

Translational Alchemy
Steve Watkins **19**

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John (“Jack”) Shelby Spong

1931–2021

Westar has lost a great friend. John Shelby Spong died at his home in Richmond, Virginia, on September 12.

For the past thirty years, Spong has been known around the world as a powerful advocate of progressive Christianity. Raised in Charlotte, North Carolina, Spong’s public life began as an Episcopal parish priest in the South. He served three churches, taking lonely positions on issues of social justice. Upon becoming rector of St. Paul’s Episcopal Church in Richmond, Virginia, he insisted that the Confederate battle flag no longer fly on the parish flagpole. After seven years in that powerful public pulpit, he was elected bishop of the Episcopal Diocese of Newark, New Jersey, a position he held for twenty-four years (1976–2000).

Spong had a lover’s quarrel with Christianity. In his words, “If Christianity was going to engage the world of my generation, it must rethink all of its images, reformulate all of its understandings, reinterpret all of its words.” His call for a credible faith made him the target of fundamentalist fury as well as hostility from his own beloved denomination. Yet, his advocacy offered hope to countless others that he called “the church alumni association.” They became the focus of his ministry, and the demand for his books and lectures escalated.

HarperOne has sold over 1.2 million copies of the bishop’s books. Of his twenty-six books, the best-selling titles include: *Living in Sin: A Bishop Rethinks Human Sexuality* (1988), *Rescuing the Bible from Fundamentalism* (1991), *Why Christianity Must Change or Die* (1999), and *A New Christianity for a New World* (2002). His last book was *Unbelievable: Why Neither Ancient Creeds Nor the Reformation Can Produce a Living Faith Today* (2018), a manuscript he completed by force of will after a stroke in 2016. His lectures in churches, at conferences, and on university campuses attracted large audiences. Many of his lectures on YouTube have been watched by more than eighty thousand viewers.

Characteristic of Spong was the care that he took to publicly thank the people who assisted him in his work. The acknowledgements in his books consume many pages. A name that appears in every preface is Christine Spong, his wife. She was the sparkle in his eyes. She also edited every draft of his books and speeches and organized his schedule and his travels. In Robert Frost’s words, they were “together wing to wing, and oar to oar.”

We mourn his passing.

Andrew D. Scrimgeour

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Cover: A depiction of the ancient Middle Eastern three-tiered cosmos. Drawing by Robaire Ream based on artwork from ancient Mesopotamia and Egypt.

*Carl Jung's theory of symbols
and the unconscious can
reveal the psychological power
of Christmas and Easter.*

*Why has European
Christianity proven to
be such a sturdy ally
of racism?*

*The belief that God is all-
powerful disables love—
human and divine—from
being unconditional.*

*How a sleight-of-hand
translation of one
word obscures the
worldview of Genesis.*

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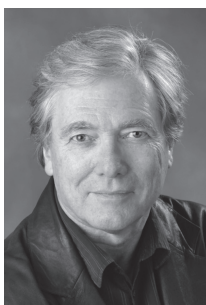
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The Fourth R welcomes letters responding to articles. Letters must be 150 words or fewer and include the writer's name, city, and a daytime phone number. Letters may be sent to Robert J. Miller, Juniata College, 1700 Moore St., Huntingdon, PA 16652 or fourthr@westarinstitute.org. Publication of letters is solely at the discretion of the editor and authors of articles may be invited to respond. *The Fourth R* reserves the right to condense letters for the sake of brevity.



Art Dewey

Jack the Precursor

Although it has been two months, the death of Jack Spong still stings. I have encountered a number of bishops from various denominations throughout my life, but only Jack Spong and Gordon Raynal have been friends. Unlike the bishops I have known from my own Roman tradition, Jack was determined to be an engaged teacher in his episcopal role. He put his own experience under critical review. He did not see himself as a company man simply propping up doctrine and maintaining the institution. John Shelby Spong carried a restless spirit within. His honesty could not overlook the fact that there was a radical discordance between the Christian tradition and contemporary life. And his preaching was a witness to this.

Long before I actually met Jack, his reputation as bishop of Newark, New Jersey, augmented by a steady stream of provocative writings, made him quite visible. I was struck by the fact that his writing took his audience quite seriously. He trusted that his congregation and readers did not relish being confined by literal interpretations of scripture and outmoded creeds and rituals. A shrewd observer of what was really stirring within the churches, he took responsibility for both naming the beast and providing a way into the future. His preaching emerged from his testing of both scripture and experience. His books documented his continued journey. Alert both to the advances of science and the progress of biblical studies, Jack brought a complicated compassion to the pulpit.

Such a witness did not always win him friends. His scriptural nuances were often lost by critics and some clergy. He was called a “heretic” by numerous conservatives, “an amateur” scholar (Raymond Brown, 1997); his reform notes were characterized as no more than “confusion and misinterpretation” (Rowan Williams, 1998). Gore Vidal in *Live from Golgotha* (1992) even satirized Jack’s argument that Paul the Apostle was gay. During a speaking tour in Australia (2001), he was banned by the archbishop of Brisbane from speaking in that diocese. The archbishop of Sydney also banned him in 2007. But Jack pressed on.

In fact, after serving as Newark’s bishop (1976–2000), he spent his “retirement” producing an avalanche of books, lectures, and presentations. It was at one of the Santa Rosa Westar Meetings that I experienced Jack in full rhetorical flight. I do not remember the question at stake but I can recall how Jack concluded his observation with

the exhortation of “living fully, loving wastefully, and building a better world where everyone has the opportunity to do the same.” I recall his later

lecture at Westar’s visit to the Big Apple and the enthusiastic response by the hundreds that crowded in to hear him. And I relish the intimate dinner I had with him in Salem—lasting way into the night—when we talked about the Christian Origins Seminar and its implications for the contemporary churches.

But as these memories crowd in my mind, I would like to slow down the rush of words and images. Indeed, we are entering into the darkest time of the year, when light is at its ebb. I would like to take a moment in the shadow side of the year to learn from a co-conspirator, who never stopped teaching. What is there to take to heart even now from an older, wiser friend?

But in the face of death, is such learning possible? Against such an incalculable loss, what can we say? Words fail. Death takes us out of our comfort zone, from the day-to-day, yanks us out of our unconscious living, stuns and numbs us with the hard edge of pain.

Nevertheless, let me ask: What is Jack still teaching us in the tumbling moments of distress and grief? Where is he leading us? Where is he going? In his later writings he kept reiterating that we should focus not on what is after life but on how we are staying on the human path.

In fact, Jack gives us a hint. He said that Jesus in his death stepped aside to let meaning in (see *Eternal Life: A Vision*, 183). Jack had consigned the vicarious notion of the death of Jesus to the wastebin of the past, nor did he see some external God acting *ex machina* to resolve this situation. Instead, he wondered *what did it mean for Jesus to get out of the way? What happened to his followers? Or, as he puts it in modern terms: What happens when everything is given away? What happens when the bounds of self-preservation are broken?*

So let us not give up on those fragments of memory. Let us remember Jack, the sweep of his arms, the flow of his words, the sparkle in those eyes. For remembering in this modern world is our deepest prayer. It takes us to the very edge of things.

Every turbulent memory wave we ride leads somewhere. Each one is like a stone skipping across a lake until it plunges deep into the water. Or a log tossed onto a

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Christmas, Easter, Myth, and Depth Psychology

Arthur George

In my recent book I discussed the experience and meaning of Christmas and Easter from the perspective of depth psychology, partly in order to suggest corresponding, modern ways to celebrate these holidays.¹ This article summarizes some aspects of that discussion and elaborates on others. In order to do so, it is necessary to review the pertinent concepts of depth psychology and myth, and then apply them to aspects of the Christ story. For reasons of space, I focus on the thought of Carl Jung (1875–1961), without getting into the variations developed by his successors. Jung’s thought is fundamental to any further study of this subject that readers may wish to undertake.

A preliminary remark is in order for readers unfamiliar with Jung and depth psychology. Jung was careful to caution his audiences that he was not a biblical scholar. A focus of his was to analyze and explain the depth psychological undercurrents of myths and religious concepts that give them their structure and much of their ultimate meaning, and he regarded the Christ story as mythical in character (as mythologists generally do*). He sought not to challenge or replace historical-critical methods, but to offer another perspective that will enrich our understanding of the material, much as the various forms of biblical criticism (which now include psychological biblical criticism) offer their own helpful perspectives. But Jung also went beyond mere interpretation to explain how a depth psychological approach is personally useful in leveraging the Christian myth to achieve better psychic balance and improve one’s spiritual life, as well as the life of the community. In my view, this approach flows over into how we conceive of and celebrate our principal Christian holidays, Easter and Christmas.

* For mythologists, whether a story is mythical has nothing to do with the common notion that a myth is something false. Rather, the mythical character of a story depends on the manner in which the story is told (e.g., using symbols) as well as the nature of its content (usually involving superhuman figures and conveying truths important to the community).

Pertinent Concepts of Depth Psychology and Myth

Depth psychology is the subdiscipline in psychology that focuses on studying the unconscious psyche. The psyche consists of a conscious part (ego consciousness) and an unconscious part. Jung subdivided the unconscious into the personal unconscious, consisting of suppressed and repressed content from each individual’s own life experiences, and an archetypal “collective” unconscious, which is the product of human evolution and is the same in all humans.

According to Jung, at the deepest unconscious center of the Self is an archetype responsible for our sense of ultimate unity, indescribable totality, and sense of wholeness.

According to Jung, the collective unconscious contains numerous structures that manifest patterned workings of the unconscious psyche, which he called archetypes. They evolved because all humans over history have faced common situations in life (e.g., the masculine, feminine, mother, father, old man, the experience of the “divine”), and so we developed psychic structures to deal with them somewhat instinctively and more efficiently.

When suitably stimulated (e.g., when one’s adaptation to one’s life and environment is shaken by events), archetypal content rises up into ego consciousness. Often this entails two opposites that are latent in the unconscious (e.g., good vs. evil) emerging and colliding, hopefully resulting in such unconscious content becoming integrated into ego consciousness, a synthesis that Jung called the “third thing.” If the ego is not sufficiently strong and stable, however, it can become possessed by the unconscious content (a state called inflation), further unbalancing the psyche. A healthy ego is important for psychic health. On the other hand, if the ego is overly strong and dominant, such that psychic energy and content from the unconscious are not recognized and integrated, a person also becomes psychically unbalanced, eventually losing one’s drive, motivation, and energy, a condition termed “loss of soul.” A goal of Jungian depth psychology is to integrate the psyche by “making the unconscious conscious,” resulting in a psychic state of “wholeness.” This process is called

“individuation,” and it is never-ending since perfect wholeness is never achieved.

The totality of ego consciousness and the unconscious that is the psyche is termed the “Self” (capitalized). According to Jung, at the deepest unconscious center of the Self is an archetype responsible for our sense of ultimate unity, indescribable totality, and sense of wholeness. It produces powerful psychic energy and is responsible for our most profound experience of the numinous, of the “divine,” of “God.” Thus, Jung also termed it the God archetype, symbolized by the God-image (the Father). According to Jung, a person’s ego consciousness can connect with this archetype of wholeness through the symbol of Christ.

Depth psychologists hold that authentic myths (and their corresponding rituals) originate not through the conscious cogitations of the ego, but rather from the unconscious. Since this content comes from the unconscious, ego consciousness has trouble defining and describing it. As a result, our unconscious generates symbols of this content which convey its meaning as comprehensibly as possible, because language and reason are inadequate to the task. Since the unconscious and its content are literally “external” to the ego, unconscious contents are perceived as external, as coming from the outside. As a result, such contents are typically projected as external realities (e.g., heaven, Satan, revelations from God), rather than being understood as inner psychic realities. Over time, our conscious efforts build upon the initial, basic myth to construct a more elaborate mythical narrative, to structure rituals, to further integrate the myth into the community and its (mythic) history, and to spawn beliefs including theologies. Myths are always *psychically* true, conveying important truths to the audience. It is improper to regard them as historically true or false from the objective (historical) perspective of ego consciousness; rather, they are only effective or ineffective, flourishing while they are effective and fading away when they cease to be so. As explained below, Jung insisted that the Christian myth can still be effective.

Jung took what philosophers call a phenomenological approach in which we can recognize only the psychic realities that are empirically observed, and not speculate beyond that. Thus, depth psychology takes no position on whether actual metaphysical, supernatural realities and phenomena lie behind the psyche’s mystical experiences of the “divine.” Still, Jung considered individuation a “religious” process. Interestingly, the theology of Paul Tillich follows a framework that aligns closely with the depth psychological approach outlined above, but in the end he be-

lieved in a real divinity behind it all.² Still, Tillich called depth psychology a “gift” to theology.³

We can now turn to how this framework is reflected in the concepts (doctrines) of Christianity, human mystical experiences of God/Christ, and the figure of Christ.

Christ as a Symbol of the Self

Jung stressed that the Christian myth, its symbols, rituals, and theology correspond closely to the matrix of the human psyche. Jung wrote,

Had there not been an affinity—magnet!—between the figure of the Redeemer and certain contents of the unconscious, the human mind would never have been able to perceive the light shining in Christ and seize upon it so passionately.⁴

The spiritual philosopher Alan Watts, who was for some time an Episcopal priest, similarly observed that “the Christ story can only find its way into the human heart because a place for it has already been prepared.”⁵ Jung considered the Christian myth a gift to humanity⁶ that offers anyone (even atheists) brought up in Western Judeo-Christian cul-

ture a reliable guide to the individuation process. This myth and its symbols still have the power to transform psychic and spiritual life, and so must continue to play an important role. Jung therefore called for an integration and internalization of Christian symbols, in order to acquaint Christians and others with the level of the psyche that originally produced these sym-

bols, and still does.⁷

Most fundamentally, Jung viewed the Christ figure as a symbol of the Self⁸ because it is the God-man, bridging the human and the divine. Thus, in depth psychological terms, the Christ figure spans the entire Self from ego consciousness (the human) on the one hand to the Self (God) archetype (symbolized by the Father) at the deepest level of the collective unconscious on the other. Several important Christian symbols, concepts, and events, celebrated in our Christmas and Easter holidays, fit into this framework, as discussed below.

The Holy Spirit and the Incarnation

According to the Bible, the Holy Spirit (literally the “Spirit of God” in the New Testament) is a creative divine agent that mediates between God and the created cosmos, especially humans. It links the earthly (human) and the divine. Many prophets and other Hebrew Bible figures operated through it. In the New Testament, Jesus was baptized through it in the form of a dove, he performed miracles through it, and conferred it upon his disciples when commissioning them. It also descended upon the disciples at

*Myths are always
psychically true,
conveying important
truths to the audience.*

Pentecost, and it was said to have a continuing effect on people and provide guidance, in the form of the Paraclete (a Greek word meaning “intercessor” or “helper” that is used in the Gospel of John to refer to the Holy Spirit).

In psychological terms, the Holy Spirit is the psychic energy (libido) that carries “divine” archetypal unconscious content into ego consciousness, and thus is crucial for individuation. In our perception, this energy is indistinguishable from the content that it carries. It is felt emotionally and also somatically, in our flesh. This is the psychological meaning of the incarnation, where Jesus is conceived in Mary’s womb through the Holy Spirit (Luke 1:35). As noted above, archetypal unconscious content is numinous and seems to come from outside. We thus project the psychic event onto external things, including the Holy Spirit itself and the Paraclete. In particular, Christ as the image of the God-man who lives within everyone symbolizes this process of incarnation. Importantly, Jung held that incarnation is not a one-time event that happened only at Jesus’ conception. Rather, it is a process that can and should occur continuously in everyone.⁹

This dynamic also helps account for the receptivity to and spread of Christianity in the ancient Mediterranean world. As Jung observed,

Christ would never have made the impression he did on his followers if he had not expressed something that was alive and at work in their unconscious. Christianity itself would never have spread through the pagan world with such astonishing rapidity had its ideas not found an analogous psychic readiness to receive them.¹⁰

As a result, early Christians, who sought and utilized the Holy Spirit, were able to live more spiritually integrated lives than before.

For Jung, the incarnation exemplifies how the unconscious (associated with God) endeavors to rise into human ego consciousness (associated with the earthly material world) when given the opportunity, rather than remaining suppressed or repressed. Stated somewhat differently, God needs and wants to become human, i.e., to enter into human consciousness, which enables humans to become aware of Him so he can exist in the minds of humans.¹¹ This numinous experience of the unconscious is what makes humans by nature religious, and is the sense in which religions have a common basis (are “alike”). God needs humans to be conscious, which is the psychic state at which opposites emerge. In my view, in the Bible humans achieved ego consciousness when they acquired the knowledge of good and evil (opposites) in the Eden myth.¹² As for God’s development, Jung considered the story of Job to be crucial, because Job recognized the contradictions in Yahweh’s erratic, unconscious behavior resulting from the dynamic of unrecognized opposites within His depths, took Him to task, and inflicted a moral

defeat upon Him from which He never recovered.¹³ When the unconscious (God) is integrated into consciousness and a new synthesis emerges, God (more specifically our image of Him) as well as humans evolve to a higher level of consciousness, which, in the Bible, the image of God has achieved by the time of Jesus. Thus, while the unconscious (God) mystically transcends the ability of ego consciousness to comprehend it, human consciousness correspondingly transcends its divine origin; the two can and should come into a closer unity at a higher level, which is an ongoing process. This all transpires on earth and within humans. From the depth psychological perspective it is therefore important that Jesus taught that the Kingdom of God would be established on earth. Jung faulted Christian doctrine for devaluing the body and the material world and locating our redemption in the heavenly realm.

The Divine Child Motif

In the psyche of a young child, the ego is not well developed and the unconscious is still prominent; the child’s psyche is not mature but is more integrated. According to Jung,

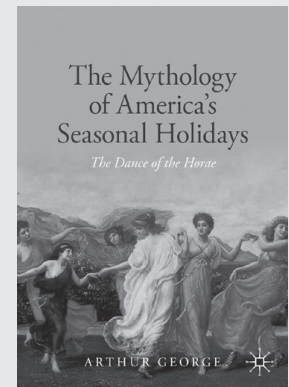
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The Mythology of America’s Seasonal Holidays: The Dance of the Horae

By Arthur George

Every year we celebrate a cycle of seasonal holidays. The ancient Greeks called this cycle “The Dance of the Horae,” after the mythical divinities who represented the seasons. What myths sit at the foundation of our own holiday celebrations? This interdisciplinary book explores the myths and symbols that underlie our major seasonal holidays and give them their meaning. Arthur George also shows how America’s own mythmaking has shaped some holidays. This mythological approach reveals how and why holidays arose in the first place, how and why they have changed over the centuries, why they have remained important, and finally how we can celebrate them today in a more meaningful manner that can enrich our lives and better our society. George devotes particular attention to the depth psychological aspects of holidays and their corresponding myths, as well as to the insights of modern biblical scholarship for key holidays such as Easter and Christmas.

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there is a child archetype,¹⁴ and the condition of wholeness is imaged in the symbol of the child, “that final goal which unites the opposites.”¹⁵ Jesus claimed that “unless you change and become as little children, you will never enter the kingdom” (Matt 18:4), and he taught much the same in the enacted “parable of the child amongst” (Mark 9:33–37).

The figure of the Divine Child of Christmas mythologizes this concept. He is a symbol of unity born from the tension of opposites, representing the potential future and hope. He is thus a savior figure. But as a numinous symbol born from the unconscious and destined to clash with the “establishment” of the ego (as symbolized by the story of Herod’s attempt to kill the child, and by Jesus’ later clashes with Pharisees), he can also help initiate the individuation process. For this to happen, he must first be recognized and accepted, as symbolized in the adorations of the magi and of the shepherds, and the chorus of angels.¹⁶

Psychologically, the adult Christ figure as the God-man functions as a mediator between the unconscious and ego consciousness, helping to integrate them by utilizing the Holy Spirit (psychic energy). He represents both this process as well as the resulting wholeness, which were exemplified in his teachings and acts.

Suffering and Crucifixion

When numinous unconscious content confronts ego consciousness, the ego suffers before the demands of the Self. For the ego this is a painful process. Thus, Jung was able to write that “crucifixion is the beginning of individuation.”¹⁷ Christ’s suffering and crucifixion thus symbolize what occurs within everyone who undergoes individuation. This is dramatized in the gospel accounts, in which Jesus collides with the Roman juggernaut, the Pharisees, and the temple priesthood, who are dominated by ego consciousness—the Romans as shown by their militaristic empire; the Pharisees and temple priesthood as shown by their insistence on technical rules and rituals; and both by their concern for preserving their own power. Here it is important that Christ willingly submits to crucifixion rather than avoiding it, much as the ego must submit (sacrifice some of itself) to the unconscious and cooperate with it, letting its inbreaking power work its effect, namely that the ego in its prior form dies. One must *be* a Christ. That is, one must experience directly and personally the Christ myth through the God-man who is within us and sanctify oneself (etymologically, sacrifice means to make sacred), especially in the awareness and experience of one’s ego consciousness, not

rely on the biblical Christ’s vicarious suffering and sacrifice on humanity’s behalf. Jung held that the Christian ritual of the Mass can facilitate this because it acts out the above archetypal pattern, externalizing in life the deepest movements of the psyche.¹⁸

Resurrection and the Kingdom of God

Resurrection is the result of undergoing crucifixion/sacrifice as conceptualized above, that of becoming a Christ. It is the state of transformed consciousness (wholeness) resulting from the process of individuation.

In Christian terms, it is a state of grace or blessedness; in non-Christian spiritual terms, it can also be described as realizing one’s higher Self. For Jung, the biblical resurrection story represents a projection onto the figure of Christ of the realization of the Self,¹⁹ which is actually in line with Christ’s teachings about one’s inner life mentioned above.

Psychologically, when one’s Self has resurrected, one is living in the Kingdom of God, a personal state. The Kingdom is thus a symbol of the culmination towards which psychic life moves. Indeed, Jesus

taught that the Kingdom lies within oneself (Luke 17:21; Thomas 3). To some extent, this state is a restoration of the original wholeness that one had as a child (see above), except that now one is self-aware about it, with the ego integrating the archetypal while preserving its own authority.²⁰ Further, ideally the Kingdom also should be a collective affair among everyone who has likewise resurrected. Indeed, the New Testament speaks of a collective general resurrection of all people who have ever lived, at which point Christ will judge who is ready to enter the Kingdom.²¹

Unlike in the Bible, however, resurrection is not a one-time event. Rather, it is a continuous process of proactive, self-aware effort in which the Self’s natural propensity toward wholeness is nurtured so that individuation becomes a conscious and continual happening.²² As mentioned above, Jung felt that celebrating the weekly Mass, which by reenacting the Christ myth leads one back to the source of the symbols, can be helpful toward this end.

The Ascension and Pentecost

The above-mentioned ongoing process of renewal within life on earth is symbolized in the New Testament by Pentecost. Once the resurrected Christ (the manifestation and vessel of the Holy Spirit) ascends and departs from earth, the Spirit descends on the apostles and other followers of Christ, to remain with and serve them constantly, a presence embodied in the figure of the Paraclete. In psychological terms, the Spirit (psychic energy) will continue

For Jung, the biblical resurrection story represents a projection onto the figure of Christ of the realization of the Self, which is actually in line with Christ’s teachings about one’s inner life.

bridging the divine and the human, reconciling and reuniting the opposites in the individuation process.²³

Having experienced Christ's example and teachings, humans must now take responsibility for their own resurrection. Stated psychologically, once one uses the Spirit and Christ inside oneself for one's individuation, the typical projections of the Holy Spirit and of the Christ figure as the external vessel of that Spirit naturally can be withdrawn.²⁴

Christ as an Incomplete Symbol of the Self, Requiring Other Symbols

Jung recognized that the Christ figure is an incomplete symbol of the Self. In particular, it lacks both the feminine and the dark (shadow) elements of the psyche. In Christianity, these came to be symbolized not by Christ but by Mary (in part) and Satan respectively. The Christian concept of the divinity (the God-image) had to be enlarged accordingly to reflect more closely the totality of the Self.

Since the feminine is an important element of the psyche that cannot be erased and appears in the form of goddesses in religions and myths, Mary was always a popular symbol. The formal inclusion of the feminine in Christian doctrine began when the Council of Ephesus in 431 declared Mary Mother of God, but her elevation into heaven as Queen over all things was not formalized (in Catholic doctrine) until 1950, when the doctrine of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin was adopted. Jung called this "a spiritual fact which can be formulated as the integration of the female principle into the Christian conception of the Godhead."²⁵

As to Satan, this figure did not emerge as an independent symbol of evil until the opposing figure of Christ (and the Christian God) emerged as representing exclusively the light, goodness, love, and justice. This figure was psychologically needed as a symbol of the shadow archetype. According to Jung, as part of individuation and to achieve wholeness, one must recognize (admit to) one's shadow and integrate its content into ego consciousness. Christian doctrine, however, does not allow for the integration of these polar opposites, and so is harmful to the psyche.

Theologians have debated the nature of the Trinity for centuries. But for Jung this doctrine is a fairly accurate portrait of the psyche and a natural outgrowth from it.²⁶ As noted above, the Father represents the God/Self archetype at the center of the collective unconscious, Christ the Son (in this narrower symbolism) represents the human that has ego consciousness, while the Holy Spirit mediates between them. Jung argued that a truer psychological portrait would consist of the Father (God), from which issue

opposites (most importantly good, the Son—Jesus, and evil—Satan), which are resolved in a fourth element that Jung calls Spirit, which is not the traditional Holy Spirit but God as transformed and reunified by the integration of the opposites²⁷ (as happened to an extent between the times of Job and Jesus). Jung also criticized the doctrine of the Trinity for devaluing the earthly, material realm because this integration process takes place within history and time. In particular, Jung posits a teleology in which the process of the unconscious becoming conscious will result in an evolution of individuals as well as society to higher and higher levels. The process is religious by nature, but

leads to a psychological maturity in which the projections involved in popular, organized religion are abandoned.

Conclusion

The Christ figure and the Christ myth have the power to offer authentic, whole life to anyone.²⁸ For this to work one must have, well, faith, similar to the kind of faith that in the gospels Jesus' divine presence triggered and that facilitated his healings (e.g., Luke 18:42).

Experiencing the symbol of Christ—being touched by divinity—indeed has the power to grip the psyche, and thus can elicit a "faith" response in which the ego becomes willing to submit itself to the unconscious and be transformed. The process and its results are worthy of celebration, and indeed depth psychology offers new ways to conceive of and celebrate Christmas and Easter. But we shouldn't wait until these holidays to do so. People can and should work on their rebirth and resurrection continuously. **4R**

Endnotes

1. Arthur George, *The Mythology of America's Seasonal Holidays* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 113–20, 243–48.
2. See John Dourley, *The Psyche as Sacrament: A Comparative Study of C.G. Jung and Paul Tillich* (Inner City Books, 1981); John Dourley, *Paul Tillich, Carl Jung and the Recovery of Religion* (Routledge, 2008). Dourley had the distinction of being a professor of religion, a Catholic priest, and a certified Jungian analyst. Tillich's views are elaborated most comprehensively in his *Systematic Theology* (Harper & Row, 1967) (all 3 volumes in one, separately paginated).
3. Paul Tillich, *Theology of Culture* (Oxford University Press, 1959), 123.
4. Carl Jung, "The Psychology of Christian Alchemical Symbolism," in *Aion: Researches into the Phenomenology of the Self*, 2nd ed. (Princeton University Press, 1969), 181. Citations to Jung are by page number, not paragraph number.
5. Alan Watts, *Easter: Its Story and Meaning* (Henry Schuman, 1950), 65.
6. John Dourley, *The Illness That We Are: A Jungian Critique of Christianity* (Inner City Books, 1984), 9.
7. Dourley, *Psyche as Sacrament*, 91.
8. Carl Jung, "Christ, A Symbol of the Self," in *Aion*, 36–71.
9. For further detail, see George, *Holidays*, 243–45.

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THE CHRISTIAN ROOTS OF RACISM

How Obscuring the Past Frustrates the Future

Dominic Kirkham

Seventy-five years ago, in April 1945, war correspondent Richard Dimbleby was accompanying the British Second Army as it advanced against the retreating German troops in northern Germany when unexpectedly they came across a clearing in the woods: Belsen. The scenes of unimaginable horror that followed shocked him to the core. His report subsequently shocked the world and the TV footage has continued to do so. Belsen has become an icon of evil, the epitome of the perversity of which humans are capable.

In dealing with the larger event we now call the Holocaust, historians and others have repeatedly looked for explanations of this genocidal act of terror. In popular consciousness it is now regarded as an unprecedented, even unique, act of evil perpetrated by the extreme right-wing Nazism that grew out of the social and economic malaise of the Weimar Republic, a movement accompanied by a return to a neo-pagan nativism glorifying the German *Volk* (people) and *Heimat* (homeland), and bolstered by pseudo-scientific racial theories popularized in the nineteenth century.

I believe this explanation is simplistic and dangerously misleading, for it serves as a convenient foil that distracts us from the real roots of what happened in the Holocaust, cultural elements that lie deeply embedded in European history. Thus it obscures the nature of European racism that continues to plague Western society. Lest this be dismissed as a highly provocative and unjustified opinion, allow me to offer a brief historical résumé of some European colonial precedents. *The reality does not always match the story told by the received historical narrative.*

A Chronicle of Genocide and Slavery

Let us be clear, the genocidal treatment of the Jews by a European nation was neither unique nor unprecedented. On May 12, 1883, the German flag was raised on the coast of Southwest Africa, modern Namibia. This was the beginning of Germany's African Empire and search for what, under the Kaiser Wilhelm II, was claimed to be its right to

“our place in the sun.” It became a war of extermination against the indigenous Herero and Nama people, who were interned in concentration camps and systematically starved and worked to death. Approximately 80 percent of Herero people perished in what would be the first genocide of the twentieth century. Though photographic evidence of the events that unfolded in this remote wilderness existed, no widespread coverage ensued and they were soon forgotten in the context of the subsequent global war. That the perpetrators of this act of genocidal terror had close links with the perpetrators of the Holocaust, and as one said, “learnt their trade there,” is matter of historical record.¹

Nor was this exceptional. Whilst this genocide was happening, a thousand miles north in what is now the Democratic Republic of Congo, formerly the Belgian Congo, a similar but even more gruesome story was unfolding, the details of which I find too sickening to repeat here.² Between 1885 and 1908 the Congo Free State had become the personal possession of King Leopold II of Belgium. (Think about that. Belgium did not consider the Congo its possession. Under Belgian law it was the private property of the king.) In July 2020, the present Belgian monarch, King Philippe, expressed his regret that “acts of violence and atrocity were committed that continue to weigh on our collective memory.” But he stopped short of a formal apology for the reign of terror and ruthless commercial exploitation that left up to ten million Congolese dead and gave rise to the term “crime against humanity.” This was the systematic oppression that prompted Joseph Conrad's searing exposé of European civilization in his novel *Heart of Darkness*. And yet Leopold was a highly regarded devout Catholic monarch who saw nothing remiss in his actions and who was described in 2010 by Belgian foreign minister Louis Michel as a “hero” who had “stimulated economic growth in the Congo.”

Before these events unfolded another drama had been playing out since the beginning of the century across the globe in Tasmania. Here the British had established a penal colony in 1803 that rapidly brought the settlers into

conflict with the native aborigines. This soon escalated into a full scale conflict known as The Black War—peaking in 1825–31—with demands for the “utter annihilation” of the native aboriginal population.³ A commission set up to investigate the conflict under the direction of an archdeacon, William Broughton, reported that part of the problem was that the aborigines had “lost the sense of the superiority of white people.” Writing of these events a century later, Raphael Lemkin, the Polish-American lawyer who first coined the term “genocide” in 1943 in the context of the Nazi atrocities in Europe and the pending trials for war crimes at Nuremberg, considered the extermination of the Tasmanian aborigines in the 1830s to be one of the clearest examples of genocide in history. Yet today few remember or are even aware of this event and the statues of governors from the time still grace the centre of the capital, Hobart.

Prior to Leopold’s commercial enterprise in the Congo, a similar royally sponsored adventure had long been unfolding on the islands of the Caribbean. Here in 1672 the English Royal African Company began transporting enslaved Africans to work on tobacco and sugar plantations. Previously in 1625 the crew of an English ship had claimed possession of the Island of Barbados in the name of James I, from whence grew a unique colony whose economy was based entirely on slavery. One should note that this was not a *slave-owning society* (as had been so many before), but rather the first society entirely *constituted by slavery*.^a During more than two hundred years of relentless brutality and terror some five million slaves were trafficked for a life of remorseless work and exploitation, and regarded as no more than disposable “property.”

Going yet further back in time, another royal adventure launched in 1492 by the Catholic monarchs Ferdinand and Isabella of Spain resulted in what Europeans call the “discovery” of America by Columbus. (The Latin American theologian Ignacio Ellacuria says that what was really discovered was the true nature of European civilization!^b) After the initial extermination of the Taino people on the islands of Bermuda the Spanish presence was instrumental

a. Another original feature of this economy was the introduction of a shift system of labour so that the sugar mills could be kept running continuously for twenty-four hours a day.

b. “What was really discovered was the true Spain herself, the reality of Western culture and the church as they were then.” Quoted by Jon Sobrino SJ in the CAFOD (Catholic Agency for Overseas Development) lecture, Salford Cathedral, July 1992. The year 1492 is also remembered for the expulsion of the Jews from Spain: the two events are not unconnected.

in bringing about the genocidal collapse of all the indigenous civilizations of the continent, an estimated 90 percent of the population and possibly 130 million people. On those who survived the Spanish imposed its *encomienda* system that had been created in Spain during the fifteenth-century *Reconquista* to reward the conquerors with the labour of particular groups of non-Christian people.^c An example was the many indigenous people who were con-

scripted to forced labour in the Potosi silver mines in Bolivia and who, when the local labour ran out, were replaced by enslaved Africans. An estimated thirty thousand such slaves were transported to these mines where they were worked to death. This inhuman treatment produced an estimated 60 percent of all silver mined in the world during the second half of the sixteenth century and represented the main source of Spain’s wealth and prestige.

The transportation of slaves from Africa to America had in fact begun with the Portuguese. Again under royal patronage the Portuguese explorer Diogo Cão first sailed up the Congo River in 1483 making contact with the native Kingdom

of Kongo. With a view to both commerce and conversion, the Portuguese soon set about exporting slaves to new sugar plantations on the island of São Tomé off the west coast of Africa. Each year twelve to fifteen ships would take between five and ten thousand slaves to the island. The subsequent “discovery” of America and the establishment of colonies there caused the trade to be extended across the Atlantic.

The purpose of this brief survey of symptomatic colonial activity is to show that the genocidal exploitation of people was not limited nor restricted to a particular country but extended to all the major countries of Europe. It was not spasmodic but systematic across many centuries. It was not accidental nor surreptitious but promoted under royal patronage. It was not exceptional behaviour but typical of the European explorers who then became colonizers. It was embedded in and an expression of the Christian mentality and church of the time. Also it was typically accompanied by a total contempt for the indigenous population, who

c. Though we now tend to prioritize the commercial aspects of the voyages of discovery, they were also a product of the crusading mentality and seen as a continuation of the *Reconquista*. This was certainly how Columbus and Ferdinand and Isabella seemed to have regarded his voyage, as a way to circumvent Muslim lands with a view to the liberation of Jerusalem thus enabling the Second Coming of Christ. This mentality is crucial to the motivation for the voyages. See Felipe Fernández-Armesto, *Columbus* (OUP, 1991) and *Before Columbus: Exploration and Colonization from the Mediterranean to the Atlantic 1229–1492* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 1987).

The genocidal exploitation of people was not limited nor restricted to a particular country but extended to all the major countries of Europe. It was embedded in and an expression of the Christian mentality and church of the time.

were regarded as less than human “savages,” and whose brutal exploitation to the point of genocidal extermination was normative.

From this perspective the Holocaust can be seen as but one element of a wider pattern of typical European behaviour, the crescendo of an appalling history. *What makes the Holocaust distinctive is the treatment in Europe of a European ethnic group on racial terms that was hitherto typical of the treatment of racial groups in colonial lands.* This behaviour pattern was deeply embedded, persistent across many centuries, and typical of European civilization. It behoves us, therefore, now to explore what exactly were the reasons for this behaviour and the attitudes that enabled and promoted it.

The Doctrine of Discovery

In 1521, during his attempted circumnavigation of the globe, Ferdinand Magellan landed on one of the islands comprising what we now know as the Philippines. He immediately claimed it for the king of Spain and planted a cross (still preserved and treasured in the original capital of the Philippines, Cebu City), declaring this would henceforth be a Christian country, later named after the Spanish Catholic monarch Philip II. Magellan was killed a few weeks later in a battle trying to enforce the new faith on the local people, a task that he regarded as a priority. The various aspects of this incident give an insight into the European mindset of the time. Underlying this was the conviction that Christianity, or more specifically Roman Catholicism, was the one true religion, the enforcement of which represented the divine will, legitimized all temporal authority, and by implication controlled legitimacy of title to territory. Any land not under the rule of a Christian monarch was considered to lack legitimate ownership.

This mindset has been called the Doctrine of Discovery.⁴ It was exemplified by the Treaty of Tordesillas in 1494 between Spain and Portugal that divided the entire New World between the two monarchs under the binding power of the pope, Alexander VI, and on the basis of the papal bull *Inter caetera* of 1493.^d This was the resolution of a dispute between the two kingdoms that had arisen from the previous Treaty of Alcáçovas in 1479 whereby Portugal’s claim to the whole of the New World had been confirmed by the papal bull *Aeterni regis* of 1481, which in turn confirmed the decision of previous papal bulls including that of 1455, *Romanus pontifex*.

d. A papal bull is a formal and definitive pronouncement (from the *bullae*/ seal attached to the document) of the Holy See and referred to by their opening word(s) in Latin

I mention these now remote and abstruse details as they are expressive of the mindset that prevailed at the moment of transition when Europe stood on the threshold of the discovery of a whole new world. They express the mindset of caeseropapism^e that underpinned medieval Christendom as the dominant political theory, and claimed that divine legitimacy was expressed through the church to provide the basis of social order.^f It was this mentality that created the template for what has been called a “persecuting society” of enforced conformity to doctrinal truth through

deliberate and socially sanctioned violence [that] began to be directed, through established governmental, judicial and social institutions, against groups of people defined by general characteristics, such as race, religion or way of life.⁵

Here we find the precedent for state sponsored terror for ideological purposes adopted by European states as a program that would endure to the present day.

Clearly this traditional Christian mindset discounted the rights of any non-European and non-Christian people, deeming them an inferior people or “savages” who, like the land they lived on, were subject to expropriation. Upon taking possession of a new territory the Spanish practice was to invoke the so-called *Requerimiento*. This document would be read to the Indians (in Spanish), declaring the universal authority of the pope and the authority the Spanish monarchs had received from the pope over this part of the New World for the purpose of colonization and evangelization. The Indians could choose to accept the sovereignty of the Spanish monarchs or suffer forcible submission. When the Spanish Dominican Francisco de Vitoria argued against the legitimacy of this document and procedure in *De Indis* (1532) he caused outrage and was denounced as heretical with calls for his imprisonment. Together with the Dutch jurist Hugo Grotius, Vitoria would subsequently come to be regarded as one of the founding fathers of international law.⁶

e. Caeseropapism refers to the claim to imperial power by the papacy on the basis that the universal authority or *dominium* of Christ had been transferred to St. Peter and his successors and after overruled all other claims to political jurisdiction.

f. It was this thinking that modern historians identify as the primary cause for the expulsion of the Jews from Spain by the Alhambra Decree or Edict of Expulsion in 1492 and it was only repealed in 1968 with the recognition of dual citizenship for Jews being passed in 2015. One significant and notorious instrument of enforcement was the Inquisition. Despite a name change this institution survives little changed to today as a Vatican curial “congregation” that continues its anonymous work of destroying people’s careers and lives. From its ranks have come most of the popes of the twentieth century, the latest being Benedict XVI.

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The Ambiguity of Christianity

From this brief summary we can see how closely colonization and the colonial mindset were linked to the Christianity of the time. As early modern European society moved through the Reformation to the Enlightenment, attitudes towards “inferior humans” underwent a subtle change becoming more overtly racist. This era reflected a cultural understanding based on class prejudices that regarded the poor and uneducated “lower orders” as sub-human. Writing in 1693 Sir Thomas Blount typically opined, “The numerous rabble that seem to have the signatures of man in their faces are but brutes in their understanding; . . . ’tis by the favour of a metaphor we call them men.” Writing of the inhabitants of the African southern cape Sir Thomas Herbert noted, “I doubt [i.e. fear] that many of them have no better predecessors than monkeys.” This dehumanisation of Black Africans helped to justify their enslavement and would in time become the basis for the maltreatment of other groups.⁷

For educated men of letters it was above all else cultural attributes that distinguished humans from the beasts and savages. In time such attitudes would become scientific and racial theories, but the original basis for this distinction, together with the basic analogue by which the world was viewed, lay in a scriptural understanding of the nature of the “dominion” that God gave to Adam over the animals: as one Jacobean commentator explained, this meant “such a prevailing and possessing as a master hath over servants.” Once this perception had taken hold it was a short step to treating inferior humans like domestic animals—and thus as property with which one could do as one willed. As one clergyman remarked in 1703 of the Indians of New England, “They act like wolves and are to be dealt with as wolves.”

When the campaign for the abolition of slavery got under way, it was led by devout and evangelical Christians whose core conviction was that humans could not be regarded as property. But though their motto, “Am I not your brother?” was scripturally based they could not escape the ambiguity of usage to which these same scriptures had given rise. This is epitomized by William Wilberforce and his nemesis, George Hibbert. Both had homes overlooking Clapham Common and both worshipped at Holy Trinity Church on the Common, even sharing the same pews. Yet it was Hibbert, a slave owner and Member of Parliament, who led the fight *against* the abolition of slavery on the basis that slaves were property and abolition amounted to

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a fundamental attack on property rights integral to a sacrosanct social order and enshrined in law, something of which Parliament could never approve. *Though the memory of Wilberforce has come to dominate the narrative of moral progress, it was the now long forgotten Hibbert who prevailed.* Hibbert lobbied Parliament to abolish slavery only on the condition that compensation would be paid to the owners. So successful was Hibbert’s campaign that the abolitionists realized that the only way slavery would be abolished was for them to accede to Hibbert’s principle, as repugnant as it was to their convictions. This resulted in the largest amount of compensation ever paid out in British history, twenty million pounds (£16 billion in today’s money)—all of which went to the slave owners for their personal benefit.⁸

Racism and the Holocaust

This ambiguity in the moral attitude towards slavery is also evident in the church’s culpability for the Holocaust. In a statement commemorating the seventy-fifth anniversary of the ending of World War II, the German conference of bishops condemned the complicity of their predecessors during the Nazi era for their failure to oppose the war of annihilation started by Germany or the crimes the regime committed: the bishops’ statement acknowledged the church’s “failing not only to remember its role, but also of not owning up to it.” Bishop Bätzing, the chair of the conference, went on to recognize that “terrifying anti-Semitism is widespread, even here in Germany” and warned that “those who come later must confront history, in order to learn from it.”⁹ A similar sentiment inspired the act of “repentance” by the Anglican Church. In an unprecedented one hundred-page report⁹ the church confessed that “Christians have been guilty of promoting and fostering negative stereotypes of Jewish people that have contributed to grave suffering and injustice” and that Christian teaching provided a “fertile seedbed for murderous anti-Semitism.”

Many find it difficult either to express or accept these sentiments, but it is exactly this reluctance that made such belated acts of atonement so necessary. As the distinguished church historian Diarmaid MacCulloch wrote,

g. A far more wide-ranging response to anti-Semitism had been made fifty-five years previously in the ground breaking Vatican II document *Nostra Aetate* that for the first time confronted the legacy of two thousand years of hatred. Unfortunately many of its implications have not been followed through: for example, the prejudicial term “Old” Testament is still in common use and goes unchallenged as a normative expression.

The Nazis might have been hostile to established Christianity, but all the anti-Semitic tropes and vocabulary, all the monstrous shapes in people's minds, had been put there by Christianity.¹⁰

That the Nazis were handed an entire ideological backing for the Holocaust strikes at the very heart of the traditional understanding of European civilization and, as with slavery and genocide, its responsibility.

Seventy-Five Years On

We should be both dismayed and shocked that after decades and even centuries of inhumanity these present-day apologies for past evils alert us to the fact that little has really changed. After the horrors of the Holocaust, why should anti-Semitism still be widespread and rising across Europe as well as a major source of controversy within the British Labour Party? A century and a half after the emancipation of slaves in the US and decades after the Civil Rights movement, why should it still be necessary to assert that “Black Lives Matter” in a society marked by overbearing and asphyxiating White privilege? Why is it that nurses who were recruited from the Caribbean by the United Kingdom in the 1950s in order to save the National Health Service from collapse have been subject to discrimination and racial profiling? And why sixty years later should members of their families still be subjected to the government led “hostile environment” policy that threatens many with deportation? Why was it necessary (in 2015!) to pass the Modern Slavery Act to address the circumstance of approximately ten thousand residents in Britain? Why is it only now that the Church of England should find it expedient to start checking its memorials for racism and questioning the overly “white” representation of Jesus? Despite gestures and declarations nothing much seems to have changed.

The same was true after the abolition of slavery. Seven decades after the slave trade was outlawed in 1807, and after the emancipation of slaves in the West Indies in 1838, the horrific massacre at Morant Bay in 1865 showed how little had changed. This event in a small parish on the east coast of Jamaica arose when the impoverished descendants of slaves began to take over abandoned areas of the sugar plantations in order to eke out some form of survival. A small incident in which the magistrates ordered some arrests quickly escalated into a much larger march on October 11, 1865, by hundreds of farmers and their

families protesting their poor conditions. Over the next two days hundreds of Black peasants took control throughout the parish whereupon the governor ordered troops to arrest the rebels and suppress the rebellion. They killed more than four hundred persons outright and arrested more than three hundred, in both cases including many innocent people. Many of those arrested were executed, flogged, or sentenced to long terms of imprisonment. In an empire that prided itself on its moral superiority and enlightened abolition of slavery, this clearly indicated how little had really changed in underlying mentalities.

What is even more disturbing about this event is the wider context. Emancipation did not lead, as abolitionists had intended, to an improvement in the lives of the formerly enslaved, but rather to a deterioration in their conditions as plantations closed and emancipated people struggled to provide for themselves. None of the vast amounts of compensation paid to the slave owners ever benefited their former dependents; instead it was invested for personal profit in British enterprises like the railways and thus enhanced national prosperity. Some even complained of being “victimized” by underpayment. Rather than a means of addressing a former wrong or a step in the direction toward a more just restructuring of a society that English slavers had artfully contrived, abolition served merely as a symbol of self-justification and a foil to deflect further criticism as ruthless commercial exploitation continued in other forms. The Tasmanian genocide, in which the aboriginal population was wiped out with government approval, is a case in point. What was missing was any fundamental change of thinking.

In a similar way the defeat of Nazism and blaming Germany for the Holocaust conveniently exonerates the wider civilization that made it possible. It makes us feel good rather than promoting the kind of fundamental change of mentality that Bishop Bätzing called for. Given all that happened in the war on Nazism it is always a surprise to realize that the place where its racist tenets survived longest was actually in Australia and the policies of the British government towards the aborigines. In 1951 the euphemistically titled Aborigines Protection Board—also known as the Aborigines Welfare Board—was set up with the purpose of assimilating aborigines into White society by removing children from families with the ultimate intention of the destruction of aboriginal society. This built on the well-established policy of the Christian missions,

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In Praise of Weakness

John Caputo

Thus far I have been arguing that, as the interest of theology lies not in God in the highest but in the unconditional, the best interests of theology are served if it is not so high and mighty, if it cuts a wide swath around what Tillich calls the half-blasphemous and mythological concept of a celestial being and seeks instead to find the kingdom of God within us, “down” in the depths of our being and of God’s. I want now to turn to weakness, to say a word on behalf of weakness—meaning both the weakness of God and the weak theology that gives words to God, to what is going on in the name (of) “God.” Only then will I be satisfied that the high and mighty God and its companion theology have been cut down to size.

In the interests of transparency, allow me to say up front I am not opposed to any and every exercise of strength. I am not advocating being weak in every sense of the word, like leading an anemic, weak-kneed indecisive life. What I mean by weakness requires a considerable courage, what Tillich called the “courage to be.” My use of the word has several sources, where the word is being used with no little art and to purposes which I think are propitious for theology. The whole thing is a certain felicitous folly, an exercise in fidelity to the folly of God, in which we are feeling around for a deeper way to be wise.

Weak Thought

I mention first the “weak thought” (*pensiero debole*) of the contemporary Italian philosopher Gianni Vattimo (1936–), which is his way of criticizing what I am calling the high and mighty tendencies of classical theology and philosophy. So, where classical metaphysics makes a show of setting forth the fundamental structures of reality, the very nature of objective being, the advocates of weak thought more cautiously claim only to have interpretations. When classical epistemology sets forth the “method” for attaining certitude and silencing one’s opponents, we on the weak side take sides with open-ended

“conversations” that make some headway in a matter that both sides see is complicated. Where classical ethics tends to be of an either/or, black or white, absolute or relativistic, my-way-or-the-highway frame of mind, we weak thinkers think we can get further with Aristotle’s idea of a flexible insight into the idiosyncrasies of the singular situation and saving inflexible unyielding universals for mathematics. When classical political theory announces authoritarian totalitarian principles, like the classless society or the glory of the *Volk*, we are of a mind to let messier and more democratic processes work themselves out in local, national, and international assemblies. In each case, “strong” principles are exclusionary and are being allowed to wither into weaker and more open-ended ones. This accords nicely with our Protestant-Jewish principle that nothing conditional, meaning nothing actual and factual, should ever succumb to the illusion that it is strong enough to stand up and be the match for the unconditional. Weak thought for Vattimo is summed up in the word hermeneutics, the theory of interpretation, in the tradition of Heidegger and Hans-Georg Gadamer (1900–2002), while for Richard Rorty (1931–2007), Vattimo’s sometime American partner in conversation, it is called “non-foundationalism.” Whatever it is called, weak thought is an attempt to find a felicitous way to negotiate between the extremes that are at war in the hardball polarization of absolutism-versus-relativism. In general, when the high and mighty loudly proclaim their absolutes, we weak thinkers head for the exits, preferring instead to speak more softly of interpretations, on the simple grounds that absolutes are always somebody’s version of the absolute, somewhere, sometime. These so-called absolutes always have an identifiable pedigree, that is, they are always very conditioned constructions trying to pass themselves off as having dropped from the sky, just the way upon closer examination universals invariably turn out to be a local favorite. The panicked right wing thinks that weak thought leads to relativism and anything-goes violence, which would be an amusing objection were violence not so serious a matter. After all, the problem with Hitler and Stalin was not that

This article is excerpted and condensed from *The Folly of God* (Polebridge, 2016).

they were relativists. The facts on the ground are that the worst violence ensues, not from hermeneutics, but from resisting hermeneutics, as when someone confuses (their) conditionals with the unconditional, which pretty much comes down to someone who confuses himself with God, which weak thought hopes to discourage on the grounds that it is a very dangerous illusion.

As a young man, Vattimo was a devout daily-Mass-and-the-sacraments Catholic—a devout but gay, fervent but progressive and left of center Catholic, and this understandably caused him no little trouble with the Roman Church. In his later writings, we can see a kind of return to his Catholicism, but a return that took a more postmodern turn and of a much more radical sort. He undertakes in these works a “weakening” of God, which takes its point of departure from Paul’s notion of *kenosis*, in which the high and mighty God of strong theology is emptied out into the world without remainder. That the transcendent omnipotent God is “weakened” into the world clearly goes back to Hegel—and to the medieval Italian mystic and theologian Joachim of Fiore (1135–1202), of whom Vattimo is fond—whose philosophical theology also lay at the basis of

The death of the high and mighty God is the birth of God in the world, whose democratic sense of freedom and equality incarnate the divine life today.

the “death of God” theologies of the 1960s, of which Vattimo’s later thought is strongly reminiscent. The death of the high and mighty God is the birth of God in the world, whose democratic sense of freedom and equality incarnate the divine life today. Where is God? God has pitched his tent in the world, in the depths of the world, in the arts and sciences, in ethical and political life, where the world is busy making the kingdom of God come true, making the name (of) “God” come true in the sacrament of the world. The so-called secular world is the realization of the kingdom of God, not its obliteration, which closely resembles what Tillich means by a “theology of culture,” or what is sometimes called a “secular theology,” meaning a theology of the *saeculum*, of the age.

A Weak Messianic

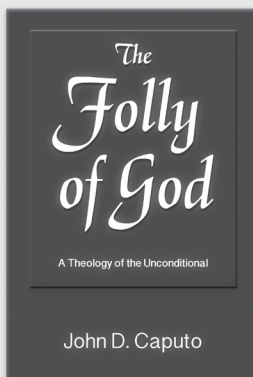
The decisive source of my advocacy of the word weak is Derrida, which is in fact where my whole idea of weak theology got started. Derrida analyzes what he calls the “unconditional without sovereignty,” something that makes an unconditional claim on us but without the sovereign power to back it up, something binding but with no power to hold us to it. If you insist on using the old etymology of religion as binding-back, then this religion would be a certain kind of binding without the power to bind with the strong force of real worldly power. The university, for example, is unconditional—it is the unconditional, unlimited, uncompromisable right to ask any question—but the university as such, if there is such a thing, is without sovereignty. It runs up against all the forces of the actual world which prevail against it, the forces of the government, the church, the free market, and benefactors more interested in funding basketball than the library, all of which try to monitor both the questions that it raises and above all the answers that it renders.

In 1989 Derrida gave a famous lecture to the Cardozo Law School in New York City in which he took up a distinction made by Pascal between the “force of law” and the call for justice.¹ It is the law that has all the force—the institutions, the courts, the police, the militias, the jails—while justice is but a “call” whose voice is ever soft and low. Its call is, to be sure, unconditional, unlimited, uncompromisable, but of itself, it lacks the long, strong arm of the law. The law is what exists, what is actual, effective, and real, while justice does not so much exist as insist, which is how I like to put it. Justice is not so much a reality as a

John D. Caputo

The Folly of God

A Theology of the Unconditional



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call, a peal or appeal, for something just to become real. Justice without the law is impotent; the law without justice is a tyrant. Hence, Pascal concludes, since we cannot make justice (a call) strong (an existing being), we must make what is strong (the law) just. We must seek to make just laws, to make the call of justice come true in the law. But every such existing (positive) law will be a construction, and as such must be repealable and appealable, that is, deconstructible, otherwise it will become a monster. But the peal of “justice in itself, if there is such a thing” (which there is not), is not deconstructible. Justice is always calling, always pealing and appealing, always to-come. Justice is like a coming Messiah who never quite shows up, not so long as we live in time and history, not so long as there is a future, and when is there not? The messianic call of justice pays a call upon the present, disturbing and interrupting it, haunting and spooking it, soliciting and destabilizing it, with its unfulfilled expectation for justice for the least among us.

But if the present is disturbed and destabilized by the call coming from the future it is no less disrupted by the solicitations of the past, by what demands to be recalled. That brings us to the other side of messianicity, which is found in the work of Walter Benjamin (1892–1940), a brilliant thinker with an interest in Jewish mysticism who contributed to postmodern theory on several different fronts, who speaks of a “weak messianic power.”²² Benjamin is where Derrida himself picked up the trope of weakness. By a weak messianic Benjamin means that instead of waiting for a (strong) Messiah who will bail us out, *we* are the messianic age. *We* are the ones who have all along been expected—by the dead. *We* occupy the messianic position—to make right the wrongs that have been done to them. But our messianic powers are weak. We cannot make the dead live again. We cannot alter the past and restore them to a life in which they will not have suffered these wrongs or will have been compensated for them. So we can at best remember them, recall them, mourn them with an impossible mourning, by righting the unjust conditions now from which they suffered then, by seeing to it that, as Abraham Lincoln said, their death will not have been in vain. The unconditional call of justice resonates not only with the promise of the justice-to-come but also with the promise of the past, which sounds like a very foolish hope. The present is haunted not only by the ones to come (*les arrivants*) but also by the “returned” (*les revenants*) who have come back to spook us, spectral figures both, both

*Justice is not so much
a reality as a call, a
peal or appeal, for
something just to
become real.*

lacking bodily force, to be sure, but not, for all that, any less unnerving, and maybe more.

The Weakness of God

That brings me to my third source, the one we started with, the most authoritative from the point of view of the high and mighty theology with which I am contending—St. Paul. In 1 Corinthians 1:18–31 Paul the apostle lays out the logic of the weakness of God, in preference to the power of the world, and the logic of the folly of God, in preference to what the world calls wisdom, which I think are the touchstones of a theology that Jesus would recognize:

But God has chosen people the world regards as fools to expose the pretension of those who think they know it all, and God has chosen people the world regards as weak to expose the pretensions of those who are in power. (1 Cor 1:27)

Paul tells us he never laid eyes on Jesus in the flesh but that does not prevent him from capturing in stunning fashion exactly what Jesus was preaching under the name of the “kingdom of God,” which Paul calls the logic of the cross. The logic or the rule when God rules is the cross. This use of “logos,” as we have said, would have stuck in the craw of the philosophers (the elite) at Corinth for whom the cross is both the substance and the symbol of folly, weakness, death, defeat, and abject humiliation. But Paul argues that God uses the folly of the cross to shame the wisdom of the philosophers, that God makes use of the nothings and nobodies (Greek: *ta me onta*) of the world to confound the powers that be. Paul must have known that his use of the vocabulary of “being” (Greek: *to on*), logos, and wisdom would have maddened the philosophers. He says that the folly of God is wiser than human wisdom and that “the weakness of God” is stronger than human strength. God, the name (of) “God,” what is going on in and under the name of God, is God’s solidarity with the nobodies not with the Big Deals, with the nothings not the people of substance, with the ill born not the well born, with weakness not with strength, with folly not wisdom.

Now, much as I love this text, far be it from me to try to strong-arm the strong theologians with the authority of the Apostle. In radical theology, the authority of St. Paul is an authority without force, without the force of law, without the *real* terrestrial force that is powered by an ideology of biblical inerrancy or papal infallibility to back it up. There are several versions of

“Paul” and there are no terrestrial police to enforce any particular version of what Paul is saying. There is likewise, in radical theology, no celestial being whispering in his ear for whom Paul provides a mouthpiece, so that he is likewise deprived of heavenly force. My Paul speaks for himself—and he usually does this very well indeed—albeit always in response to what is calling upon him. Depriving Paul of both terrestrial and celestial force is the condition under which anything unconditional might be taking place in Paul’s appeal to weakness. Otherwise Paul is reduced to the authoritarianism of the long robes. That is why, in the name of my love of Paul, I am sometimes constrained to disagree with Paul, which for some people means I am destined for ruin but for me simply means that I am not a party to the ruinous mythological and half-blasphemous idols of biblical inerrancy and ecclesiastical infallibility. Paul was, for example, obviously in error about his belief that the coming of the kingdom was imminent. What I am offering under the name of “weak theology” might be seen as systematically thinking through Paul’s version of the weakness of God, thinking it radically, all the way down. I think Paul goes very far with his thought of folly and weakness but not far enough, because I think he takes what he says in 1 Corinthians 1 and largely walks it back in 1 Corinthians 2. The ones who are mature and well versed in God’s ways (see 1 Cor 2:6) know the secret of which the ones who have earthly power are deprived. The ones who have “the spirit” know that God’s power will out, and that the enemies of God will be both outsmarted and punished. In speaking of weakness and folly, Paul has something up his sleeve. He is entering them into an economy, in which the present weak and low-born status of the Corinthian church will be reversed, and God in all his apocalyptic power will triumph. As New Testament scholar Dale Martin says, “Ultimately, what Paul wants to oppose to human power is not weakness but divine power (1 Cor 2:5)—that is, power belonging to the other realm.”³ The rulers of the world who crucified Jesus will get their come-uppance. They are coming to nothing, and had they known better they would never have crucified him. The wisdom and power of God are going to lay low the so-called wisdom of the powers and the principalities. Paul never shrinks from a fight.

In short, you either get on board with Paul’s Christ crucified or you will fry. How does he know that? He

The power of forgiveness is the utterly disarming power of responding to a wrong done to us not with retribution but with forgiveness. What is that if not madness and folly?

has had a Revelation (in the upper case), a very Strong Vision, seen it, been told it in no uncertain terms, in his own personal vision. So the weak theology sketched in the first chapter of 1 Corinthians is an investment that is shown to pay dividends in the second chapter. Weakness is but a preparation for the final staging of an extremely strong theology—when the God of Abraham will be all in all, the Jews first, then the Gentiles (“pagans”). But woe unto those who do not get on board at either stop. Paul does not take the weakness and folly of God as sufficient unto itself, as speaking for itself, as unconditional without power, but as a way to usher in the coming triumph of a very strong God, who is about to establish his kingdom on earth and run circles around worldly wisdom. Paul has apocalyptic power up his apostolic sleeve. When God establishes his rule here on earth, and Paul was mistakenly convinced that this was to be soon in the coming, there will nothing weak or foolish about it.

Weakness All the Way Down

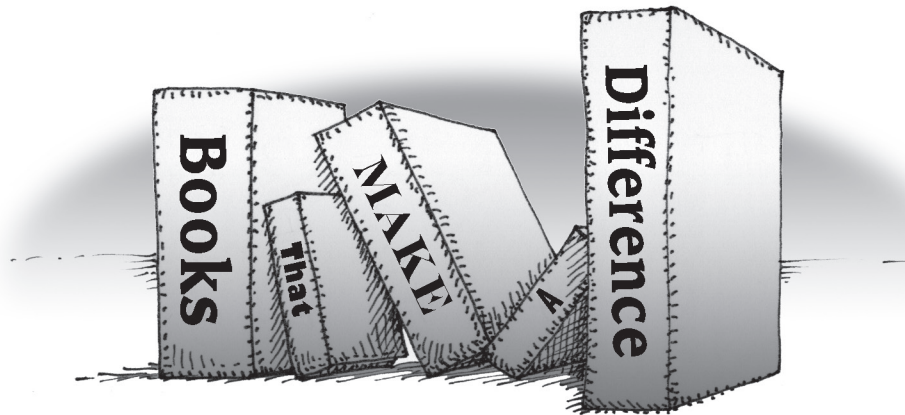
To think the weakness and folly of God all the way down would consist, accordingly, in resisting the temptation to enter them into an economy of long-term strength and wisdom. It would be to trust weakness without calculating that it will have a long-term payoff in real power (be it earthly or heavenly), when the weak will finally get to pull the trigger and lay low their enemies and God’s, which are usually pretty much the same thing. It would begin by disabusing ourselves of the high and mighty God of strong theology who promises to make our enemies our footstool (Ps 110:1), and realizing that the name of God is the name of a weak force, of a call, like justice, which is unconditional but without sovereign power. What would that be like? It would be like forgiveness, which is folly in the light of the world’s wisdom, a weak force whose power lies in the power of abdicating power, abdicating retaliation—no footstools—which we might call the power of powerlessness. The power of forgiveness is the utterly disarming power of responding to a wrong done to us not with retribution but with forgiveness. What is that if not madness and folly?

I love Dostoevsky’s “Legend of the Grand Inquisitor” for many reasons, but one of the things I love the most about it is the very end. The Lord Cardinal Grand Inquisitor gives a long and quite interesting discourse—which actually make some interesting

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Books That Make a Difference

A New Regular *Fourth R* Feature



“Books That Make a Difference” will be a one-page feature in every issue, in which Westar Fellows and Associates recommend books (whether recent or “classic”) they find especially interesting and important. This feature is intended to supplement but not replace the Book Review, which will continue in its present format.

These entries are not reviews per se, but rather brief reports that include the book’s publisher, year, length, a one-line introduction to the author, a description of the book and its main thesis, its level of accessibility (using our Basic/Intermediate/Advanced classification), and an explanation of why the book is important.

Length is 100–125 words.

We invite readers to send us one or more entries. Before submitting an entry, check with associate editor Steve Watkins (swatkins@westarinstitute.org) to make sure the title has not yet been submitted. Steve will let you know if you can write the entry.

EXAMPLE

Sapiens: A Brief History of Mankind by Yuval Noah Harari (Harper Perennial, 2018, 464 pages, level: Intermediate). Yuval Noah Harari is an Israeli historian, public intellectual, and professor at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. This book is a forty-thousand-foot view of the many distinguishing features of our species, sapiens. One, among many, brilliant features of this book is Harari’s thesis that stories or fictions have allowed humans to conquer and destroy the planet. For example, ideas like “economic theory,” “money,” and a “nation,” are all fictional narratives. But the power they carry can create wars or solve pandemics. It all depends on the story.

—Steve Watkins



Letter to the Editor

I began reading “The Historical Jesus Is Not History” by Roy W. Hoover with Robert J. Miller (*The Fourth R*, July–August, 2021) with some enthusiasm arising from long-time familiarity with *The Fourth R* and the work of the Jesus Seminar. The questions raised in the first paragraph are at the centre of my reading, thinking, and teaching: What can we know about the authentic teachings and deeds of Jesus? What do they convey of Jesus’ “vision”? Can that vision be meaningful for us today? As the second paragraph states, “There is no guarantee that his vision would be relevant to us today. He was, after all, speaking to his people and to his time, not to us.”

The article focusses on “finding the unifying theme” in the sayings of Jesus and zeroes in on “a repeated summons to an unconditional trust in and commitment to the reign of God.” The article discusses the religious and social situation in Jesus’ time and identifies particularly the Dead Sea Scroll community at Qumran, the Pharisees, and John the Baptist.

Each of these groups had a particular and characteristic view of the Temple establishment in Jerusalem that was consistent with their vision of Israel’s religious ideal. Jesus’ teaching and vision can be seen as his own version of such a quest and carried with it his own view of Jerusalem’s Temple. . . . Jesus’ aim was to persuade all who could hear him to embrace his vision and to accept the challenge to actualize this ideal, to live this vision.

The authors select two extended passages from Matthew’s Sermon on the Mount as most clearly expressing Jesus’ ordering vision’ (Matt 5: 39–42, 44–48 and 6:24–30). Here “Jesus urges his hearers to have a total trust in the generosity and care of the Father in heaven and to be single minded in their commitment to do God’s will by imitating the divine generosity. To do this is to live under God’s reign.”

Roy W. Hoover Replies

For some time now I have been referring to myself as an heir of the Christian tradition. What I mean by that is that, as an heir, I acknowledge that I have received something of considerable value; but it also means that, as an heir, I have both the freedom and the responsibility to decide what I should do with that inheritance. Exercising that responsibility means making relevant distinctions between what in

I read on with an expectation that the relation of such a transformative guide to life expressed in the concepts and language of a Jewish group in the first century would be “translated” or made relevant to an educated person in a Western predominantly secular society. The article strongly cautions against taking specific teachings such as turning the other cheek or loving one’s enemies as tactics for non-violent resistance and focusses instead on “how to act like the children of their uncalculatingly generous heavenly father” as “the sole basis” of the teaching.

It is here that a formidable gulf separates me from the teaching. Take the example of Matthew 5:44: “Love your enemies and pray for your persecutors. You’ll then become children of your Father in the heavens. God causes the sun to rise on both the bad and the good, and sends rain on both the just and the unjust.” What are the contemporary meanings of “your father in the heavens” or the statement that “God sends rain on both the just and the unjust”? As a motivating model of divine generosity, weather is a poor choice at any time; in a time of massively increasing damage by storms and floods aggravated by humanly caused climate change it would be hard to choose a less useful motivating example of divine generosity. Matthew indeed “let’s the hard saying stand. ‘Be perfect just as your heavenly father is perfect.’” But what does or could that mean today?

The authors recognise that “Jesus’ vision of life under the reign of God is an unfinished work. The unfinished character of Jesus’ work, in effect, invites anyone so inclined to ‘complete’ what Jesus began in one’s own way and as one’s own work.”

It would be a valuable contribution to contemporary Jesus movements if scholars as impressively competent in guiding us to what the first-century CE writings say about Jesus’ vision could provide a range of bridges to the twenty-first century to assist us to explore that vision for today. As it stands the concepts and language remain firmly in the world of twenty centuries ago.

Rev. Dr. David Merritt
Melbourne, Australia

that legacy may have a connection with what we take to be the realities of the modern world and where there is a disconnection in the relation between ancient and modern. I am responding to David Merritt’s thoughtful letter from within that general frame of reference.

First, a reminder about the importance of the historical Jesus. After the discoveries of Galileo, Darwin, and others, the traditional view of the world and its redemption

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Translational Alchemy

Stretching Metal Into Thin Air

Steve Watkins

The Ancient Middle Eastern Three-Tiered Cosmos

Sometimes a single translated word can mislead millions of people into a serious misunderstanding of the word's original meaning. In my research on evangelical Creationism, I stumbled upon one such instance where a translation of one biblical word has morphed into a nonsensical concept for a large number of lay Bible readers and many educated evangelicals. For most biblical scholars this is a relatively straightforward issue. But translations often come with theological agendas that have little or nothing to do with the ancient language and culture within which the text was written. The word that has confused millions of Bible readers appears in the first several verses of Genesis 1. In the King James Version (KJV), the English word “firmament” was selected. And except for being archaic, that's a pretty good translation of the ancient Hebrew word *raqia'* (רקיע).^a However, most people would struggle to define what this ancient “firmament” actually is, as a concept. Also, the KJV was influenced by the Latin word *firmamentum*, a term even fewer people could define.

So what is going on here? And what is a firmament? To answer those questions we must take a trip back to the ancient Middle East.¹ What we now call “cosmology” simply means a model of how we understand the universe to be constituted. Through history, the models change based on new scientific discoveries. The biggest shift happened with Copernicus (1473–1543) and Galileo (1564–1642). Galileo built a telescope that helped prove Copernicus' theory of a heliocentric (sun centered) solar system, rather than one that was geocentric (earth centered).

Even older than the medieval geocentric model was an ancient model that scholars refer to as the three-tiered cosmos. This concept is a strange one for modern Bible readers. When I teach the Hebrew Bible to college students, I can see their faces strain as they try to process such a foreign concept. As depicted on the cover of this issue, the three tiers consist of a shadowy underworld, a flat disc-

shaped earth, and a heavenly ocean where the temples of the gods are located. Of course, the ancients appreciated how much water weighed. So they needed to posit a very strong dome-shaped object to hold up this extraordinarily heavy ocean. This dome, or vault, was identified in Hebrew as the *raqia'* (the KJV's firmament).

In the ancient Middle East, from Egypt through the Levant and stretching east to Mesopotamia, this is how people pictured the world. They also thought that the sun, moon, and stars were relatively close to us, likely only miles away, rather than hundreds of thousands (our moon), millions (our sun), and trillions (distant stars and galaxies) of miles away. These distances are so great that it is impossible for a modern person such as myself to wrap my head around the vastness of a single light year (5.88 trillion miles). And I have had the experience of once flying over six hundred miles per hour in a military aircraft for an exhausting eighteen-hour trip during which we only covered a distance of eleven thousand miles—*only*. Philosophical savants aside, ordinary ancient people probably had trouble conceiving of speeds much more than one hundred miles per hour.^b In any case, the three-tiered model was their way of thinking about how things were constructed. Incidentally, we can still see the three-tiered universe reflected in the New Testament in passages such as Phil 2:10: “At the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven [1] and on earth [2] and under the earth [3]” (NRSV).

We know this is how the ancients believed the universe to have been constructed not only from written documents, but also from ancient epigraphy (the study of ancient inscriptions) and drawings from Egypt and Mesopotamia. Pictured below is an Egyptian papyrus drawing dated between 1570 and 1085 BCE. The drawing shows the basic concept of the tiers. The exception in this particular image is that the underworld is not portrayed

a. The ' at the end represents ׀, a silent consonant.

b. I am basing this very rough estimate on the fact that the only tangible objects with great speed would be animals. The Peregrine falcon, the fastest recorded animal, can exceed one hundred miles per hour in a dive.



An Egyptian deity (sun deity) travels by boat across the heavenly ocean above the firmament which is represented by the female body stretching from foot-to-hand and encompassing the world, the male deity, Geb.²

because the Egyptians believed the place of the dead to be within the earth, within the body of Geb (the Egyptian god of the earth). The rest of the main parts are there. Notice the boats carrying the sun across the heavenly ocean. The Egyptians often represented worldly features in corporeal form, so the firmament is the arched female body of the goddess Nutt. Earth, her mate, is represented by the male god Geb, pictured beneath the goddess/firmament Nutt.^c Birds represent the air between the firmament and earth. The ancients thought that the sun, moon, and stars were actually connected to the firmament, going down under the earth at night and back up the other side each new day.

While this schema seems strange to us in an age of science, it did hold a certain logic for ancient peoples who were trying their best to make surface observations of natural phenomena. And a dose of humility is needed here because if someone erased my brain and sent me back to that time period, I'm sure these ideas would make much better sense than current astrophysics. The sun, moon, and stars do appear to be going around us. Most days, especially in the Middle East, the sky is as deep-blue as the Mediterranean Sea. And occasionally the heavenly sea leaks, creating rain and floods. Where else would all that water come from? Additionally, a heavenly ocean would require an incredibly strong dome to support its vast weight. This rigid and firm dome was the *raqia'*, or *firmament*.

The word *raqia'* derives from the Hebrew root verb, *raqa'*. Hebrew lexicons define *raqa'* as: "beat out, stamp, or spread out."³ This fits because the noun, *raqia'*, repre-

c. The Egyptians were exceptional in presenting the earth as male and heaven/firmament as female. For example, Hesiod's *Theogony* tells of the earth, Gaea, as a female deity and the sky, Uranos, as a male deity. The Greeks and many others usually present the earth as a female/mother goddess and sky/heaven as male.

sented something beaten out by a blacksmith, such as a shield or bronze laver. For example, in Exod 39:3 the same word is used in the following phrase: "they beat out (*raqa'*) the plates of gold." In the Latin Vulgate, the word used for *raqia'* was *firmamentum*. As mentioned above, this is a pretty good translation because it retains the idea of firmness. The best modern translations, such as the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) and Robert Alter's translations, use the English words "dome" and "vault" respectively. In my judgment, these two words are about the best single-word translations of *raqia'* into English.

The Genesis 1 Account

Genesis 1 and 2 are both creation stories. They differ as to the order of when things were created. The Genesis 1 account introduces the concept of the firmament. Consider the following passages:

And God said, "Let there be a firmament in the midst of the waters, and let it divide the waters from the waters." And God made the firmament, and divided the waters which were under the firmament from the waters which were above the firmament: and it was so. And God called the firmament Heaven. And the evening and the morning were the second day. (Gen 1:6-8)

And God said, "Let there be lights in the firmament of the heaven to divide the day from the night; and let them be for signs, and for seasons, and for days, and years: And let them be for lights in the firmament of the heaven to give light upon the earth." And it was so. And God made two great lights; the greater light to rule the day, and the lesser light to rule the night: he made the stars also. *And God set them in the firmament of the heaven to give light upon the earth.* (Gen 1:14-17 emphasis added)

It should be fairly clear from the context of these passages that this firmament is exactly the rigid dome or vault that held up the heavenly ocean. Glance back at the cover and you'll see how they all fit nicely with the context of Genesis 1. God separated "the waters which were under the firmament from the waters which were above the firmament" (Gen 1:7). So we have a heavenly ocean above and the earthly ocean below. When God created the sun, moon, and stars as light sources, he then "set them in the firmament." Without the visual schema of the ancient three-tiered cosmos, these verses make very little sense, given a modern understanding of a heliocentric solar system, as well as the unfathomable distances measured by modern astronomy. But when we adopt the ancient cosmology, it makes perfect sense.

I remember the first time I learned about this three-tiered cosmology. Before that moment, I just scratched my head when I read Genesis 1. I guess my default understanding of firmament was something like "the sky." But that didn't help either because what exactly is "the sky?" Is it the

atmosphere? The ionosphere? The stratosphere? Outer space? And where does the sky stop and space begin? And whatever this sky concept is, let's not forget that the sun, moon, and stars are all located within it. Remember, God "set them [sun, moon, and stars] *in* the firmament." For ancient cosmology that is fine. But when we assume a modern cosmological structure, things go flying apart. Keeping modern and ancient distinctions separate is crucial for good interpretation. In his history of interpretation on Genesis 1, theologian and physicist Stanley Jaki playfully comments on this long-standing mistake by Bible interpreters through the years. Referring to the need for understanding this distinction, Jaki writes,

Those who fail to see this [i.e. confusing Genesis 1 for a modern science textbook] will have their heads crushed as they butt them up against the firmament of Genesis 1. Or should we think that astronauts wore helmets in order to escape the calamity?^d

However, biblical literalists (or maybe we should say biblical anachronists) continue to insist that Genesis 1 is an accurate account of the universe and its creation as contemporary scientists understand it today. Such insistence forces them to redefine the firmament as most of

us know that there is no literal dome-in-the-sky that holds up a heavenly sea.^d So the Hebrew word *raqia'* is mishandled in a way that blurs this ancient concept. I have observed two basic approaches that literalists employ in an effort to eschew an actual dome-in-the-sky. The first is to stick with the KJV's word, *firmament*. Few English speakers know the etymology of that word and so they take it to be some generic and broad reference to the sky. The second approach is to define *raqia'* as "an expanse." Numerous conservative and evangelical Bible translations have placed "expanse" in the text instead of firmament, dome, or vault (see the English Standard Version, older editions of the New International Version,^e New American Standard Bible, and The New King James Version).

This is a tricky little move. Going back to metal being pounded out by a blacksmith, it is true that metallic substances "expand." However, the meaning of expanse that these translations imply is a huge space of air, such as the

d. I would mention that there is a growing movement known as the "flat earth." A documentary on Youtube is titled, "Under the Dome." It is an argument for a flat, disc-shaped earth with a surrounding dome, based on Genesis 1. It is surprising to me that Young Earth Creationists, such as those at the Creation Museum, reject a flat earth. They would be far more consistent to embrace the whole package in Genesis 1.

e. Newer editions of the New International Version have changed from using "expanse" to "vault."

The word expanse, instead of dome or vault, has led many fundamentalist and evangelical Christians to insert a modern notion of atmosphere and space into Genesis.

atmosphere. This is a far cry from the expanding of hard metal, through heat and hammering. In my interviews with the staff at Kentucky's Creation Museum, including Danny Faulkner who holds a PhD in astronomy from Indiana University, none of them could give me a consistent and non-contradictory answer for what the firmament actually *was*. When I showed Faulkner images of the ancient three-tiered cosmos, he dismissed them because he knew this could not be accurate cosmology. Yet, he still wants Genesis to be absolutely true in every respect, even scientifically. When I asked him to define the firmament, he chuckled and said: "I wish I knew."⁵ When I asked Creation museum co-founder and CEO, Ken Ham, about the concept, he went back and forth and finally admitted: "So that one [the firmament], yeah, I don't talk about it too much."⁶ The firmament is the Achilles' heel of a literalist interpretation of Genesis 1. But it's not only a literalist interpretation, it's also what we call a "concordist" interpretation.

Concordism

The word *expanse*, instead of *dome* or *vault*, has led many fundamentalist and evangelical Christians to insert a modern notion of atmosphere and space into Genesis. This

type of interpretation is called concordism. In essence, concordism is trying to read the Bible as if it presents a cosmology perfectly congruent with the modern scientific consensus. Jaki sounds the alarm to this tendency to think in modern scientific terms:

Genesis 1's greatest peril. . . is the ever recurring temptation to make that magnificent chapter appear concordant with the science of the day in order to ensure it cultural respectability. Since the lure in this age, when all science has become cosmology

to a staggering degree, is more seductive than ever, and even greater has grown the contrast between the biblical cosmogenesis and scientific cosmogony, the task in question should seem paramount.⁷

Changing the basic meaning of a word through translation is dishonest, unless the translators are ignorant or they assume a concordist position from the outset. In my opinion, it is the duty of scholars to safeguard the ancient meaning, and we never arrive at a perfect understanding of the ancients. Concordist translations are Procrustean in that they cram modern science into the bed of ancient Middle Eastern cosmology.

Conclusion

The need for informed translations has never been greater. Folks who have never learned the biblical languages are dependent on scholars to deal accurately and honestly

with ancient texts as they translate them. I recommend translations such as the New Revised Standard Version, all of Robert Alter's translations (Alter has translations only of the Hebrew Bible), and the translation put out by the Westar Institute, the Scholars Version.

When I was teaching American college students in Greece in 2018, I had an unforgettable conversation with the renowned New Testament scholar John Dominic Crossan. We were studying the Pauline letters and Crossan said that the New Testament really started to make sense to him after he reread Virgil's *Aeneid* with fresh eyes. I followed Crossan's lead and did the same. The missionary journeys of Paul, as recorded in the Acts of the Apostles, burst wide open with meaning that I'd never seen before. Reading Mesopotamian epics such as *Enuma Elish* and the *Epic of Gilgamesh* generated similar experiences. We can't get enough ancient context in efforts to interpret these documents.

Like the rally cry of my high school football coach, "Defense, Defense, Defense!" so the cry of good interpretive practice should be "Context, Context, Context!" Important also is the need for a certain hermeneutic humility before a text. Pulling from Hans Georg Gadamer's *Truth and Method*, John D. Caputo lays out a helpful set of hermeneutical "best practices."

We typically begin to interpret by proceeding reproductively, by learning the original language, studying the original culture, ascertaining the original audience and the original purpose that was being served by the work. There is no other way to avoid misunderstanding the work and distorting it anachronistically. This is the mistake of people who think they can simply sit down, pick up the Bible, or any ancient text, and start reading.⁸

Along this line, I'll never forget a side comment I heard nearly a decade ago by Duke University theologian Stanley Hauerwas. This is not a direct quote, but it is close. He said something to the effect that Christians shouldn't be allowed to read the Bible by themselves, by which he meant without the help of scholars. It was meant in a humorous sense, but I find a lot of truth packed into that little quip.

Hermeneutics, the fancy word for principles of interpretation, is part art and part science. Imagination and visual creativity are sometimes neglected in the focus on written texts. But I would suggest that visual creativity and imagination are just as important as linguistics and historical-critical studies. I really appreciate visual enhancements to a written text because I've always been a visual learner. Give me a map, graph, picture, or diagram and I'll be able to make much better sense than with a written text alone.⁹ This type of media may not always be possible but when it is, efforts should be made to use any and all cultural mate-

rial to assist interpretation. A good example is the helpful Egyptian papyrus drawing (see above).

Most single words don't carry the important cosmological significance that the word *raqia'* does. But it is still important to capture the most accurate and equivalent meanings when translating ancient words into contemporary ones. To use *expanse* as a gloss for a rigid dome-like ceiling is confusing if not downright deceptive. *Expanse* has a wide range of meanings. A beaten-out expanse of metal is a far cry from air or atmosphere. The same word may have a range of meanings that are very different. For example, the word "magazine" can mean: (1) a printed periodical, (2) an ammunition dump, (3) an armory, (4) a clip of bullets one inserts into an assault rifle—and on it goes. The ancient firmament, as a concept, was the opposite of thin air; it was as solid as bronze. **4R**

Endnotes

1. If you desire more depth on this topic, I suggest the following: David Sedley, *Creationism and Its Critics in Antiquity* (University of California Press, 2007) and Stanley L. Jaki, *Genesis 1 Through the Ages* (Scottish Academic Press, 1998).
2. From Othmar Keel, *The Symbolism of the Biblical World: Ancient Near Eastern Iconography and the Book of Psalms*, trans. Timothy J. Hallett (Seabury, 1978) 36, Figure 32.
3. Francis Brown, S. R. Driver and C. A. Briggs, *Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Clarendon, [1906] 1951).
4. Jaki, *Genesis 1 Through the Ages*, 287.
5. Danny R. Faulkner, Interview by Steven M. Watkins, Creation Museum, Petersburg, KY, on September 6, 2013.
6. Ken Ham, Interview by Steven M. Watkins, Creation Museum, Petersburg, KY, on September 16, 2013.
7. Jaki, *Genesis 1 Through the Ages*, 32.
8. John D. Caputo, *Hermeneutics: Facts and Interpretation in the Age of Information* (Penguin-Random House, 2018), 98–99. This book is an excellent introduction to hermeneutics, for both upper-level undergraduates and seminary students.
9. John Dominic Crossan has produced a wonderful breakthrough about universal resurrection in the Eastern Church and its use of iconography. Having studied icons with Marcus Borg for over a decade, Crossan and his wife have written a recent book to this end: John Dominic Crossan and Sarah Sexton Crossan, *Resurrecting Easter: How the West Lost and the East Kept the Original Easter Version* (Harper One, 2018).



Steve Watkins (PhD University of Louisville) is associate editor of *The Fourth R* and Senior Lecturer in Global Humanities at the University of Louisville and has been teaching study abroad in Greece and Japan for over a decade. His interdisciplinary interests include religious studies, Greek Classics, and the dynamics of fundamentalist cultures around the world. A former Navy SEAL and Gulf War veteran, he is pursuing a project on the problem of violence in the world.

Level: Advanced



The Enchantments of Mammon

Eugene McCarragher
Belknap Press, 2019

According to Eugene McCarragher, we do not live in a disenchanted world, as the sociologist Max Weber and more recent acolytes of various forms of secularism assume: enchantment has simply changed hands. As McCarragher puts it, “Under capitalism, money occupies the ontological throne from which God has been evicted” (11).

That capitalism does not mark an end to enchantment, to religion, but institutes an enchantment by other means puts McCarragher closer to the German philosopher and critic Walter Benjamin, whom he references with approval: capitalism is a religion, one with its own, particular imagery and practices. McCarragher calls this religion Mammonism, and its gospel is hardly good news. Mammonism trades a classical Christian ontology of abundance and peace for a “grotesque ontology of scarcity and money, the tawdry humanism of acquisitiveness and conflict, the reduction of rationality to the mercenary principles of pecuniary reason” (16).

I share McCarragher’s claim that Mammon is the god of this world, but I have concerns over the way its ascendancy is framed. *How* we tell the story of capitalism’s theology and theological roots matters, not just for outlining and assessing its components but also for proposing solutions.

McCarragher frames his narrative as one of a declension from a more “sacramental” view of the world. He marks this in various ways throughout the book. For instance, capitalism is not just a form of enchantment but a “*mis*enchantment, a parody or perversion of our longing for a sacramental way of being in the world” (5). Likewise, the promises of Mammonism are “counterfeit, for the love of money misdirects our sacramental desire to know the presence of divinity in our midst” (5). Capitalism is a “profanity,” (9) an “empty animism,” (9) which works us over with its “perverse iconography” (14).

All of this, of course, implies a standard from which capitalism deviates. For McCarragher, that standard is not so much found in utopian longing but, rather, in the recognition that human flourishing can only be found in embrac-

ing our “creaturely nature” vis-à-vis God’s cosmic grace. Indeed, McCarragher often states and regularly implies that what underpins capitalism is the sin of overstepping our bounds, of attempting to put ourselves in the place of God via money. The story of Mammonism is, then, very much a fall, which is why McCarragher can also imagine our exit from the cult of money as re-entrance into paradise, “even if only incompletely” (679).

Another way to put this is that, for McCarragher, a properly construed Christian ontology is fundamentally at odds with the ontology of capitalism, of Mammon. Yes, Christianity serves as capitalism’s incubator, but this is more of a historical accident rather than a feature of its theological, moral, and communal imagination. The ways in which he describes the emergence of capitalism out of Christianity is telling, in this respect. To cite just one example, McCarragher writes that the “Puritan errand into the wilderness became an errand into the marketplace, and American life became an experiment in Christian friendship with unrighteous Mammon” (117). Capitalism emerges in the internal struggle and social conflict between these two poles, but the latter pole has nothing to do with the former, in any substantial sense. Any justification of Mammon, and peace made with it, is portrayed as a “succumbing” (119), rather than an extension of a logic found in Christianity itself.

Christianity and capitalism are, at the end of the day, essentially two separate things, even if on the ground the two constantly cross each other’s paths. This is again evident in McCarragher’s habit of using language that, in both the history of religious studies and theology, carries negative connotations as compared to the language and practices of Christianity. McCarragher portrays his own vision, which coincides with a Christian vision, as “sacramental.” Capitalism is, for him, a caricature of sacramental reality, but it is one that he describes variously as a form of “alchemy” (602; cf. 120), “animism” (616), or “sorcery” (186); as rife with symbolic “totems” (3); and as governed by a clerisy of “shamans and magicians” (18). These are just a few examples, but he never uses these or similar terms to describe his and others’ versions of “sacramental romanticism.” Capitalism is described as and takes the place of the exoticized and colonized other, whose practices and being remain outside the sphere of Christianity proper—unless converted, of course.

Accusing McCarragher of what essentially amounts to colonialism with respect to non-Christian others may sound harsh. Nevertheless, and keeping the accusation in mind, I think a more fruitful approach would be to view Christianity and capitalism as closer together, not just historically but in substance. In other words, I wonder what the narrative would look like if McCarragher had not clipped Benjamin’s claim about capitalism being a religion

itself. After making this claim in “Capitalism as Religion,” Benjamin goes on to state, “Capitalism has developed as a parasite of Christianity in the West . . . until it reached the point where Christianity’s history is essentially that of its parasite—that is to say, of capitalism.”¹ Each plays host to

1. Walter Benjamin, “Capitalism as Religion,” in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings* Vol. 1, edited by Marcus Bullock and Michael Jennings (Belknap, 1996), 289.

2. See Michel Serres, *The Parasite*, translated by Lawrence R. Schehr (University of Minnesota Press, 2007), 15–16.

the other, which also means that each needs the other not just to survive but thrive.²

To label the relationship between capitalism and Christianity as parasitic, in this sense, does not mean that Christianity, its histories and theologies, have no role to play in the fight against capitalism. Rather, it means we must interrogate the ways in which key aspects of Mammonism remain folds within Christianity itself, and vice versa.

Hollis Phelps
Mercer University

Jack the Precursor *Continued from page 2*

campfire that brings out sparks and an unexpected glow. Memory alerts us to relations that somehow never go away.

Death turns us all into children again. Here we are uncertain and shaken, on unknown ground. We have become like little ones on our first day at school, left all alone to face something so overwhelming, so staggering.

Until we remember. Who has led us here, who has gotten out of the way but still coaches us, coaxes us to keep going, to enjoy the warmth of the campfire or the depths of the water, or to realize the point of our life together?

Isn’t this really the heart of teaching? Isn’t this the heart of a teacher? **4R**

Christmas, Easter, Myth, and Depth Psychology *Continued from page 7*

10. Carl Jung, “Answer to Job,” in *Psychology and Religion: West and East*, 2nd ed. (Princeton University Press, 1969).

11. Jung, “Answer to Job,” 373.

12. Arthur and Elena George, *The Mythology of Eden* (Hamilton Books, 2014), 245–68.

13. Jung, “Answer to Job.”

14. Carl Jung, “The Psychology of the Child Archetype,” in *The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious* (Princeton University Press, 1959), 149–81.

15. Carl Jung, “The Type Problem in Classical and Medieval Thought,” in *Psychological Types* (Princeton University Press, 1971), 59.

16. Lionel Corbett, *The Religious Function of the Psyche* (Routledge,

1996), 149 (as to the magi). For further details on the Divine Child in this context, see George, *Holidays*, 245–48.

17. Unpublished letter of 1926 from Carl Jung to Gerhard Adler, quoted in Gerhard Adler, “Aspects of Jung’s Personality and Work,” in *Psychological Perspectives* (1975), 6:12; also quoted in Corbett, *Religious Function of the Psyche*, 134.

18. Carl Jung, “Transformation Symbolism in the Mass,” in *Psychology and Religion*, 203–96; Dourley, *Illness*, 96.

19. Carl Jung, “On Resurrection,” in *The Symbolic Life* (Princeton University Press, 1976), 694–95.

20. Dourley, *Psyche as Sacrament*, 81.

21. For example, Matt 22:30; Acts 23:6; 24:15, 21; 1 Cor 15:20–21; 1 Thess 4:16–17.

22. Carl Jung, “The Alchemical Interpretation of the Fish,” in *Aion*, 169.

23. Carl Jung, Letter of March 27, 1954, to Père Lachat, in *The Symbolic Life*, 689.

24. Edward Edinger, *The Christian Archetype: A Jungian Commentary on the Life of Christ* (Inner City Books, 1987), 126–27.

25. Carl Jung, Letter of November 25, 1950, to Father Victor White, in Gerhard Adler, ed., *C.G. Jung Letters*, vol. 1 (Princeton University Press, 1973), 567. See generally discussion by Jung in “Answer to Job,” 461–69.

26. Carl Jung, “A Psychological Approach to the Dogma of the Trinity,” in *Psychology and Religion: West and East*, 107–200.

27. Jung, “Trinity,” 174–75.

28. Norman Perrin, *The New Testament: An Introduction*. 2nd ed. (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1982), 49.

Religion and Oppression

Under the cloak of a theocratic economy in which justice, wealth, life, death, health, fertility and social esteem are the ultimate responsibility of deities who can be accessed only by means of a privileged institution stands an economic system created by humans themselves, in which a small elite sustains itself at the expense of the productive majority whose surpluses are removed, leaving them economically powerless and physically weaker than they would otherwise be—not to mention ideologically dominated, so as to fail to see that their oppression is the outcome of a certain social system, and indeed to cooperate with that system in attributing blame for many ills on the deity, collaborating with their exploiters in bringing this deity problems for which humans, and not deities, are responsible.

—Philip Davies, *Whose Bible Is It Anyway?* (T&T Clark, 2004), 121.



Arthur George is an independent scholar (mythology, religion, and cultural history) and the author of several books, most recently the award-winning *The Mythology of Eden* (2014), *The Mythology of America’s Seasonal Holidays* (2020), and *The Mythology of Wine* (Tellwell, 2020). He has a mythology blog at www.mythologymatters.wordpress.com.

New Westar Board Member

Westar Institute welcomes **Lyn Pickhover** to its board of directors.

Lyn has been a Westar associate since the late 1980s. She and her late husband, Brian, attended JSORs on the East Coast and began their in-person involvement with the big 2004 meeting in New York. “We were hooked!” she laughed. They went to Miami Lakes twice and then on to Santa Rosa once or even twice a year to enjoy the stimulation and company of the Westar gatherings. “I call my Westar friends my ‘once a year family,’” she added. “Hosting the Garden Room at the Santa Rosa meetings has been a wonderful opportunity to talk with lots of people in a short time and share in their interesting discussions. I lead three lives,” she explained. “Professionally, I’m in the process of retiring from almost four decades as a child protective lawyer. I’m currently a deacon in my church, a federation of local UCC and ABC churches, and lead an adult Bible study making use of knowledge and materials gained through Westar. Then there is Westar itself, which provides much appreciated intellectual challenges as well as a wide circle of interesting friends.”

As the daughter of a Yankee mother and a first-generation Italian American father, Lyn grew up in Franklin, Massachusetts as “the only Protestant child in a Catholic family.” “Seeing different faith traditions within my own family was a good base for learning that there was more to Christianity than what was presented in my home church. It also prepared me to embrace growth and change, both personally and in the organizations I value.” Lyn looks forward to being part of the challenges in Westar’s future.



New Westar Scholar

Mary Foskett is Wake Forest Kahle Professor at Wake Forest University, where she teaches undergraduate and graduate MA students in the Department for the Study of Religions and served as a faculty co-founder and inaugural director of the WFU Humanities Institute. She works in the area of New Testament studies and her publications include *A Virgin Conceived: Mary and Classical Representations of Virginity* (Indiana University Press) and *Ways of Being, Ways of Reading: Asian-American Biblical Interpretation*, co-edited with Jeffrey Kah-Jin Kuan (Chalice Press). She is an active member of SBL and Pacific, Asian, and North American



Asian Women in Theology and Ministry and serves on the board of the Foundation for Theological Education in Southeast Asia.



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THE CHRISTIAN ROOTS OF RACISM *Continued from page 12*

controlled by the churches, that had existed for over a century with the purpose of instilling Christian belief amongst the aborigines, denying access to traditional lands and sacred sites, in order to facilitate assimilation.^h Such policies lasted up to the 1960s. Though we condemn the inhuman behaviour of the Nazis and their perverted ideology, the treatment of the aborigines, guided by “benign” Christian principles, had the same ultimate purpose: that a whole people should ultimately cease to exist. *Quelle difference?*

This willful amnesia conveniently allows inconvenient truths to be brushed aside and old mentalities to remain unchallenged. Despite the words and good intentions little really changes, as with Lincoln’s 1862 Emancipation Proclamation. This document brought about very little real change and has subsequently been denounced as little more than a grandstanding gesture for self-serving political ends. Discrimination, brutality, and terror continued and even worsened with the end of Reconstruction and the rise of the Ku Klux Klan. And in 2020 on the anniversary of the Tulsa Massacre the president of the United States chose to revisit the city on his campaign trail with a message of “Law and Order,” respect for property, and his incongruous claim that the “Black Lives Matter” movement is a form of terrorism! *Plus ça change?* 

h. See Phillip Noyce’s brilliant film *Rabbit Proof Fence* of 2002 set in 1931 with Kenneth Branagh playing A. O. Neville, the official “Protector of Aborigines.” The film caused immense controversy over the treatment of Aborigines and the children of the so-called Lost Generation. Attempts to discredit the history behind the film failed simply because it was demonstrably true.

Endnotes

1. Casper Erichsen & David Olusoga, *The Kaiser’s Holocaust: Germany’s Forgotten Genocide* (Faber, 2011). In May 2021 the German government formally apologized to Namibia for the slaughter of over a hundred years previously and pledged eleven billion euros compensation.
2. Adam Hochschild, *King Leopold’s Ghost: A Story of Greed, Terror and Heroism in Colonial Africa* (Picador, 2019). The publication of this book forced Belgians to come to terms for the first time with their long buried colonial past and generated intense public debate that so troubled Belgian officials that they reportedly instructed diplomats on how to deflect embarrassing questions about the past that the book raised.
3. Tom Lawson, *The Last Man: A British Genocide in Tasmania* (Tauris, 2014).
4. See Robert J. Miller, *Discovering Indigenous Lands: The Doctrine of Discovery in English Colonies* (Oxford University Press, 2010).
5. R. I. Moore, *The Formation of a Persecuting Society* (Blackwell, 2007 Second Edition), 4.
6. Vitoria challenged and ultimately discredited the thinking that justified caeseropapism. See Fernando Cervantes, *Conquistadores: A New History* (Allen Lane, 2020), 265–68.
7. Keith Thomas, *Man and the Natural World: Changing Attitudes in England 1500–1800* (Penguin, 1983).
8. David Olusoga, *Black and British: A Forgotten History* (Pan, 2017), ch 6, “The Monster is dead.”
9. Report: “Church’s mea culpa on antisemitism,” *The Times* November 21, 2019.
10. Letter, *The Times* November 22, 2019.



Dominic Kirkham was ordained in 1977 into the Norbertine (Premonstratensian) Order which he left some twenty-five years later, undertaking a variety of community and welfare projects that he still leads and promotes. He is the author of *From Monk to Modernity* (revised edition, 2019), *Our Shadowed World: Civilization, Savagery and Belief* (Westar Studies, 2019), and *Horror and Hope: The Conflicted Legacy of Christianity* (Wipf & Stock, 2021).

In Praise of Weakness *Continued from page 17*

points that we weak theologians would agree with—in which he makes it absolutely clear that he has all the power in this situation, having the power of life and death over Jesus, and there is no greater power than that. After his eminence concludes his long speech, during which Jesus is completely silent, Jesus does not strike the man dead with a blink of his eye or command his angels to hurl the body of his eminence out of the window crashing it on the plaza below. That is precisely the sort of fantasy with which strong theology nourishes and entertains itself. For the strong theologians, the greatness of Jesus in this scene is his self-restraint, like the strong silent type in the movies whom everyone in the audience knows can level his enemy if he chooses but instead chooses not to. That is why Nietzsche concluded that Christianity was a slave

morality spawned by resentment against the powerful. Instead, Jesus simply goes up to the Lord Cardinal and gives him a kiss, which completely disarms the great man, who tells Jesus to leave and never come back. That I think is a splendid distillation of the weakness of God and of how things are done in the kingdom of God, not with a sword but a kiss, and something which the Church, which too often confuses itself with the kingdom of God, as if it were the perfect society, forgets with alarming regularity.

Unconditional forgiveness means granting forgiveness *without* laying down the traditional conditions strong theology has always imposed—that the offender express sorrow, make amends, do penance, and promise to offend no more. Such forgiveness would be a little “mad,” completely foolish, would it

not? As foolish and mad, perhaps, as forgiving one's executioners, as loving one's enemies, as greeting hatred with love.

The rule of God is the rule of a weak force, not an *imperium* or *basileia* in the usual sense. The weakness of God is precisely the rule of unconditional calls like forgiveness, hospitality, and the pure gift. God, the celestial being, weakens into the kingdom of God, even as the kingdom of God weakens into the world, into a form of being-in-the-world, a form of life, which is I think what is going on in the incarnationism of the Incarnation. God, the name of God, the event that takes place in the name (of) "God," represents a way to name what is going on in the kingdom of God, the unruly rule by which the wondrous works of the kingdom are worked. By the impossible everything happens. Not only does the kingdom of God have no need of the Supreme Being, but were such a God ever to show up, it would ruin everything. **4R**

Endnotes

1. Derrida, "Force of Law," in *Jacques Derrida: Acts of Religion*, ed. Gil Anidjar (Routledge, 2002); see in particular pp. 242–45. The version available in Cornell, *Deconstruction and the Possibility of Justice*, is earlier.
2. Walter Benjamin, "On the Concept of History," in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings*, Vol. 4, 1938–40, ed. Michael Jennings (Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2003), 390. This little essay is very famous and influential and well repays study.
3. Dale Martin, *The Corinthian Body* (Yale University Press, 1995), 62.



John D. Caputo (PhD, Bryn Mawr College) is the Watson Professor of Religion Emeritus at Syracuse University and the Cook Professor of Philosophy Emeritus at Villanova University.

A hybrid philosopher/theologian who works in the area of radical theology, Caputo is the author of many books, including *The Folly of God* (2015); *Hoping Against Hope* (2015); *The Insistence of God* (2013); and *The Weakness of God* (2006), winner of the American Academy of Religion award for excellence in constructive theology.

Letter to the Editor *Continued from page 18*

as expressed in the Nicene Creed and other similar formulations lost its credibility for educated residents of a secular, scientifically literate culture. The search for the historical Jesus began in response to that disconnection with the theological language of the tradition that was embedded in an ancient mythological worldview. The Jesus of the Nicene Creed, a mythological figure, does not exist; but the Jesus of Nazareth was a real historical person. Identifying historically reliable evidence about that historical figure was the aim and the achievement of the Jesus Seminar. Now we can know at least something about the historical figure with whom the Christian tradition began. This knowledge, partial though it may be, is of crucial importance because it puts us in touch with something historically real: a young religious visionary who lived in the same world we do (although, of course, at a different time and place and in a different cultural context.) In dealing with Jesus of Nazareth we are not dealing just with a creature of ancient theological imagination—the Jesus of Nicea; we are dealing with a real historical event and the question of its meaning. That is essential information if we are to be able to understand the origin of the Christian tradition and its originating meaning.

In response to one of David Merritt's specific questions, I would say that people of the modern world who know that we humans are the point at which the evolutionary process became conscious of itself are not going to ask what it means to be the children of our father who is in the heavens; but, having emerged as self-conscious, significantly self-directed beings, we can and should ask what

kind of people we ought to be. Socrates can be one of our precursors here in insisting that a life worth living must be an examined life: how can we identify and pursue the good? That is one way to put a modern equivalent question to Jesus' implicit question of what it ought to mean to be the children of the father who is in the heavens. Reference to the father in the heavens is a culture-bound formulation; the issue of what kind of people we ought to be is one that confronts all of us in every generation.

During my doctoral program one of my professors insisted that the task of biblical scholars was to focus on "what it meant, not what it means." I have long since concluded that he was only half right. Getting the history right is indispensable; but if our scholarship is to be of any use to the people of church, they will need more than good historical information. To deal with the question of modern meaning will require collaboration with philosophers, theologians, and others, but biblical scholars can offer a particular competence and a distinctive perspective, so we should do what we can. I offered a brief attempt to address this challenge in an article published in the May-June, 2020 issue of *The Fourth R*: "Toward a Strategy for an Enlightened Faith."

Bishop John Shelby Spong once said that the theological task facing the church today is the greatest challenge of its entire history. That is not an overstatement. That challenge calls upon the church to make a long-term commitment to its own theological re-education (and education of any kind is not an easy, short-term project) if it is to be capable of contributing to a humane wisdom that can enlighten and elevate human life in our time. **4R**

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Westar Website Project Underway

During the months of March, April, and May, I engaged in a campaign to raise money for a renewed and revitalized Westar website. It was a daunting task. Few people enjoy calling someone to ask for money, but doing so afforded me the opportunity to establish relationships with Westar people and to share the excitement of a new horizon.

In some cases, email was the vehicle of communication, but in most cases I spoke in person with several different people across the Westar family. I enjoyed renewing old friendships and discovering new friends and supporters. In relatively short order the goal of \$60,000 was not only raised but surpassed. I thank all the donors that made and are making this website project possible! I would not be much of a salesperson if I did not throw in that there is still time to give. Your gifts, large and small, are always gratefully received.

Now we move to stage two of the web project, which is the harder part. After receiving proposals, interviewing candidates, researching a variety of different possibilities, second and third round interviews, and Board feedback, the Board of Directors approved the proposal from Scott Merriam to re-design, re-equip, and re-implement the Westar website. There were three important considerations in this decision: to improve the look and navigational ease of the site, to ensure the staff can update the site with little trouble, and to introduce features (widgets) that allow staff to schedule events with options. For example, if a seminar has three or four sessions, we want to offer package deals or the chance to choose, with one registration, the sessions members want to attend. Still another element involves handling the different membership categories Westar now has and accessing the privileges each membership holds. We want to see greater ease of use here, too.

Yet, the website is only half of the picture. The second half is the Learning Management System (LMS). The Westar Academy was created to put courses online. We have the vision of certificate programs that we hope may grow into full-fledged degrees. Imagine getting a degree in biblical studies from Westar! That possibility will be a lot of work, but it cannot get off the ground without an LMS. Westar is now in a position, with our website recreation underway, to focus on the LMS. The Westar Academy Committee will be taking the lead on this question. We are hoping to identify the LMS best suited to our needs and to launch our first online courses in early 2022.

These two important developments for Westar are possible because people believe in the Westar vision, follow Westar scholarship, and give what they are able to support the possibilities. I had a fantastic time raising money for these two efforts. So, as a warning, I will not be shy to phone to raise money for future projects yet unknown. But the point is that it is you, the Westar member, that makes the Westar project possible, and on behalf of the Board of Directors, I extend the depth of our gratitude for your trust and your gifts.

David Galston, Executive Director



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