentoring groups throughout the country.

Most gifts ranged from \$10 to \$500. Significant gifts came from foundations and churches. Contributions of \$1000 or more came from 14 individuals, including one supporter who gave \$15,000 and another who give \$17,500.

Every gift, no matter the size, is deeply appreciated. These larger gifts, however, do allow us to send the Journal to hundreds of readers who would otherwise not be able to receive it, including students, ministers, college and seminary libraries, and churches—all free of any cost. The cost of producing and mailing the Journal for the last three years has remained under \$90,000, an amount most journalists find astounding. The credit goes to our capable staff of workers in five different cities, who keep expenses to a minimum.

From our inception in 1995, the founder of *Christian Ethics Today*—

Foy Valentine—dreamed of a journal of Christian ethics that would be sent free of charge to anyone requesting it. He often said, “as long as finances and energy allows, we will continue to publish and send the Journal.” To date we have not missed an issue. Although his energy is no longer with us, Foy’s dream lives on!

Special Thanks To Our Major Supporters

A special word of gratitude is due to these supporters who have kept the dream alive through major contributions of \$1000 or more in 2007:

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CIOS/Piper Fund Grant

The Journal is deeply grateful for the third year of a grant of \$25,000 from the CIOS/Piper Fund of Waco, Texas, for special projects. A major

event was to sponsor a conference on “The Minister and Politics” last June in Washington, D. C., during the joint meeting of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship and the American Baptist Convention, U.S.A. The four hour session featured four renowned speakers: Gregg Boyd, Tony Campolo, Melissa Rogers, and Jim Wallis. Numerous attendees claimed it was the best conference they had attended in many years. Audio and video CDs of the sessions have been mailed to hundreds of ministers, students, churches, and college and seminary libraries, as well as to subscribers and supporters of CET.

The funding also allowed the Editor to promote the Journal and the cause of Christian ethics through visits to state conventions, the Texas CLC conference, and Oklahoma Baptist University. The \$32,477 expended includes unused funds from previous years.

SUMMARY OF FINANCIAL STATEMENT 2007

*Balance: 12/31/06 \$52,489

**Expenditures 2007: \$120,597

***Gifts/Income 2007: \$141,046

*BALANCE: 12/31/07 \$73,310

*This amount includes unused funds from the CIOS/Piper Grant.

**Expenditures in 2007 include \$32,427 expended from the CIOS/Piper Grant.

***This amount includes the CIOS/Piper Grant of \$25,000.

FOY VALENTINE MEMORIAL FUND: \$184,342.

Christian Ethics Today

A Journal of Christian Ethics

“We need now to recover the prophethood of all believers, matching our zeal for the priesthood of all believers with a passion for the prophethood of all believers.”

—Foy Valentine, Founding Editor

MISSION

The Christian Ethics Today Foundation publishes *Christian Ethics Today* in order to provide laypersons, educators, and ministers with a resource for understanding and responding in a faithful Christian manner to moral and ethical issues that are of concern to contemporary Christians, to the church, and to society.

PURPOSES

- Maintain an independent prophetic voice for Christian social ethics
- Interpret and apply Christian experience, biblical truth, theological insights, historical understanding, and current research to contemporary moral issues
- Support Christian ecumenism by seeking contributors and readers from various denominations and churches
- Work from the deep, broad center of the Christian church
- Address readers at the personal and emotional as well as the intellectual level by including in the Journal narratives, poetry, and cartoons as well as essays
- Strengthen and support the cause of Christian ethics

Christian Ethics Today was born in the mind and heart of Foy Valentine in 1995, as an integral part of his dream for a Center for Christian Ethics. In his words, the purpose of the Journal was “to inform, inspire, and unify a lively company of individuals and organizations interested in working for personal morality and public righteousness.”

When the Center was transferred to Baylor University in June 2000, the disbanding Board voted to continue the publication of *Christian Ethics Today*, appointing a new editor and a new Board. The Journal will continue to be published five times annually.

From the beginning *Christian Ethics Today* has been sent without charge to anyone requesting it, “as money and energy permit.” More than ever before, your financial support is “greatly needed, urgently solicited, and genuinely appreciated.”

The Christian Ethics Today Foundation is a non-profit organization and has received a 501 (c) (3) status from the Internal Revenue Service. Gifts are tax deductible.

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