

a critical review of modern life

# kategoria

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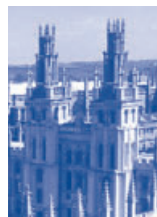
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## Can literature replace God?

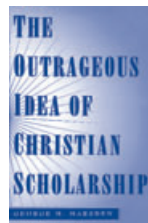
### CHRISTIANS AND THE HUMANITIES

*What's happening  
in the universities?*



### CHRISTIAN SCHOLARSHIP

*Is it outrageous?*



a critical review of modern life

# kategoria

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Correspondence should be addressed to the editor:  
Dr Kirsten Birkett  
Matthias Centre for the Study of Modern Beliefs  
PO Box 225  
Kingsford NSW 2032  
AUSTRALIA

Australia: Ph. (02) 9663 1478 Fax (02) 9662 4289  
International: Ph. +61-2-9663 1478 Fax +61-2-9662 4289  
Email: [matmedia@ozemail.com.au](mailto:matmedia@ozemail.com.au)  
Internet: <http://www.gospelnet.com.au/matmedia/>

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# editorial

One of the ways in which people have tried to find meaning and importance over the last century or so is through literature, through artistic expression. The literary world is and has been a strange one; it can be very self-absorbed, but at the same time the brilliant people who have inhabited the literary sphere have produced works which changed the world. Literary endeavour is deep engagement with ideas and how to express them: “the right words in the right order”, as the saying goes. For those involved, literature and writing can take on ultimate importance, overshadowing anything else. Those who have never studied literature, or who are not great readers, may not even know this community exists and would be amazed at the amount of communal activity which occupies them.

The literary world—or at least the academic part of it—is now, however, facing certain fundamental problems. It is difficult any more to judge what ‘good’ literature is. Certainly most English faculties in universities are undergoing heated debates on the subject. In a world where certainties are failing, and absolute principles have been rejected, on what basis do you judge literature ‘good’? Why is Shakespeare considered so important? If literature expresses a genuine point of view, can it ever be ‘bad’? These are some of the struggles of the postmodern attitude. When students come to be taught about English literature, what should you teach them?

Michael Jensen describes for us the way in which this debate over ‘good’ literature has developed, and why. For

it was no accident that English studies began taking such prominence last century; they were self-consciously trying to replace the principles of religion with principles derived from the best of literature. Instead of Christianity providing ethics and profound ideas about life, the canon of great literature would. The trouble is, what is the canon of great literature these days? How do we decide which works are worth reading? Without some basis in absolutes, such humanly constructed standards fall prey to human disagreements.

This is not a question that is going to go away. Greg Clarke's interview with American scholar Leland Ryken gives a perspective from within the academy, and Kim Hawtrey's review of George Marsden's latest book on universities and scholarship points out some of the widespread difficulties. Even if we recognize that Christianity does provide the basic principles now lacking, it is still problematical how it should interact with university studies. Kim Hawtrey discusses some of the issues involved in the concept of 'Christian' education—is there any such thing as a Christian approach to mathematics? In what way would Christian ideas help in the construction of an English syllabus?

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I have recently been reading the work of Christopher Milne. He is the original Christopher Robin who had a toy bear named Pooh. Christopher Milne evidently grew up in the shadow of his famous father, but as an adult began writing his own books. They are not fiction; more autobiographical, they explain his philosophy of life and the development of his ideas.

In the end, Christopher Milne describes himself as a pantheist, one who had gone through the gates of Christianity to a religion more all-encompassing and loving. He lives in a beautiful country setting in Devonshire, and the photographs which illustrate his writing show the kind of idyllic English countryside which might well inspire nature-worship. Milne finds this kind of religious emotion far more satisfying than the church-and-chapel Christianity he grew up with.

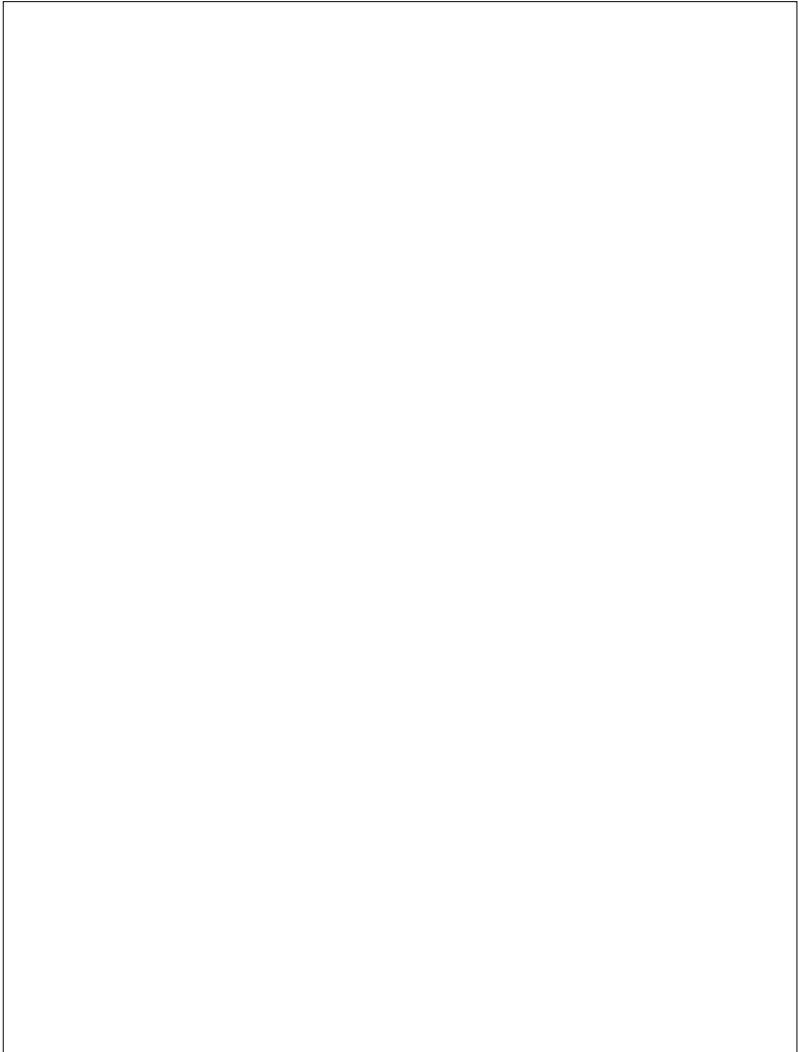
Unfortunately, the Christianity which Milne describes

and rejects bears little similarity to the Christianity of the Bible. Raised an upper-class English male, Milne identified Christianity as part of the attitude of superiority which, he says, was instilled in him from birth and encouraged at school. Being upper-class, he thought, taught him to look down on lower classes; being English taught him to look down on other nationalities; and being Christian taught him to look down on other religions. Through his travels and growth in understanding as an adult, Milne recognized the first two attitudes as unjust and wrong. Thinking Christianity merely a part of the same pattern, he rejected it as unjust and wrong too. Beautiful, maybe; historically important, and with some truths to offer; but not something which humane people could follow in today's world.

I am glad Christopher Milne recognized the problems of class and national bigotry. It is a terrible shame he thought Christianity part of that same bigotry, or that he ever identified the gospel as patronizing and unfriendly. One wonders how many others have rejected Christianity through an upbringing that distorted it. No doubt this has been a large part of the widespread rejection of Christianity this century, so entangled was it with Western cultural values in many people's view. Christianity has produced some of the best in Western culture, but it is not the same as Western culture and should not be. This is one of the dangers of teaching Christianity in universities; it can become merely part of an academic subject, rather than a living trust in a living God.

As the Christian viewpoint becomes increasingly marginalized in secular teaching institutions, this will become a bigger issue for Christians. To what extent is it good to stay in the secular academy, and to what extent should Christian institutions be founded? The problems of marginalization, or being misunderstood, on the one hand, are paralleled by the danger of becoming a ghetto on the other hand. Somehow the Christian viewpoint needs to be put forward, in a way that avoids both cultural distortion and closed cliques. ❀

Kirsten Birkett  
Editor



# May our literature save us

Michael Jensen

George Gordon, one of the first professors of English at Oxford delivered this message at his inaugural lecture:

England is sick, and...English literature must save it. The Churches (as I understand) having failed, and social remedies being slow, English literature has a triple function: still, I suppose, to delight and instruct us but also, and above all, to save our souls and heal the State.<sup>1</sup>

The rise, in the nineteenth century, of the formal study of Literature—‘English’—came as a direct result of the perceived failure of Christianity. It was hoped that the reading of great literary works—the ‘Canon’—would provide the moral basis for industrial-scientific culture that the Church could no longer supply with any credibility. The experience of reading the great books of the culture was to be a balm on society’s industrial wounds. Yet in our times we may

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1 Quoted in T. Eagleton, *Literary Theory—An Introduction*, Blackwell, Oxford, 1983, p. 23.

recite a similar elegy over this optimistic vision of the salvation of culture from barbarity. Plainly, in the light of subsequent history, the project of people like Gordon has failed. Literature could never achieve what was asked of it: it could soften, but never change the adamant human heart. This has been recognized in the contemporary academy; but there confusion reigns, because the role of Literature in Western culture is no longer so obvious. The Canon is under attack from a plethora of moral and ideological points of view.

The study of the humanities within the university is in a state of foment. The English faculty at the University of Sydney, where I studied from 1989-92, provides a not unusual case study. For years the department had insisted on a core of study made up of traditional literary classics, from Shakespeare, Spenser, Milton and Pope to Keats, Austen and Dickens. The twentieth century was represented by Woolf, Joyce, Yeats and Eliot; and we even studied the writings of such latter-day stars as Helen Garner and Thomas Pynchon. The core was supplemented by a smorgasbord of optional courses which tended to reflect the predilections of the faculty. The reading was at times a chore; I would not have chosen to read several of the authors. Often I was pleasantly surprised, or challenged—but not always. Yet, as one of my favourite teachers said: “If you are going to study literature, you’ve got to rub your nose in this stuff”.

The year after I left, however, the faculty controversially voted to revamp its syllabus in a way which reflected a philosophical change in the way literature was to be understood. A core syllabus was no longer required: students could choose their entire course of study. An undergraduate student, then, could avoid studying Shakespeare or Austen if she wanted to. It was no longer deemed necessary to a literary education to receive instruction in classic or Canonical works. The focus of what had been ‘literary’ study was now more broadly ‘cultural’. Works by minority groups or by women were given a space under the new umbrella.

That the stakes were high was revealed by the arresting

acrimony under which the whole syllabus review was undertaken. For example, Andrew Riemer, now chief literary reviewer for the *Sydney Morning Herald*, and one of Australia's foremost writers and critics, resigned in protest after more than two decades at the University. He made no secret of his disgust at what he saw as the erosion of important standards. What occurred at the University of Sydney did not happen in isolation, but as part of a debate about culture that has affected the teaching of literature everywhere, a debate that has focussed on the issue of the Canon.

The Greek word *kanon* originally signified a measuring rod. However, its subsequent uses have been with reference to collections of books: first, to the list of books that comprised the Old and New Testaments; and second, in a literary context to refer to the set of works (of which the Bible is one) which, by a cumulative consensus in the past, have come to be considered 'major' and to serve as "the persistent subjects of literary history, criticism, and scholarship".<sup>2</sup> It is common to speak of *the* Canon as being that of the Western cultural tradition. The Canon is meant to include those works that are called 'Literature'; indeed, the two terms are coterminous. In current practice, 'Canon' is also used to signify the key authors in a literary subgrouping. For example, a recent edition of *Southerly* was devoted to the 'Australian Canon'.

The notion of the Canon has been one of the most keenly contested areas of literary study in the last two decades. It would be difficult to find a university whose faculty of English has not been rent asunder over the issues of the Canon, because it directly affects what is taught. In fact, the Canon *is* what is taught, generally. Yet the Western Canon as commonly conceived has come under intense pressure from the ideological interests that now permeate English faculties; and even the idea of Canonicity itself has been called into question.

What we might call Western culture—the heritage of

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2 M. Abrams, *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, New York, 1989, p. 210.

those societies having origin in the west of Europe—is a culture which Christianity has shaped profoundly. Indeed, the Judaeo-Christian tradition must be counted as one of the two pillars on which the entire Western tradition of intellectual and cultural endeavour, from biology to poetry, is founded (the Graeco-Roman being the other). Western culture and Christianity are yoked together, historically speaking. The spread of Western power and influence roughly coincides with the spread of Christianity. Western political, economic and military thinking has theological roots. In many painful passages of history the ‘Western’ and the ‘Christian’ have been indistinguishable. Until comparatively recently the term ‘Christendom’ was used to indicate what is now meant by ‘the Western world’.

However, today a thorough reconsideration of the Western cultural heritage is underway. In the post-holocaust, post-Hiroshima, post-colonial age the Western past is no longer something of which simply to be proud. The unprecedented power of this culture has come at the cost of tremendous human suffering. The utopia of Western technological progress is for everyone else an apocalypse. The success of the West has, it seems, less to do with the blessing of God and more to do with simple theft and murder. In recent years the literary academy has been the site of a new self-loathing towards the cultural heritage of the West; and it is the ‘great’ books of Western literature—the Western Canon—that are the focus of the discussion. Is the Western notion of what is aesthetically pleasing tainted with the bloodguilt of that culture? Do the works that comprise the Canon represent the tools of centuries of oppression? Can we ever extricate Christianity from Western culture, or are the two joined at the hip? In the discussion that follows I hope to shed some light on these difficult questions.

The contemporary debate about the Canon highlights three major problems that Western culture has yet to resolve—the problem of Western history and politics, the problem of Western thinking, and the problem of Western aesthetics. These seem to be the three areas which make it difficult to determine whether there can be such thing as a

Canon. Contrary to the optimism of nineteenth-century devotees of Literature, the Canon has not only failed to save our souls, but may be beyond salvation.

**D**iscussion of the Canon of Western Literature uncovers the problem of Western culture's dubious history. Leading contemporary cultural critics such as Palestinian-American Edward Said rightly point to the rather equivocal past of Western culture. In his magisterial book *Culture and Imperialism*, Said aims

...to focus as much as possible on individual works, to read them first as great products of the creative or interpretive imagination, and then to show them as part of the relationship between culture and empire...Since narrative plays such a remarkable part in the imperial quest, it is therefore not surprising that France and (especially) England have an unbroken tradition of novel-writing, unparalleled elsewhere.<sup>3</sup>

Literature, then, has played a role in the dubious process of Empire. Much undoubted good has come from the hegemony of the West in the modern world. Yet the construction of a monolithic cultural identity, to which poetry and narrative literature are fundamental, has been to the specific exclusion of other cultural identities—class, race, even gender. We may cite, for example, even the English language itself—today, truly a world language, opening exciting possibilities for communication between peoples, but at the same time privileging some and disadvantaging others; working against diversity, by its power sucking the life out of other languages. Said admires the great literary works of the Western tradition as an unparalleled corpus of imaginative literature, but he deplores the use of this corpus in the exercise of power and privilege.

If the Canon is an instrument of oppression, exclusion

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3 E. W. Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, Vintage, London, 1993, pp. xxiv-xxv.

and elitism, how can it maintain any credibility? Wouldn't it be better to dismantle the very idea of a Canon as out-moded and imperial? Terry Eagleton, Marxist and professor of English at Oxford, argues for the dismantling of the idea of 'Literature' on ideological grounds. He proposes rather the study of 'discourse', by which he means everything from Shakespeare and Tolstoy to advertising copy and government memoranda. A document surveying 'The humanities in the Princeton undergraduate experience 1989'<sup>4</sup> summarizes the debate:

Is there a Canon of great books? What is a masterpiece? Who decides what the 'great books' are?...Are the currently revered books chosen 'by Western white men *for* Western white men' as some critics claim? Do colleges and universities have *an obligation* to expose undergraduate students to some of the great works of Western civilization by requiring some course or set of courses designed specifically for that purpose? Do we also have *an obligation* to expose students to the work of other cultures and of the historically dispossessed within our own society?

### The problem of Western discourse

Tension over the Canon has also pointed to the problem of discourse in contemporary discussion, highlighted by Jacques Derrida and others. Western thinking has historically given prominence to the authority of the author of the text as the key to understanding its 'real' meaning. French structuralist critic Roland Barthes proclaimed 'The Death of the Author' in his essay-cum-obituary of 1964. By 'Author' he meant the author as used by critics to author-ize a particular interpretation of a text over another—the author as the object of discovery. He wrote:

We know now that a text is not a line of words releasing a single 'theological' meaning (the 'message' of the Author-God) but a multi-dimensional space in

4 D. Anderson, *Text and Sex*, Vintage, Sydney, 1995, p. 181.

which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash. The text is a tissue of quotations drawn from innumerable centres of culture...Once the Author is removed, the claim to decipher a text becomes quite futile. To give a text an Author is to impose a limit on the text, to furnish it with a final signified, to close the writing...We are now beginning to let ourselves be fooled no longer by the arrogant antiphrastical recriminations of good society in favour of the very thing it sets aside, ignores, smothers, or destroys; we know that to give writing its future it is necessary to overthrow the myth: the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author.<sup>5</sup>

The presence of the Author in the text is a powerful illusion, but an illusion nonetheless. The study of the Canon, or 'Classics'—works by 'great' 'authors'—is thus dramatically undermined, so it seems. Barthes saw that texts had to be 'disentangled' rather than 'deciphered'—the notion of an 'ultimate' meaning is untenable. Barthes was sensitive to the theological consequences of his manifesto: the Death of the Author was also the Death of God, the ultimate Author.

As a consequence, notions of literary value break down, a savage blow to the Western Canon which was conceived as a repository of values. Reading now needs to be suspicious of the construction of reality in texts, not sympathetic to it, less still guided by it. The perceived order in the rhetoric of the West is susceptible to deconstruction.

The problem of articulating the nature of aesthetic merit continues to vex Western culture. The notion of beauty is in many ways intuitive, and the reader or observer decides what is beautiful on an inarticulate level. Aesthetic theories have never been entirely convincing. This has led to a deep mistrust of the idea of the aesthetic. For political critics like

The problem of  
Western aesthetics

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5 R. Barthes, *Image-Music-Text*, trans. S. Heath, Fontana, London, 1977, pp. 147-9.

Eagleton, the idea of the 'aesthetic' is mythical, an instrument for denying the ideological forces at work in art and literature.

The intuitive sympathetic response of people to the aesthetic quality of great literature was the reason that the study of a Canon of great literary works was developed on such a large scale in the nineteenth century. In response to the crushing utilitarianism of Benthamite England and the sheer drear of industrial work, the Canon of literature promised a realm for the imagination. However, the perceived failure of religion is the most significant reason for the development of English studies in the nineteenth century. George Gordon, as we have already seen, saw English as the panacea for social ills, "to save our souls and heal the State". English was a liberal, humanizing pursuit, dulling the razor's edge of extremism. The aesthetic response of the reader supposedly taught him or her universal human values. Even the Bible was recast in the role of a literary rather than a religious document—Matthew Arnold, for one, advocated ignoring the gauche doctrinal aspects of the Bible in favour of its literary qualities. The Canon, then, has been part of a specifically pedagogical programme aimed at enlightening the morally backward masses in culture and ethics. It was, however, some time before 'English' was accepted as a subject worthy of study in the major universities, rather than a matter of developing 'taste', as if reading the right books was akin to choosing the right drawing room curtains, or the selection of imaginary cricket teams. It was rather the domain of the Schools of Arts, Mechanic's Institutes and women's colleges. English literature was the new opiate for the masses who did not study Classics.

The moral/aesthetic ideal was renewed in the twentieth century by a group of Cambridge academics—F. R. Leavis (editor of *Scrutiny*), Q. D. Leavis, I. A. Richards, L. C. Knights and William Empson. The argument was similar to the nineteenth century one, but the tone was more aggressive, heated, urgent. Mass commercial society was reducing life to banality; literature would lift it to a level of vitality. To study English was to encounter the core of intellectual life—far more important than mere science, law, history or

philosophy. The critic had a prophetic role to play, because literature was now a matter of high moral seriousness involving social and political questions. Leavis followed a *modus operandi* familiar to Christian exegetes: his insistence on 'close reading' was a form of exegesis. He coupled this rigour with the tone of a preacher.

Where Leavis preached his criticism with a quasi-religious fervour, his Cambridge colleague I. A. Richards founded his approach on a science—psychology. In the scientific age, we must look to poetry to supply a soothing balm to the troubled human psyche. Literature was the hope of the side as far as a social order went. "Poetry", he wrote, "is capable of saving us; it is a perfectly possible means of overcoming chaos".<sup>6</sup> In his book *Practical Criticism*, Richards wrote up the results of quasi-scientific 'experiments' on the reactions of readers to poetry.

Would the reading of literature make you a better person? Could it save society? Would it halt the march of barbarity and vulgarity in the modern world? If this was still believed in 1939, it was difficult to believe in 1945. The volume of Goethe on the shelf of the camp commandant does not seem to have restrained his savagery. Indeed the totalizing nationalism with which our world has been so lately cursed has a relationship to the use of such literature in the formation of a national literary heritage.

However, an optimism about the achievements and possibilities remained, especially among the New Critics of North America (many of whom were Christians) in the post-war period. Perhaps in reaction to the terrible events of the immediate past, they sought to study texts in isolation from the historical circumstances of their production. The literary test (for the New Critics, preferably a poem) was like a "well-wrought urn", to quote the title of Cleanth Brooks' book. The author's intentions were unknowable and in any case, irrelevant. Great literature could stand on its own (iambic?) feet. In a different way, the New Critics believed in the social possibilities of

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6 Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 45.

literary study: the balancing of the tensions of complex language forms mirrored the process of liberal democracy. John Crowe Ransom wrote that the poem was “[l]ike a democratic state, so to speak, which realizes the ends of a state without sacrificing the personal character of its citizens”.<sup>7</sup>

In more recent times, Harold Bloom has argued for the aesthetic value of Canonical literature in *The Western Canon*. For him, however, aesthetic value is not to be entangled with morality. In this work, the scholar holding two prestigious American professorships (Yale and NYU) vigorously defends the Canon with all the rhetorical strength he can muster. “Without the Canon”, he writes, “we cease to think”.<sup>8</sup> Bloom argues that considerations that are either moral or ideological have no place in the question of the literary Canon. He does not equate the Western Canon with Western cultural imperialism: “The greatest enemies of aesthetic and cognitive standards are purported defenders who blather to us about moral and political values in literature.”<sup>9</sup> What counts, Bloom insists, are *aesthetic* qualities, not agendas of one kind or another. The relativization of beauty is his great enemy. Aesthetic value must pass the test of history: a work must survive the struggle between texts within culture. “The Western Canon is a kind of survivor’s list.”<sup>10</sup> Canonical works “live”: they have a vitality which sustains their presence in the cultural memory. However:

If we read the Western Canon in order to form our social, political, or personal moral values, I firmly believe we will become monsters of selfishness and exploitation...All that the Western Canon can bring one is the proper use of one’s own solitude, that solitude whose final form is one’s confrontation with one’s own mortality.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 50.

<sup>8</sup> H. Bloom, *The Western Canon: The Books and School of the Ages*, Macmillan, London, 1994, p. 41.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 40.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 38.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 29.

With these problems in mind, it is difficult to see what future there is for the Canon, or for the idea that there *are* certain 'great' works which can provide cultural, aesthetic and moral guidance. There are several options that may be taken. These differing approaches to the Canon issue may be summarized under six headings.<sup>12</sup>

### 1 Conservative Idealism

The aim of this position is, as far as possible, to preserve the 'existing' Canon. In such literature, it is claimed, may be found transcendental and uplifting values. They represent an ideal of literary merit. The Canon is 'closed'. There is a growing band of more conservative authors, such as Robert Alter, Allan Bloom and Alvin Kernan who want to defend the Canon, or to bemoan its loss as an armageddon for Western culture. David Lehmann writes of a

programmatic assault now in progress against the venerable idea of the Canon...The determination of a Canon, a syllabus, a reading list of any kind, is stripped of all but political considerations, with results that are nothing if not arrogant.<sup>13</sup>

Harold Bloom, as we have seen, argues vehemently that canonical writings possess a purely aesthetic superiority, which in part explains how they have attained their canonical status.

### 2 Conservative Culturalism

This view, of which T. S. Eliot is the most famous exponent,<sup>14</sup> holds that the Canon defines a collective identity—in his words, the English "native element". The culture is

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12 For this categorization I am indebted to B. Readings, 'Canon and on: from concept to figure', *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 57/1, pp. 149-172.

13 David Lehmann, *Signs of the Times—Deconstruction and the Fall of Paul de Man*, Andre Deutsch, London, 1991, pp. 79-81.

14 See his essay 'Tradition and the individual talent', in D. Lodge (ed.), *20th Century Literary Criticism—A Reader*, Longman, London, 1972, pp. 71-76.

20 | formed by an elite kind of writing—of which, naturally, Eliot's notoriously 'difficult' poetry was a model. The Canon is a great 'Yes' to the culture it defines.

### 3 Liberal Culturalism

There are many critics who argue for the inclusion of new works into the Canon, or perhaps the construction of new Canons—of works by women, for example. The notion of Canon developed on intrinsic grounds is implicitly approved: merely the content of the existing Canon is contested. The Canon remains “an organic totality that defines the culture it affirms”.<sup>15</sup>

### 4 Liberal Idealism

This view holds that the Canon operates as a negative ideal—a challenge that must be met by diversity. There is then a kind of dialectical relationship between the Canon and the culture. The Canon is a repository of humane ideals which function to make us struggle against, rather than confirm, our smugness. It has a regulating impetus, saying to the modern world “Go thou and do a little differently”. Canonical literature is more diverse than it at first appears.

### 5 Extrinsic Arguments

Many authors attempt to account for the Canon on sociological or historical grounds only. The very notion of a Canon is elitist, archaic, oppressive—superstitious even—and thoroughly arbitrary. It is a tool of imperialism and/or patriarchy. Consequently, many non-western writers hold this view. Abdul R. JanMohamed writes of “attempts by ethno-century Canonizers in English and other (Western) language and literature departments to ignore Third World culture and art”.<sup>16</sup> Feminist writers may also claim to subvert the very “*idea* and ideal of the Canon”.<sup>17</sup>

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15 B. Readings, *op. cit.*, p. 151.

16 Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 152.

17 *Ibid.*, p. 153.

## 6 Canon as 'figure'

Bill Readings, a proponent of deconstruction, holds that the Canon is a self-imploding literary construct. "Canonicity", he writes, is "inherently deviant from any fixed form that a Canon might assume...[it] is a process, like writing, divided against itself".<sup>18</sup> Canons are attempts to preserve texts in written form, to achieve stability and closure against the instability of speech. However, Readings argues, following Jacques Derrida, that writing is itself inherently unstable and self-contradictory. That is, one cannot hope to preserve a text, even a 'great' one, as fixed for all time. As people change, the way they read changes, and the meaning of the text changes. Even within a given culture, Canon merely operates as a substitute for memory. It is a way of reading a text.

What can we then say about the Canon in response to these various approaches? Readings' account is in many ways the most convincing. Like the dragon, the Canon (in literary terms) is a large, mythological beast. Purported to be the list of books sanctioned for study in education institutions, 'Canons' by and large do not actually exist *per se*. The use of the term 'Canon' which is meant to imply the say-so of a church-like institution here breaks down. While there are indeed powerful imprimaturs given from within the literary world, there is no fixed list of what constitutes Literature and there never has been. There is no literary equivalent to the standard metric weights kept in a safe somewhere in Paris. Canons are in fact centrifugal. That is, they have a solid core of largely undisputed material with an indistinct fringe. Very few would dispute that the Western Canon has at its heart the work of a writer like Shakespeare, but the status of sixteenth century poet Mary Wroth is far less certain. The notion of 'Canon' in the literary world invites debate and contention as to its contents. The setting up of a fixed list of texts would be productive only of tedium!

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18 *Ibid.*, p. 156.

It is important to recognize that Canons are also a *way of reading*. A Canon exists within a reader's reading brain, offering a highly specific component of the multi-functional process of reading. This has several ramifications. Firstly, to read a work canonically is to read it in reference to its place in a larger body of writing, and thus to be aware of its relations—by allusion, influence and repudiation—to other works within that body. These works are part of a tradition, as F. R. Leavis termed it, "The Great Tradition"; indeed Bloom sees the tradition, in Freudian terms, as an attempt of one generation to overcome the mastery of the previous. The Canon operates in both directions in time: just as it is impossible to read Joyce without noting the influence of Homer, the Canon has the effect of making all reading of Homer post-Joycean. Allusion operates as a powerful coding mechanism, using images, quotations, characters, plot structures and devices, names, places, genres, tropes, types and phrases. By providing helpful footnotes to modern editions, scholarship has made modern readers better readers, but perhaps lazier as well.

Secondly, in including a work in the Canon the intentions of the author may of course be disregarded or superseded. The fantastic history of the interpretation of the Song of Songs is a case in point. The Rabbis and the Fathers ignored the appearance of the song as an erotic poem and interpreted it canonically (as they saw it)—that is, non-erotically. The intentions of the (human) author were not important. Gibbons' *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* was written as a serious historical work. Today, when it is included as a canonical work it is on the basis of its great literary style and imagination rather than historical insight.

Further, the notion of Canon does imply authority. In the realm of Scripture this is a familiar concept; but what of the literary world? As we have seen, canonical writings have been accorded a certain kind of authority over and against other works. The Canon is further given the task of being the repository of cultural value and memory—not in the narrowly historical sense, but as a source of the mythology that all cultures need. For example, nineteenth century

Australian poets like Paterson and Lawson successfully mythologized the Australian landscape and sense of national self, but in ways that need contemporary reappraisal. The task of cultures is to reflect on their heritage rather than accept or reject it out of hand. The Canon may hinder this process of mature cultural reflection by creating out of the past a package which extremists, radical or conservative, can deny or affirm holus bolus. The Canon may be a concept used to domesticate uncomfortable types of literature. The Bible read ‘as literature’ or ‘the noblest monument of English prose’ and not as the Word of God is the prime example. T. S. Eliot wrote: “Those who talk of the Bible as a ‘monument of English prose’ are merely admiring it as a monument over the grave of Christianity”.<sup>19</sup> Ironically, the Canon may be a way of *not* reading.

Lastly, many of these approaches are reductionist—the literary value that distinguishes the Canon is either a purely aesthetic function, or it is merely ideological. The most prominent left-wing critics reduce all aesthetic value to a matter of politics; on the other hand, it is equally a fallacy to remove all political or moral considerations from the discussion of literature. Beauty is not Truth, but it is part of the Truth. How can the aesthetic be separated from the good? Modern critics want either to relativize the beautiful, or to relativize the good.

Is the Western Canon still tenable? The very concept of Canon—which imbues groups of writings with status and authority—looks extremely tenuous in the fractured and diverse post-modern world. Given the close association between Christianity and Christian ideas and the Western cultural heritage, will the demise of the Western Canon presage the demise of the Canon of Holy Scripture? Evangelical Christians are often predisposed as a result of this connection to culturally conservative positions. Is this a healthy alliance given the incisive ethically-based contem-

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19 ‘Religion and literature’, in T. S. Eliot, *Selected Prose*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1953, pp. 31-42.

porary attack on Western culture?

No, it most certainly is not. Christianity needs to renew its status as counter-cultural and, by proclaiming its Gospel, seek repentance, atonement and reconciliation between and within cultures as far as possible. Sensitive reading of the Canon will assist the process of humble cultural and personal reflection. Often by placing literature in a Canon, however, it has been hermetically sealed from the careful and exacting reading that is necessary. Great literature, almost by definition, stimulates both individual and collective self-examination which is sometimes painful. However, history has illustrated what the Bible already teaches: that the reading of literature cannot keep us from the terrible effects of human evil and self-destruction. The failed moral optimism of the nineteenth century must not be re-endorsed. Once again, the optimistic humanism of the Victorian era has failed, leaving late twentieth century culture to grapple with the dearth of an alternative. Literature replaced religion, but now that literature has failed, what will replace it? The claims of the past were grotesquely grandiose, and have fathered a deep disappointment revealed by the contemporary quandaries of Western culture, as we have seen.

The great books that comprise the Canon continue to be great. It is worthwhile for many reasons to “rub your nose in the stuff”. The greatness of works like Shakespeare’s *King Lear*, for example, is that they continue to confront and challenge our culture, not merely affirm it. These works are of such richness that they rise above the squabbling of academics. Let them be read, but not ‘canonically’—if that means granting them an authority they do not have or using them in the subjection of others. Let them be read, but not if that means importing into reading our own ideological proclivities at every turn. Let them be read, but not without due consideration of historical contexts. Let them be read, but not without appreciation of creative genius, imagination and artistry. ❀

Michael Jensen is an English graduate currently studying theology.

FURTHER READING

25

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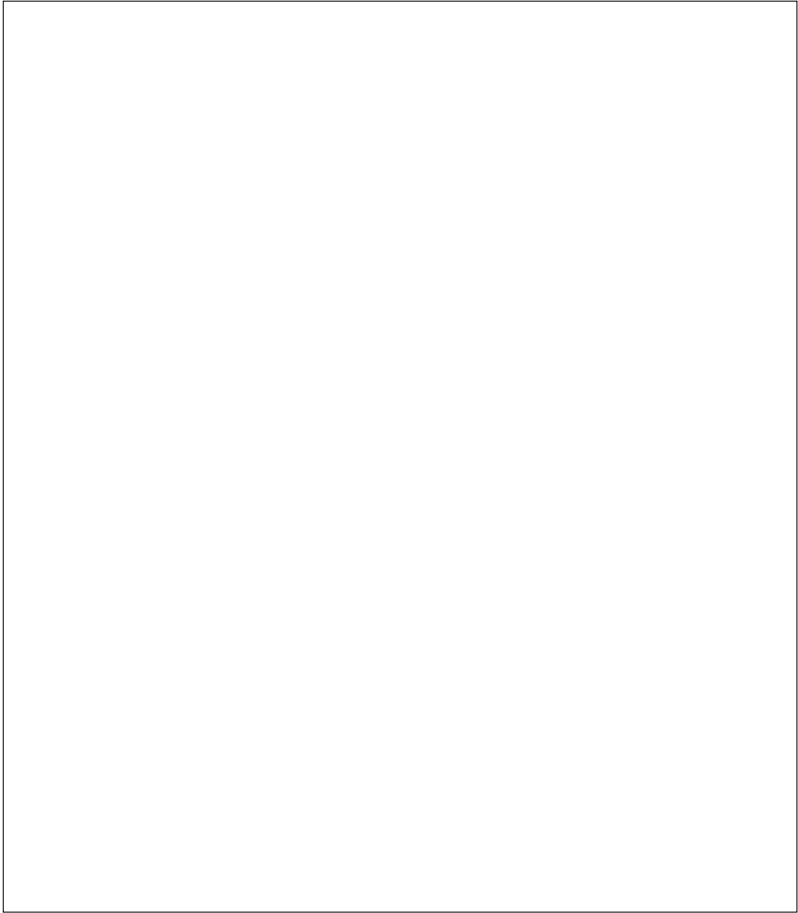
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# The literate Christian

## An interview with Leland Ryken

‘Crisis’ is the word most commonly used to describe the state of the relationship between Christianity and the humanities. Whereas Christian ideas used to be standard fare in philosophy, history and literature, they are increasingly being pushed to the margins and off the page. Universities which were founded for the very purpose of training Christian minds have become hostile towards anyone exercising such a mind in their academic work.

Does such exclusion matter to Christians? Why should the scarcity of Christian voices among today’s arts educators and practitioners be a cause for alarm? Does it matter that works of literature which have Christian ideas and doctrines at their heart are purposely ignored in our places of learning? Is the end nigh for Christians in literary studies?

In the following interview, such questions are put to Leland Ryken, Professor of English Literature at Wheaton College, Illinois, and a mainstay of Christian literary criticism for the past two decades. A self-styled conserving (rather than conservative) critic, Professor Ryken’s books (among them *Realms of Gold: Christians and the Classics*, *Triumphs of the Imagination* and *Contemporary Literary Theory:*

*A Christian Appraisal*) have been the entry point into understanding and enjoying literature for many a Christian student. He spoke with Greg Clarke, Matthias Media editor and PhD candidate in English Literature.

KATEGORIA: How would you describe the current relationship between the world of Christian belief and that of literary studies?

LELAND RYKEN: Well, first, you have to understand that my orientation is old-fashioned! I represent old theory—C. S. Lewis is the most-quoted critic in my work; Northrop Frye [a United Church of Canada pastor] would be next. My own sympathies are not with the contemporary scene, although I do see that it is very important that someone gives a Christian response to current trends—but it won't be me!

The status of the academy *vis-a-vis* Christian literary scholars is one of hostility. Our own graduates really struggle, sometimes drop out, when they go on to higher study. What they run into is an entrenched radicalism, often combined with overt objection to anyone who holds a Christian belief.

K: Why are Christians considered such a threat?

L.R: That is a very good question. I mean, statistically, they're insignificant. I'll give you my take on it: it's the hatred of the darkness for the light. It finally comes down to that. But there's a mystery about it.

K: How do you respond to the aggression? Where does a Christian critique start?

L.R: My critique starts by ignoring it and going about my own agenda. We do need a Christian response, but I'm not sure that the best use of a Christian scholar's time is busily to attack the current trends. Right away, that allows the radical establishment to set the agenda. I have found that when I did respond to those issues, such as in the volume I edited (*Christian Literary Theory: A Christian Appraisal*), it was worthwhile but we hadn't really pursued a Christian aesthetic. So there is a divergence between Christian scholars who want to

respond to current issues and those who want to build a Christian aesthetics for the Christian community at large.

K: I'd be curious to know what your own response would be to that.

L.R: Well, I think Australia is very different from the States. The idea of a Christian aesthetics is an absolute luxury. There are so few Christian intellectuals, particularly in the humanities, that to think of one sitting down to develop an influential aesthetic program is wildly optimistic. We seem to spend most of our time looking around for what we can appropriate from secular discourse in order to get a hearing!

I'm not opposed to that. I've just seen something different as my calling, and I've had the luxury of pursuing it, working where I do [Wheaton is a Christian college].

K: So what do you think Christians uniquely have to offer the field of literary studies?

L.R: My interest in the 'hedonistic' defence of literature—seeing value in its beauty and its refreshment—has a basis in the Christian worldview, the idea of God as creator and the beautiful world he created. Even the nature of this sacred book, the Bible; it's a very literary book, a lot of it is surely artistic. I would be hard pressed to defend literature in such a way were it not for these Christian concepts.

I would also say we bring a passion for truth, and a standard by which to assess truth and morality. I know that creativity has been assaulted recently among Christian critics, but I think a Christian world view encourages me to value creativity, not to apologize for it, even though the Romantic view of literary creativity might be somewhat different. Roger Lundin [another Wheaton academic] and I would be on the opposite sides of that question. I think there is a lot in the Romantic movement that is congruent with our Christian thinking. I don't see Romanticism as the enemy. Where do you stand on that?

K: I would add an 'eschatological thread' to the theoretical discussion. To my mind, the thing the Christian has that is

unique and, in fact, underpins literature if only we look is God as Saviour, God as the End, as our hope, our longing. These forward-looking notions, as well as the powerful ideas of judgement and the end of the world—I think they are persuasive Christian tools for literary study. They tell us that the story is going somewhere!

L.R: I agree. I just haven't thought about it much. I would say the more conventional notions of God as Creator, humans as created in God's image, *are* uniquely Christian, but you're adding something important to that. I increasingly think a main function of literature is to awaken longings; some literature awakens the right longings, some the wrong longings.

K: Can you diagnose what you see as the primary problems facing Christians working in literary studies?

L.R: The key issue is finding a place to stand so you can even receive a hearing for your Christian interests—somewhere to work and somewhere to publish. Christians are increasingly excluded from the marketplace of ideas (the universities) and the publishing system. It's very hard to find a publisher for a work of literary criticism that would espouse Christian interests. It's pretty rare. It's not by accident that my books have been published by evangelical presses.

It can be done indirectly, by addressing topics as a Christian without making it obvious, so Christians will be interested, but they'll have to read between the lines because it can't be written for them directly. I look at the academic book titles coming out and the Christian titles are diminishing.

K: How unusual that is in the history of publishing! How did it happen?

L.R: It's a broad, sweeping change. It happened because Western culture ceased to be predominantly Christian in its intellectual interests. Thirty years ago I used to find scholars doing exactly the kind of work that I wanted to do, and getting academic credit for it. It breaks my heart that that is no longer so. In the immediate future, just getting a hearing as

a Christian in the academy is no certainty. It's not a time for glib assertions like, "If we were only bolder, we could do it". I don't think so; we haven't withdrawn into our conclave, we've been locked in there.

K: I remember a paper of yours from around a decade ago where you tried to defend Christians in literary studies against the claim that we don't even belong in universities.<sup>1</sup> Are you saying that the secular critics have now succeeded in kicking us out?

L.R: Well, look at the bibliographies being published: where are the Christians? The secular press isn't interested. There is also the argument for a cultural scapegoat. Christians have been the big bully on the block for twelve centuries. It was time we got a taste of our own medicine. I guess that's the way people might argue.

K: Do you think secular critics have dined out on Christian ideas? Have they borrowed intellectual tools from the Christian world view and then turned them against it?

L.R: We need to delineate just what we're suggesting here. Are we saying that critics simply haven't yet moved out of the cultural milieu which took Christian ideas for granted, or are we saying that there is a deep structural reality to literary work which is fundamentally Christian and they couldn't escape it even if they tried? Or are secular critics merely grabbing religious language because it is apt and it lends a kind of sanction to a non-religious enterprise. They might be desacralizing something or paying unwitting tribute to it. The Romantic movement *is* guilty of that: continuing to speak the Christian language but devoiding it of Christian content.

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1 Ryken, L. 'Contours of Christian Literary Criticism', *Christianity & Literature*, Vol. XXXVII No. 1. Fall 1987. pp. 23-37. The attacker was Jonathan Culler, 'A Critic Against the Christians', *Times Literary Supplement*, 23 November 1984, pp. 1327-8. A similar debate was held recently in *First Things* No. 60 February 1996 between literary critic Stanley Fish and Roman Catholic writer Richard John Neuhaus.

I'm not sure which is the accurate answer to your question.

K: Turning to the general reading public, do you think Christians are bigger readers than everyone else?

L.R: The Christian public as a whole (at least in America; it's probably the same elsewhere) doesn't do a lot of reading. I do worry a lot about the future of reading. *The Gutenberg Elegies*, Sven Birkett's book on the demise of reading in a technological age, codified a lot for me and fed my pessimism about what I think is happening in Western culture. I really think reading is dying, and television is doing the killing.

K: But book sales among Christians are soaring, I understand.

L.R: Well, a lot of Christians buy religious fiction—romances, fantasy, end-of-the-age novels. In my opinion, these result in an impoverishment of both mind and imagination and the loss even of an awareness of what literature can do for a person. By not reading the classics, I think the American Christian public is losing out. It doesn't make them worse Christians, but it certainly makes their sojourn less fulfilling. They miss out on a lot of enjoyment and intellectual depth that could be theirs.

K: Doesn't it affect people's ability to read the Bible enjoyably and at depth, too?

L.R: Absolutely. The study of literature and the study of the Bible really ought to go hand-in-hand. There is still entrenched in worldwide evangelicalism a non-literary approach to the Bible and a reduction of it to a set of ideas. That is really harmful to the correct hearing of the word of God. There are some hopeful signs in seminaries of this beginning to change, but there is a long way to go. You may find it hard to believe that two or three decades ago, courses on the Bible as literature were among the ten most popular electives in public high schools here in the States. These days that interest has dwindled to a trickle.

K: I can't imagine such a course even getting a run in Australian high schools. You've painted a fairly bleak picture of the future relations of Christianity and literature!

L.R: I do wonder how literary studies can continue to attract students at the hands of deconstruction. Literature is not going to be left; increasingly literature is just used as the propaganda for political movements. As for Christians and their relationship with books, it is becoming more and more trivial.

I am pessimistic, you might even say apocalyptic! But always for Christians there is the hope of a new dawn. ☸

Greg Clarke recently visited Wheaton College as part of his study towards a PhD in English literature.



# Mars and Jesus: what's the connection?

David Sinclair

We have already heard the story of how in early August 1996 NASA held a press conference where a group of scientists announced that they had found evidence for the possibility of life on Mars. The announcement was widely reported in the media and many articles were written, by journalists and scientists, about the implications of life being discovered on Mars.<sup>1</sup> The authors of these articles often claimed that this discovery had struck a serious blow to belief in God, and Christianity in particular.

I revisit this topic because further reflection has shown that this example of scientific 'discovery' sheds some light on the way in which we answer questions about the past. Is science, as the intense speculation about Mars assumed, really the right discipline to answer such questions? The NASA scientists did not claim to have proved that there was life on Mars, but in the popular articles this was generally overlooked altogether or mentioned only briefly. The general

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<sup>1</sup> See David Sinclair, 'Life on Mars...really?', *kategoria*, 1996, number 3, pp. 51-55.

attitude seemed to be that the lack of proof was a technicality which scientific research would soon remedy.

The NASA group found what they believed to be bacterial fossils in carbonate granules located in cracks in a meteorite found in Antarctica, which they believed originated from Mars. None of their evidence was conclusive, but they believed that it all added up to a pretty good case. "Although there are alternative explanations for each of these phenomena taken individually, when they are considered collectively, particularly in view of their spatial association, we conclude that they are evidence for primitive life on early Mars."<sup>2</sup>

## The biochemical evidence

In my last article in *kategoria*, I discussed the evidence underlying the 'life on Mars' furore. Here, to refresh our memories I will summarize the main points, and also discuss the contrary views that were published soon after. Comparing these views helps us see the difficulties of evaluating evidence, and the high degree of interpretation needed.

The NASA group led by David McKay found polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons (PAH's) in the meteorite. PAH's are a large class of organic compounds which includes naphthalene, anthracene, and other similar compounds. The main source of PAH's on Earth is human activity such as the generation of electricity, but they can also be formed over a period of time by chemical reactions on simpler compounds of either biological or non-biological origin. McKay's group didn't believe that the PAH's found in the meteorite were contaminants picked up on earth for two reasons. First, the concentration of PAH's they measured was at least a thousand times greater than that in the surrounding ice; and second, the concentration of PAH's in the outer layers of the meteorite, where the rock was melted in its passage through the atmosphere, was much lower than the concentration in the core. Ruling out contamination still leaves the question of whether the PAH's had a biological

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2 D. S. McKay *et. al.*, 'Search for past life on Mars: possible relic biogenic activity in Martian meteorite ALH4001', *Science*, 1996, 273, pp. 924-930, p. 929.

or non-biological origin. McKay's group suggested biological origin because they had found a relatively simple mixture of PAH's. They argue that this is what would be expected for biological origin, while non-biological origin would be expected to give a more complex mixture.

It was not long before further work was published which disagreed with these conclusions.<sup>3</sup> The authors of the new paper compared the PAH's in the meteorite (and several other meteorites found in Antarctica) with the PAH's found generally in Antarctic ice. It was found that the mixture of compounds in each of the meteorites was very similar to the mixture in the Antarctic ice. They also made a suspension of carbonate particles in water that contained PAH's, and found that all the PAH's adsorbed onto the carbonate. The authors suggested that the PAH's in the meteorites were adsorbed onto carbonates in the rocks as melt water from the Antarctic ice percolated through them. If this explanation is correct then the PAH's cannot be considered evidence for the presence of life.

Another area of doubt is the temperature at which the carbonate globules in the meteorite formed. For bacteria to be responsible for some of the features noted by McKay's group, the globules would have to have formed at a temperature capable of supporting life. Two estimates by other researchers were cited in McKay's paper: one of about 700°C, and one of 0-80°C. If the first estimate is correct, then bacteria could not have survived; but bacteria are known to live on Earth at temperatures up to 110°C, so the second estimate would be consistent with the presence of life. More recently published estimates have been in the range of 40-300°C, and, again, the lower end of the range is consistent with the presence of life. You will notice that I have referred to these figures as estimates, and that is because

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3 Luann Becker, Daniel P. Glavin, and Jeffrey L. Bada 'Polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons (PAHs) in Antarctic Martian meteorites, carbonaceous chondrites, and polar ice', *Geoch. et Cosmoch. Acta.*, 1997, 61, pp. 475-481.

the techniques used require some assumptions about the conditions on Mars at the time the granules formed. A lot of the variation in the estimates is due to different assumptions rather than differences in measurements on the meteorite. More precise estimates are not possible without information about the conditions long ago on Mars.

The final piece of evidence worth mentioning is the discovery of crystals of magnetite, an iron-rich mineral with magnetic properties, in the rims of the carbonate globules. Minerals with magnetic properties are generally composed of a large number of magnetic domains, with each domain being like an individual magnet. These domains are randomly aligned so the overall effect is to cancel out the magnetism. The magnetite crystals found in the carbonate globules, however, each had a single magnetic domain. Single domain magnetite crystals can be produced by either biological or non-biological means, but McKay's group believed that the crystals they had found resembled magnetite crystals used by several species of bacteria to orient themselves along the line of the Earth's magnetic field. The original paper reported that the magnetite crystals in the carbonate globules were chemically pure and had no structural defects, which would be expected if they were produced by bacteria; but a more recent paper claims to have found surface and structural defects which are inconsistent with a biological origin.

## Science and history

So what does all this add up to? While some of the evidence presented by McKay's group has been questioned, neither the biological nor the non-biological explanation has been ruled out yet. We still cannot say for sure that there were once bacteria in the meteorite, but we cannot say that there were not, either. Despite the media's confidence that proof would be found, looking at the scientific evidence only leaves us with uncertainties.

Why are we left with so much uncertainty when science is supposed to give definite answers? The answer to this question lies in the wide range of activities that are included under the general description 'scientific'. One of the keys to

science is the repeatability of experiments. When scientists publish the results of their research it is expected that other scientists will be able to perform the same experiment and get the same results. A scientific report which cannot be verified by other scientists has (in theory) no credibility. Yet the research into past life on Mars is really a question of history. History deals with events which occurred in the past and cannot be repeated. The historian tries to understand past events by examining the evidence left behind by these events. This is an important distinction to keep in mind when fields of science contain an historical element. In these fields, scientific methods are used to examine each piece of evidence, but historical methods must be used to gain an understanding of the events which this evidence relates to.

Let us look at this meteorite again. The question being asked is not 'are there carbonate structures in this rock?'. It is 'were there once bacteria in this piece of rock?', and that is an historical question, not a scientific question. Once every piece of evidence has been examined in as much detail as science allows us, we still need to have enough evidence to reach a conclusion about the historical event. Unfortunately, in this case, we do not have enough evidence—that is why the question remains unanswered. Science might be able to constrain possible answers; for instance, if there are elements on Mars which would make it absolutely impossible for certain kinds of life to exist, then that would reduce the parameters of the question. Yet as for determining precisely what happened in the past, science has to move beyond its own methods. It may be time that the 'historical sciences' acknowledge that this is two labels, not one.

When people argue that science disproves Christianity, or that science defends Christianity, probably both views have begun on the wrong basis. Christianity makes historical claims. It claims, for instance, that Jesus was born in Palestine almost two thousand years ago, that he died on the cross for our sins, and was raised from the dead. These claims need to be evaluated using historical methods. That is, these claims are evaluated given the written accounts of Jesus' life and death by people who were there at the time.

- 40 | Science may be able to help us examine some of the evidence—for instance, by testing manuscripts to determine their authenticity—but scientific methods on their own will not give the answers we should be looking for. ❧

David Sinclair is a PhD student  
in organic chemistry.

BOOKS  
&  
IDEAS





# Scoffers will come: faith and the millennium

Greg Clarke

My chances of meeting Christ in the air were pretty good on October 23 last year. I was in a plane when I realized that according to the date calculated by the 17th century Anglican Primate of All Ireland, Archbishop James Ussher, the world was about to end. The stewardess didn't seem phased; she continued to pass out orange juice. Perhaps she had traded in her Archbishop Ussher's *Annales veteris testamenti a prima mundi origine deducti* for Stephen Jay Gould's more sceptical volume, *Questioning the Millennium*.

Gould's is one in a stream of recent books addressing the millennium—or at least using the word in their titles. It is the buzzword of the day, a compulsory element of 1990s advertising strategies, reaching its pinnacle in a marketing textbook which employed millennial rhetoric to explain market-

*Questioning the Millennium*  
Stephen Jay Gould  
Harmony Books, New York

*Apocalypse Theory and the Ends of the World*  
Malcolm Bull (ed)  
Blackwell, Oxford

*The End of Time: Faith and Fear in the Shadow of the Millennium*  
Damian Thompson  
Sinclair-Stevenson, London

ing theory.<sup>1</sup> Gould's book *Questioning the Millennium* aims to debunk millennial thinking by demonstrating the irrationality and, to his mind, plain silliness of worrying about the end of the world. In dismissive tones, Gould, a well-known paleontologist, presents a populist anecdotal history of millennialism

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1 S. Brown, J. Bell & D. Carson (eds), *Marketing Apocalypse: Eschatology, Escapology and the Illusion of the End*, Routledge, London, 1996.

and its impact upon human behaviour. The outlook of the book is established by its subtitle: "A rationalist's guide to a precisely arbitrary countdown".

*Questioning the Millennium* is a publisher's delight. This proven author provides 190 A5 pages of generously spaced text, frequently interspersed with illustrations and chapter breaks, and no footnotes. And within the space of the preface, Gould manages to mention three of his other books by name. He restrains himself from self-citing for most of the rest of the book, but from its early pages this book is clearly identified as a personal essay rather than a careful scholarly contribution.

It is an essay in three parts. Part One makes a defensible distinction between millennium as *apocalypse*, and millennium as *calendrics*. The former refers to the belief that the millennium is part of the End Times, when finally the battle between good and evil will be resolved by heavenly forces, and a utopian new age, a millennial age, will begin. The millennium concept here is *qualitative*. The calendrics case understands the millennium as a device used to measure development in history, the passing of one era into the next, without necessarily a divine intervention. Millennium here is a *quantitative* concept, and not necessarily a thousand years. It has come to refer more generally to the idea of transition in history.

It is this calendrical idea of the millennium which most fascinates Gould.

Gould suggests (as many have before him) that people shift from the apocalyptic to the calendrical view as they move from religion to secularism. As more and more predictions of an apocalyptic end to the world fail, people lose their faith in the event ever taking place, but still feel the immense psychic pressure of certain dates. The 'trace' of former belief remains visible—hence the growing noise about the coming new millennium. Very few expect it to herald the End, but many have a sense that the year 2000 will usher in some sort of new era.

So far so good; but Gould is not happy to simply allow that, generally speaking, this change from apocalypitics to calendrics has occurred. Instead, he sets out to ridicule religious belief and to examine it as a purely social phenomenon. He is entitled to make this judgement, but he makes it with little consideration of the actual beliefs of Christians. This lack of attentiveness leads to overstatements about how Christians engage in millennial behaviour.

For example, Gould accepts without reflection an inadequate view of apocalypticism. He writes:

Apocalypticism is the province of the wretched, the downtrodden, the dispossessed, the political

radical, the theological revolutionary, and the self-proclaimed savior—not the belief of people happily at the helm (p. 45).

This is to overstate the case. It represents an attempt to explain away end-time thinking as a literature of hope for the hopeless—if you don't have the power to change things yourself, then believe that a time will come when justice will be done from on high. However, this understanding of apocalypticism has been demonstrated to be inadequate. Apocalyptic literature did not always arise among suffering communities.<sup>2</sup> Some scholars now draw attention to the literary sophistication and erudition of apocalyptic writing to argue that it could not have been produced by mariginalized people.<sup>3</sup> Many

of the powerful Roman leaders of the 3rd and 4th centuries were apocalyptic in their outlook—Hippolytus and Lactantius to name but two. Contrary to Gould's claim that the rise of the church-state quelled apocalypticism in order to maintain rule (pp. 44-46), major church figures such as Gregory the Great and the Venerable Bede were outspoken believers in the imminent End.<sup>4</sup> It is also well documented that the millenarian beliefs of the seventeenth century English Puritans were behind the drive to reform during that period.<sup>5</sup> Their largely postmillennial view, that God had begun rebuilding Jerusalem in England's "pleasant pastures", may have kick-started the Puritan Revolution, but it also served to continue it through Cromwell's rise to power and on into the Restoration period. Those whose millennial thinking brought about revolution continued to implement their millennialism when they were in power.

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2 For example, evidence exists to demonstrate that some Jewish apocalyptic texts were not written during times of persecution. Furthermore, recent work has focused upon the similarities between Gnostic writings (often composed by the elite) and apocalyptic (U. Körtner, *The End of the World: A Theological Interpretation*, Westminster John Knox Press, Kentucky, 1995, pp. 30-36).

3 My source for the new perspective on social status and apocalypse was two papers presented at the 'Towards 2000: Apocalypse Then and Now' conference, Macquarie University, Sydney, May 1997: J. Lieu, 'Reinterpreting Apocalyptic in the Johannine Circle' and C. Forbes, 'Apocalyptic and Wisdom'.

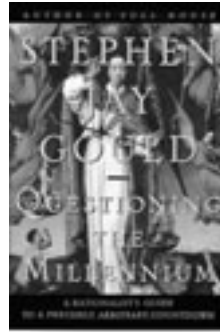
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4 B. McGinn, 'The End of the World and the Beginning of Christendom' in M. Bull (ed.), *Apocalypse Theory and the Ends of the World*, Blackwell, Oxford, 1995, pp. 58-89. McGinn's argument is that an apocalyptic mentality was foundational to the power of medieval Europe.

5 The literature is broad and deep. As a starting point, see C. Webster, *The Great Instauration: Science, Medicine and Reform 1626-1660*, Duckworth, London, 1975, Ch. 1.

It is certainly true that oppressed communities have used eschatological hope as their means of persevering, but it is a dismissive generalization to say that *only* those without hope in this world cling to a belief in the dawning of the next. Gould at least nods at the truth of this by mentioning Ronald Reagan and his staff for their apocalyptic thinking. But his complaints might have been more convincing had he paid greater attention to the *content* of Christian eschatology, for it is by no means monochromatic. Christians profess a range of views regarding end-time events, a reflection perhaps of the difficulty in interpreting the Book of Revelation. There are premillennialists (those who believe Christ will return to reign on earth for 1000 years before the new creation), postmillennialists (a smaller number of people who believe that this world will improve for 1000 years before Christ returns to rule) and amillennialists (those who believe the thousand years mentioned in Revelation 20 to be entirely symbolic).<sup>6</sup>

Gould pays little attention to differences such as these. For instance, he baldly asserts that the millennium “did not arrive, as initially promised, during



Jesus’ own generation” (p. 67). Thousands of amillennialists, who interpret the millennium *symbolically* as the time between Christ’s first and second comings, would disagree. In fact, amillennialism has been the historic teaching of the church since Augustine, a fact which Gould acknowledges (p. 45) but disregards from then on. This is typical of the lack of theological reflection in what ought to be a highly theological book. Admittedly, in America (from where Gould writes) there are more premillennialists than amillennialists, but is it too much to ask that Gould do more reconnaissance work on the significant schools of eschatological thought so that his targets are better defined?

Gould’s lack of interest in the content of eschatological belief is perhaps what makes it possible for his superior tone to exist alongside the book’s disturbing and sobering illustrations, which include scenes from Michelan-

<sup>6</sup> There is a popular, iconoclastic fourth option: panmillennialism, the belief that somehow it will all pan out in the end.

gelo's *Last Judgement*, Albrecht Dürer's woodcuts from *The Book of Revelation* and other depictions of hell (interestingly, there are no heavenly illustrations; almost all are of condemnation). One gets the impression that they are intended merely to function as text-breakers.

Part Two of *Questioning the Millennium* deals briefly with that chestnut: does the millennium start in January 2000 or January 2001? Gould is entertaining as he explains how the sixth century monk, Dionysius Exiguus (Dennis the Short), forgot to include year zero in his calculation which formed the basis of today's Western calendar. 'High culture' has long favoured the 'correct' view that the new millennium begins in 2001 and that we ought to hold over our partying until then. 'Popular culture' has always opted for the more obvious, the more symbolic, change from 1999 to 2000.<sup>7</sup> When it comes to parties, popular culture usually enjoys an easy advantage.

Part Three has Gould returning to what he knows best: science. He

observes the discrepancy between mathematics and the physical world, what we see and what we calculate:

If God were Pythagoras in Galileo's universe, calendrics would never have become an intellectual subject at all. The relevant cycles for natural timekeeping would all be nice, crisp, easy multiples of each other...We might have a year (earth around sun) with exactly ten months (moon around earth), and with precisely one hundred days (earth around itself). But God, thank goodness, includes both Loki and Odin, the comedian and the scholar, the jester and the saint. God did not fashion a very regular universe after all (p. 134).

But Gould finds this far more theologically troubling than most Christians do. So what if God does not adhere to human mathematics? Certainly, religions have shed blood over matters of calculation such as the date of Easter, but many Christian believers are quite content to believe in a God of order without having to discover his precise formulae. It is Gould, not the Christian, whose real trouble and fascination is with the mathematics of dating, with coping with the fact that a solar year is 365.242199 days not 365 neat, with wondering what to do with leap years,

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<sup>7</sup> An interesting exception is Arthur C. Clarke's book and Stanley Kubrick's film, *2001: A Space Odyssey*, which supports the sophisticated reading. Science fiction buffs may wish to argue over whether *2001* represents 'high' or 'popular' culture!

and how to outrun the millennial computer bug. Why is it then that he cannot resist attributing these problems of human mathematics to God the creator, and his followers, as if they present a major theological stumbling block?

There is the hint of an answer in Gould's admission that he sees in such mathematical intrigues "a wonderful microcosm for everything that makes human beings so distinctive, so potentially noble, and often so funny" (p. 158). And the fact that his son is an *idiot savant* who can do instant day-date calculations for previous decades has most likely skewed his interest in the topic.<sup>8</sup> The human fascination with calendrics has become one of *ultimate concern* to him. He writes:

I find no theme more ennobling than the compensations that people struggle to discover and implement when life's misfortunes have deprived them of basic attributes of our common nature (p. 171).

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8 I apologize for mentioning this here. Gould intends that it be a final surprise to learn on the last page that this person is his son (another reviewer called this "an emotional rabbit punch"). However, such is the controlling force that this fact wields over the rest of the book that it seemed necessary to spoil the surprise.

Gould's highest admiration is for human beings (like his son) striving to order the apparent chaos of their universe, while suffering its misfortunes. Throughout the book, he cannot resist laying the blame for these misfortunes at the feet of the God he doesn't believe in! It is fascinating how often it is the problem of suffering which seems to turn people against God, even while they ridicule religious belief. As one character moans in Samuel Beckett's play, *Endgame*: "The bastard! He doesn't exist!" God is a bastard for not existing.

Christians are partly to blame for the kind of ridicule dished out by Gould. Historically, many believers have misused the Bible when it comes to understanding the future, and have failed to develop a consistent hermeneutics of biblical symbolism. Nowhere in Scripture is there any encouragement to calculate a date for the Last Day; on the contrary, there is straightforward discouragement of such practices.<sup>9</sup> Gould's book is evidence of the damage that has been done. As an entertaining and short anecdotal ramble about millennial ideas, it is worth the read; but for those seriously interested in eschatology and its influence upon the human race, there are far better places to look.

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9 Matthew 24:36; Acts 1:6-7; 1 Thessalonians 5:1-3; 2 Peter 3:3-10.

Malcolm Bull's collection of historical and literary essays, *Apocalypse Theory and the Ends of the World*, seeks to convey how apocalyptic thinking has developed and transformed from the earliest times until now. The editor writes, "The history of Christian eschatological expectation reveals that the end of the world has long played a significant role in the generation of meaning" (p. 7).

The volume begins with Norman Cohn's thesis that an interest in the end of the world is first evident among the Zoroastrians of 1500 B.C. Cohn claims that the prophet Zoroaster was the first to transform the religious myth of perpetually warring deities into a vision of victory for the forces of good and of order. In his seventeen hymns, known as the *Gathas*, Zoroaster foretells "the making wonderful", a utopian future in which everyone shall live forever in peace. This will be brought about by a messianic figure, the Saoshyant, who will orchestrate victory in the final battle. With this myth, Cohn asserts, eschatological faith was born.

Other contributors trace the flourishing of apocalyptic thinking through the New Testament (Christopher Rowland), its psychological importance in shaping Europe during the first millennium (Bernard McGinn) and the immensely influential work of the 13th century Calabrian monk, Joachim of

Fiore (Marjorie Reeves). Joachim is largely responsible for reversing the Augustinian view of history as waiting for God to tie up his loose ends now that Christ's work is done. Joachim, in contrast, saw the approach of the End Times in the historical events of his day, prophesied in the symbolism of the Revelation of St John. This view (or variations on it), which closely connects secular history, prophecy and biblical symbolism, is probably still the most popular, if not the most scholarly, approach to John's Revelation.<sup>10</sup> It is also, it must be said, responsible for much heart-ache.

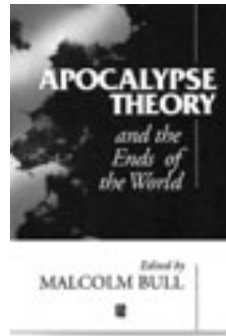
From this collection of essays, a strong sense emerges that our age has thrown out the baby and kept the bathwater. It readily joins in Gould's ridicule of Christian eschatological beliefs, but still employs the rhetorical power of apocalypticism in a wide variety of discourses. The sense of an ending yet prevails. As Bull puts it, "even when divorced from a traditional Christian context, the ends of the world may still

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10 Some prominent contemporary theologians, such as Jürgen Moltmann, have found in Joachim an agreeable commitment to God himself working in history. However, where Joachimite views have done most damage is in encouraging Bible readers to equate certain historical events with the action of God, an activity fraught with the danger of human prejudice.

form the boundaries, and thus also the shape, tone and perhaps even substance of secular discourse" (p. 7). Once you have heard the Christian story of the end of the world, it is nigh impossible to abandon its power—even when you stop believing it.

So, in Bull's volume we find essays on apocalyptic sensibilities in (not surprisingly) Milton, Wordsworth and Coleridge, and (more surprisingly, perhaps) Kant, Derrida and Foucault.<sup>11</sup> We may witness in Western literature a movement away from God, but it is not accompanied by a corresponding move away from apocalyptic. In fact, the more literature, philosophy and history we examine for its apocalyptic ideas, the more evident it becomes that



Christian eschatological thinking is one of the foundations of literary endeavour. The end of the world, the Judgement, the hope of a New World and all that comes with it, powerfully inform Western letters.<sup>12</sup>

And it is certainly not only 'high culture' which is affected by apocalypticism. For example, the Sex Pistol's singer, Johnny Rotten, sang 'I am an antichrist' in their punk anthem 'Anarchy in the U.K.', ending with the repeated phrase 'No future'. One quarter of the tracks on the most recent album by pop music's biggest band, U2,

11 The future-oriented aspects of Derrida's work are receiving increased attention. See 'The Messianic: Waiting For the Future' in J. Caputo, *Deconstruction in a Nutshell: a conversation with Jacques Derrida*, Fordham University, New York, 1997 and J. Derrida, 'No Apocalypse, Not Now, (full speed ahead, seven missiles, seven missives), in *diacritics*, Summer 1984, pp. 20-31. Consider also the following Derrida quotation: "Unfortunately, I do not feel inspired by any sort of hope which would permit me to presume that my work of deconstruction has a prophetic function...The fact that I declare it 'unfortunate' that I do not personally feel inspired may be a signal that deep down I still hope. It means that I am in fact still looking for something" (from R. Kearney, *Dialogues with Contemporary Continental Thinkers: The Phenomenological Heritage*, Manchester University Press, 1984, p. 119.)

12 I cannot claim originality for this thesis: see F. Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1967, pp. 24-31. It is a worthwhile, if not very methodical, exercise to think back through the prominent titles in the history of Western literature and see how many are chiefly eschatological in focus: *The Divine Comedy*, *Pilgrim's Progress*, *Paradise Lost*, *Lord of the Flies*, *Brave New World*, *The Wasteland*, *Waiting For Godot*, *Endgame*...

deal with eschatological ideas.<sup>13</sup> The genre of science fiction is based upon responding to eschatological notions. In popular discussion, the style and tone of apocalyptic is used when speaking of nuclear holocaust, ecological catastrophe, sexual decadence and social collapse.

British journalist Damian Thompson provides a good analysis of apocalyptic movements and their effects upon contemporary society in his *The End of Time: Faith and Fear in the Shadow of the Millennium*. Thompson's is a more general volume than Bull's, but no less astute and covering similar material. Thompson begins by surveying the debates and issues surrounding the year 1000 (was it, or was it not a time of great millennial expectation? The court is still out), the role of Joachim of Fiore in connecting apocalyptic events with earthly politics, the importance of the printing press in heightening the public consciousness of the End and the historical background to the millennial mixture of paranoia and optimism which characterizes so much of American religion. He makes this remote and often obscure history

readable and relevant, all the more so by drawing parallels between medieval apocalypticism and the behaviour of some religious groups today.

In brief chapters, Thompson examines a sweep of historical movements as well as contemporary phenomena which reflect similar eschatologies. He considers Catholicism by looking at Pope John Paul II's optimistic statements about a "new springtime of Christian life" beginning in 2000 (p. 171). He examines the way popular culture has "inculcated quasi-religious beliefs" in a broad section of the public under the banner of the New Age. And he provides interesting psychological studies of apocalyptic Christians in Seoul, the Japanese Armageddon cult, Aum Shinrikyo, whose members released poison gas in the Tokyo subway in 1994, and the Waco conflagration which brought End-time beliefs violently to the surface of American public discourse.

Like Gould, Thompson appears to be uninformed of the latest thinking regarding the variations in socio-economic status of readers/writers of apocalyptic, but he pays more attention to the variations in eschatological belief among Christians. Although not a believer, he notes such subtleties as how the eschatological nature of the Lord's Prayer can be highlighted or obscured, depending on the translation

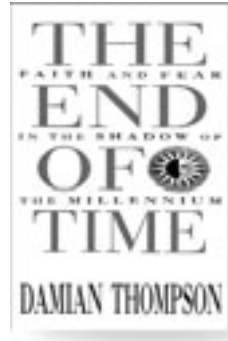
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13 The tracks are 'Last Night on Earth', 'The Playboy Mansion' and 'Wake Up Dead Man'. Arguments could be put for the utopian urges of two other tracks, 'Mofu' and 'Discotheque'.

(p. 20).<sup>14</sup> He records Luther's wariness of the Book of Revelation and differentiates Protestantism from cultic groups such as the 16th century Anabaptists:

The spread of Protestantism was not meant to be associated with turning the social order on its head or calculating the time of the End...The biblical End-time sequences were, at most, a framework within which to analyze the immense political and theological upheavals of the Reformation (p. 83)

Thompson is also aware that "[f]or some evangelicals, the year 2000 is a mere date: a focus for activity, perhaps, but absolutely nothing more" (p. 142). He gives more time than Gould to the more sophisticated of eschatological faiths, which are not so concerned with the *when* of apocalypse, but the *certainty* of it, in God's good timing. He is unsympathetic towards "the primitive and fear-filled character of fundamentalism", but not dismissive of religious



belief in the manner of Gould. However, Thompson cannot resist a little condescension, even when he is being fair-minded:

The centrality of Scripture in the lives of these Christians, who, whatever their cultural background, carry zip-up bibles with them everywhere, has another important consequence. They are all, to a greater or lesser degree, End-time believers. No one who takes a literal view of the Gospels, St Paul's Epistles or the Book of Revelation can be anything else. The point cannot be made too often that the approaching end of history casts a shadow over the New Testament which the established Churches, naturally fearful of apocalyptic panic, have often professed not to notice. Most conservative evangelicals, in contrast, have always believed that

<sup>14</sup> 'Give us this day our daily bread' might be translated 'Give us this day the bread to come'; 'Lead us not into temptation' might be translated 'Lead us not into the Ordeal', referring to the final tribulation; 'Deliver us from evil' might be translated 'Deliver us from the Evil One'. See 'Lord's Prayer' in *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, Doubleday, New York, 1992, pp. 356-62.

Jesus may conceivably return in their lifetimes... (pp. 144f).

Nevertheless, Thompson's analysis of End-time thinking in American and British evangelicalism (broadly used to include some aspects of pentecostalism and fundamentalism) is careful and fairly accurate. He provides an incisive account of how the Toronto Blessing, Frank Peretti's fiction, John Wimber's Vineyard movement and C. Peter Wagner's spiritual territorialism have shifted middle-class evangelical concerns away from morality (smoking, makeup, the cinema) and towards supernaturalism. And along with this supernatural emphasis has come an expectation that the 'spiritual' manifestations associated with holy laughter, signs and wonders and territorial prayer are the precursors to the Last Judgement.

Like Gould, Thompson is throwing a damp cloth over *fin de millennium* enthusiasms. By highlighting the miscalculations of history, the arbitrary nature of calendrics and the inappropriateness of biblical literalism, he wishes to demonstrate that there is no need to panic. He cites psychological studies claiming that fundamentalists tie the dating of the apocalypse to their own lifespan: "There is a powerful confluence between apocalyptic belief and the universal human experience, and as

a result it often fits easily into the personal horizon of the individual" (p. 331; cf. pp. 149-50). There is, however, a central question that Thompson does not ask: why *stop* believing in the apocalypse? Throughout his book, the assumption is that end-time thinking is a fantasy used by a great many people in order to structure life and provide hope, but nowhere is it explained why this should be regarded as a fantasy. Sometimes, the dismissal of religious belief is more direct: "The belief that mankind has reached the crucial moment in its history reflects an unwillingness to come to terms with the transience of human life and achievements" (p. 332). One might also read between the lines and find that for Thompson the sheer variety of eschatological beliefs, along with the fact that so many apocalyptic faiths have failed, their deadlines passing without event, weighs against the likelihood of a real end to the world. But what of the millions of believers who, in accordance with Holy Scripture, have avoided calculating the day of the Lord, and yet wait and pray for it?

Both Gould and Thompson build upon the *fact* that millennium as calendrics has overtaken millennium as apocalypse, but neither provides sufficient explanation as to why this *should* be the case. Perhaps this wasn't their brief: both authors were chiefly inter-

ested in the social phenomenon of millennialism. But, like so many of the people the authors cite, whose faiths they critique or faintly ridicule or observe from afar, I finished these titles

without feeling the slightest challenge to my own eschatological faith, still looking forward in hope to what tomorrow will bring. ❧

Greg Clarke is a PhD student in English literature and is also currently studying theology.

# Belief in the Academy

Kim Hawtrey

In 1852 John Henry Newman delivered nine lectures in Dublin which subsequently became his classic book, *The Idea of the University*. In these lectures he expressed the predominant view in the academy that a single unified theory explains the world and that the role of scholars is to unpack and systematize this, within the context of their respective disciplines. There was a working assumption that reality is a unity, and on this was based the very notion of a uni-versity.

This project, which began at the Enlightenment and ran through to the twentieth century, is what historians now call 'Modernism'. At first, it had a strong theistic point of reference. It eventually became secularized as, gradually, supernatural information was deemed to be inadmissible, and the definition of 'real' scholarship was narrowed to include only natural

*The Outrageous Idea of  
Christian Scholarship*  
George M. Marsden  
Oxford University Press,  
Oxford

processes. The presence of religious perspectives in the lecture theatre became frowned upon. Yet there was still the (Judaeo-Christian) working assumption of a grand connectedness.

Even this postulate of Modernism, however, is in trouble. As we know, it has been challenged by the new kid on the block, Postmodernism, in which the idea of scientific objectivity has come under attack, along with the notion that a single coherent model can explain reality. Instead, diverse 'ways of seeing' are admitted. Even the process of gaining knowledge itself is now seen by some as inherently subjective, as simply an extension of the inquirer's own culture or politics. The new orthodoxy, in short, is that there is no orthodoxy.

The idea of the university, according to some, is consequently dead. In its place we now have the multi-versity. And in this new intellectual milieu, we might well ask whether Christian scholarship—sold as one way of seeing—can regain a place in mainstream higher education and research. George Marsden is one who thinks it can.

In an earlier book (*The Soul of the American University*, 1994)<sup>1</sup> Marsden outlined the historical process by which explicitly faith-informed views came to be excluded from academia. In one sense, the process was understandable as a reaction to Christendom's past excesses, including its perceived interference in scholarly inquiry (for example, the persecution of Galileo). But, Marsden argued, the academy went too far and over-corrected, to the point of virtually barring religious perspectives altogether. This ultimately amounted to a form of censorship that contradicted the university establishment's own ideal of freedom of inquiry.

In his latest book, *The Outrageous Idea of Christian Scholarship*, Marsden takes the issue a step further and says it is time Christian scholars were again allowed to play a part in the higher academy. The new orthodoxy of plural-

ism, if genuinely adhered to, logically implies that religious perspectives have a legitimate place in academic disciplines alongside competing worldviews, and that the old discrimination by Modernism is no longer appropriate.

Marsden recognizes that this proposal will not meet with a warm reception in many quarters. Anticipating some of the objections that secular scholars might raise, he presents responses which tellingly deploy (in reverse) the very 'rules of the game' which those secular scholars themselves use to make their own case. Some might argue, for instance, that including theistic perspectives is 'unscientific'. This is the Modernist objection. If, for instance, religious points of view on a given subject were to be taught by a professor who personally adhered to the religion in question, this could compromise standards of scholarly detachment. Marsden's retort to this is swift:

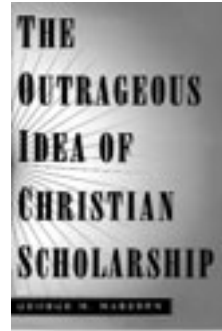
One can imagine the response to some parallel proposals. What if someone suggested that no feminist should teach the history of women, or no gay person should teach gay studies, or no political liberal should teach American political history? (p. 13).

Why then, he asks, is a double standard applied in the case of religion? Perhaps some feel that religious faith occupies

<sup>1</sup> Reviewed in *kategoria*, 1996, number 2, pp. 73-38.

a different category to the ideologies mentioned above, one that is somehow more susceptible to fuzzy thinking. But Marsden points out that the secular academy is itself riddled with ‘non-demonstrable beliefs’, that is, moral commitments that sneak in despite all the rhetoric about value-free science. These beliefs (for example about equality, gender, life origins, competition, markets, human goodness, race, the poor, the handicapped, etc.) act like inviolable precepts and by their nature cannot claim to be any less value-ridden than Christian beliefs.

Another possible line of opposition to Christian scholarship involves the complaint that it will offend someone in a pluralist setting. This is the Post-modern objection and has been documented by Don Carson in his 1996 book *The Gagging of God*.<sup>2</sup> It arises out of a prejudiced view that Christianity is one of the powers from which the world needs to be ‘liberated’ and that it should therefore not be tolerated. In the view of such academics, religion is an instrument of power and politics (while their own world view, of course, is not!) since it commits the scholarly ‘sin’ of making absolute truth claims. This line



of thought, however, is breathtakingly hypocritical says Marsden:

The fact is that many contenders on the various sides of such debates are imperialistic in the sense of wanting to set the moral standards for all of society (p. 33).

These new moral imperialists would rather play the man than the ball, by excluding Christian voices a priori and avoiding the harder work of engaging Christian scholars in rigorous dialogue according to the principles of liberal polity and academic civility.

A third possible objection to intentional Christian programs of public scholarship is not discussed by Marsden, but is nevertheless important. It arises not from secularism but from Biblical Christianity itself, and might be termed the Evangelical ‘caution’, if not objection. It concerns the inherent danger of confusing church and academy,

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2 Don Carson, *The Gagging of God: Christianity Confronts Pluralism*, Zondervan Publishing House, Grand Rapids, 1996.

based on the important observation that God's instrument for working in his world centres on the foolishness of preaching the gospel and making disciples (Matthew 28:19; 1 Corinthians 1:21), not on academic paradigms or scholarly research programs, no matter how impressive these may be. This is a crucial issue and needs careful clarification before Christians decided to engage with the academy. What exactly should be the motivation for committed and expressly Christian involvement in higher scholarship?

One response would be to say that Christian intellectuals should strive for the same thing as the original religious founders of universities did in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries: the unified cultural ideal. This we can term the 'strong form' of Christian scholarly vision. Many in those earlier generations were interested in building a great Christianized civilization founded on the highest moral ideals, and saw the academy as the path to achieving this. The theological problem with this, however, is the way it shifts the emphasis from God's work through the gospel, to man's work through social engineering. It is too close to the flawed thinking known as realized eschatology. This is simply not the Biblical blueprint: there is no Scriptural mandate for attempting to establish the kingdom on earth in such a way, and as

admirable as the vision might at first seem, it lacks a proper eschatology that is informed by the centrality of the gospel. In the words of 2 Corinthians 10:3, it falls into the trap of 'waging war as the world does', and Paul warns us not to go down this road.

An alternative approach—let's call it the 'weak form' of Christian scholarly vision, without in any way meaning to diminish it—is much to be preferred, because it complements the work of gospel ministry rather than displacing it. In this, the intentional involvement of Christian scholars in mainstream academia should have the twin motivations of honouring God with the mind, and of commending the gospel to unconverted academic colleagues. In the same passage in 2 Corinthians, Paul speaks of 'taking captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ' (10:5), and this is surely a worthy rallying call for Christian academics as they work in their chosen discipline.

Having rebutted the predictable secular arguments against Christian scholarship, Marsden then turns his attention to the way forward and begins to sketch the constructive contributions that Christian thought could bring to mainstream scholarship. He explores the potential implications of beliefs such as "that God exists, that God created the world, that God might reveal himself to humans, or that God

may have instituted a moral law". Against this stands methodological atheism, under which humans and their cultures are regarded as the products of natural processes. Which of these two starting points we take has in turn a massive bearing on scholarship at a number of important levels.

First, it has implications for epistemology, the question of 'how we know', which is fundamental to all intellectual disciplines. Under secularism 'reality' is defined by human reason or may even be an ad hoc social construction, while according to Christianity reality is ordered by God and human reason is limited.

Second, our point of departure has implications for the questions we choose to study in the first place. At the risk of oversimplifying, Modernism says that 'everything is material', Post-modernism says 'everything is political' while Christianity says 'everything is theological'. Given this, each will pose the questions for study differently and it follows that none of these paradigms is 'pure' or value-neutral, even if the answers it subsequently derives are gained by methodology that is entirely detached and objective. The fact is, the original choice of questions is not value-free and the Christian paradigm is not alone in this.

Third, there is the issue of the significance of scholarly findings. Mars-

den points out that "consciousness of the wider context of the more real and more pertinent spiritual dimensions of reality within which empirical inquiry takes place" should have an impact on "how one regards the significance of one's work, even if, technically considered, that work might look much like the work of a nontheist" (p. 91). This includes a better understanding of the relative proportions of the big picture as a whole.

As an illustration, Marsden gives the field of engineering as epitomized by the act of landing a plane. The Christian engineer is like any other scholar to the extent that he or she will expect the pilot to rely on radar and trajectory computations—"not just the Holy Spirit" (!)—when landing the aircraft. Yet at the same time the Christian's faith informs a view that God upholds the cosmos, that this is why the laws of physics are predictable, that we should still demonstrate trust in God's sovereignty by praying for a safe landing and—most importantly—that the apparent secular focus of the scholar on natural phenomena when designing the plane is always particular, having a limited technical purpose only, and should not be generalized to imply that Man no longer needs God. On the contrary, the laws of physics depend on God's providence for their continuance.

A fourth level at which Christian thought can make a contribution is in the framework of morality. Whereas secularism often pragmatically posits that ethical rules evolved as survival mechanisms, the Christian scholar knows that moral principles originated from God and that all cultural constructions of morality are thus not equally valid. Postmodernists ultimately lack a determinative basis for their moral prescriptions and so it is not surprising that the arbitration of contested claims reduces to considerations of power. Christian thinkers on the other hand have an external point of reference from which to develop their analysis of human rights and responsibilities.

The future effectiveness of Marsden's case, of advancing acceptance of Christian scholarship in the secular academy, remains to be seen and will depend on several considerations. There is the question of whether the Postmoderns are actually succeeding in taking over the academy, or whether Modernism still holds sway in practice. If the latter still carries weight—and I suspect it does in many areas—then the implication is that much of the establishment still defends logical positivism and will resist giving any ground to theological perspectives. Another issue is that it is all very well

for Christians to base our appeal on the argument that we deserve a seat in the 'marketplace of ideas', but this also opens the door for other religions such as Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism. Using such a pragmatic line of argument may, therefore, carry with it certain adverse consequences. And another significant barrier is, of course, human sinfulness. Despite the rhetoric of secular scholars about freedom of inquiry and intellectual diversity, at heart they (like the rest of us) are spiritual rebels who deep down will resist acknowledging God.

These things said, Marsden's book deserves our attention. One reason is the effect that higher education can have on young Christians. As argued by Steven Garber in another book on a similar subject recently<sup>3</sup> the undergraduate stage of life represents a critical moment for many, when beliefs and commitments are shaped and even Christians often uncritically imbibe unhelpful pluralist and humanist viewpoints.

Over the past hundred years, secular humanists put Christians strongly on the defensive. It is time to take the challenge forward. The discrediting of

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3 *The Fabric of Faithfulness: Weaving Together Belief and Behaviour during the University Years*, IVP, 1997.

the unified Modernist project and the corresponding shift to the 'polyuniversity' implied by Postmodernism may provide Christian scholars with the best chance in many years to gain fresh

entry into the academic mainstream. A generation from now, the idea of Christian scholarship may not be all that outrageous after all. ☞

Dr Kim Hawtrey holds qualifications in economics and theology. He works with Impact Evangelism and is based in Sydney.



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