

explore

EXPLORING THE
INTEGRATION OF FAITH,
JUSTICE, AND THE
INTELLECTUAL LIFE
IN JESUIT, CATHOLIC
HIGHER EDUCATION

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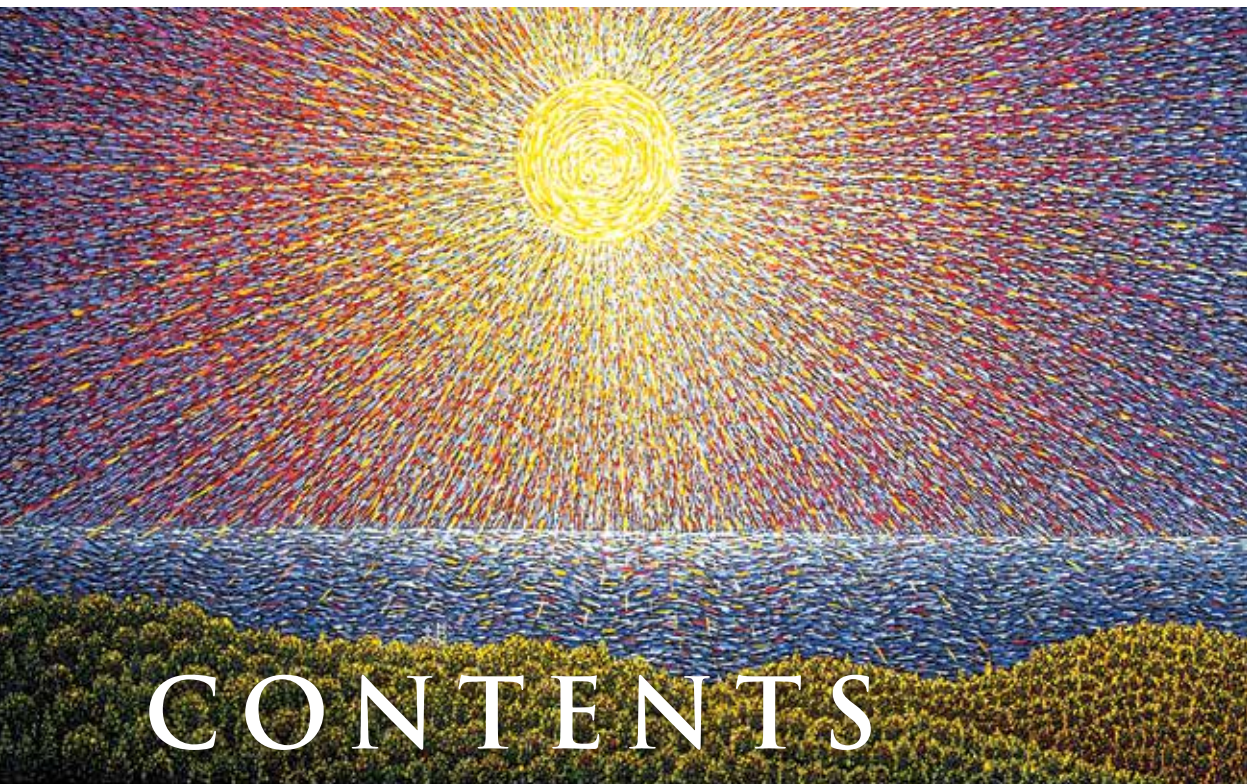


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ON THE COVER: Graphic Icon by calligrapher and artist Barbara Callow, www.barbaracallow.com; Star by Georgia Deaver (1957-2013), created for Bannan Institute. Above: Arthur Poulin, O.S.B. Cam., "Radiant Light, High Noon, Big Sur," painting, 24x36, www.fatherarthurpoulin.org. Used with permission of artist.

Dialogue and Depth: Exploring What Good Is God?

Introduction to Spring 2014 *explore*



Charles Barry

BY THERESA LADRIGAN-WHELPLEY
*Director of Institutes and Spirituality,
Ignatian Center for Jesuit Education,
Santa Clara University*

“WHAT GOOD IS GOD?” This provocative question has long been a central concern of theology and philosophy. Medieval theologians such as Thomas Aquinas inquired: “Whether God is good?” and “Whether all things are good by the divine goodness?”¹ However, this age-old question has taken on an added significance today. While many contemporary believers continue to inquire about what kind of “good” God is, many believers and nonbelievers press in on the question through another frame: “What is the use of God?” In a world in which humanity can create and destroy with wide-reaching agency, what utility or “good” does God, and belief in God, have for our lives and our communities?

Through a dynamic series of lectures and facilitated dialogues with scientists, philosophers, literary scholars, engineers, theologians, poets, artists, and educators, the 2013–2014 Bannan Institute of the Ignatian Center for Jesuit Education at Santa Clara University sought to engage this challenging question. The current issue of *explore* highlights four of these lectures and invites further dialogue through the reflective responses of Santa Clara University faculty, staff, students, and alumni.

Poet and author Christian Wiman leads off the issue with an excerpt from his lecture, “My Bright Abyss: Thoughts on Modern

Belief,” considering the modern phenomenon of unbelieving believers for whom the realities of doubt, alienation, and suffering ground the experience of faith. Reflecting on his own journey of faith and doubt, faculty member and celebrated author Tim Myers draws on Wiman’s contribution to consider the interwoven realities of death and life, and his experience of transformation within the simultaneity of divine paradox. Santa Clara junior Sabrina Barreto, who currently serves as poetry editor for Santa Clara’s student literary magazine, reflects on Wiman’s poetic vocation, suggesting that poetry, with its inimitable capacity to hold space for the unsaid within the said, provides an incarnational medium for the transcendent.

International literary scholar and prolific author Terry Eagleton opens the second chapter in this issue’s series of dialogues with an excerpt from his lecture, “Why Is God for Christians Good for Nothing?” Here Eagleton challenges functionalist notions of God with the claim that God is good for no reason, benefit, or instrumental end, but rather, for goodness’ sake itself. He urges Christians to be “good for nothing” too, arguing that humans most closely resemble God when we exercise our freedom seeking no self-advantage or return for our goodness. In her essay “Thinking Otherwise about God, Marx, and Eagleton,”

Marilyn Edelstein, English professor and Women and Gender Studies faculty affiliate at Santa Clara, expands on Eagleton's thesis to suggest that the social and political practices that arise from "good for nothing" goodness are central to the teaching of many religious traditions and are taken up by nonreligious believers as well. Santa Clara junior religious studies and classics major Jonathan Homrighausen presses Eagleton's thesis further, arguing that while God may be "good for nothing," what humans believe about God is actually good for everything.

Planetary scientist and curator of meteorites at the Vatican Observatory in Rome Br. Guy Consolmagno, S.J., launches our third series of dialogues on the question "What Good Is God?" with an excerpt from his lecture, "Why Science Needs God." In this lecture, Consolmagno argues that scientific questions are imbued with religious significance and scientists' notions about ultimate meaning supply the motivation for doing science itself. Professor Aleksandar Zecevic of Santa Clara's School of Engineering offers a dynamic response to Consolmagno's thesis. While Zecevic agrees with Consolmagno that the core beliefs of scientists and engineers do underlie their foundational reasons for conducting research, Zecevic also observes that recent developments in mathematics, physics, and systems theory advance the claim that there are fundamentally unknowable truths about reality, opening up increasingly complementary (rather than merely competing) potentialities within science and religion dialogues. In his essay "Science, God, Life," Brian Green of the Markkula Center for Applied Ethics enriches the conversation by considering the ways in which his own perspectives as a scientist, theologian, and ethicist have become more wholly integrated.

The fourth dialogue in this issue of *explore* opens with an excerpt from Michael C. McCarthy, S.J.'s lecture, "The Fragility of Faith: How Can a Thinking Person Still Believe in God?" In this inaugural Fr. Louis I. Bannan, S.J. Memorial Lecture, McCarthy argues for at least three necessary, though not sufficient, conditions for a thinking person to believe in God: imagine bigger, befriend intelligent believers, and take a risk. McCarthy suggests that these three practices

may open up possibilities within ourselves and our universities where a more dynamic engagement with faith may become possible. Professor of Religion and Society at the Jesuit School of Theology Jerome Baggett considers McCarthy's charge through the lens of his own research on everyday Americans who identify as atheists, pressing McCarthy to consider the ways in which believers and non-believers alike seek to imagine bigger, befriend intelligent believers, and take a risk. Finally, recent Santa Clara alumna, Sarah Attwood, now Campus Minister at Providence College, posits that the three conditions McCarthy names for a thinking person to believe in God are best understood as lifelong practices.

*In a world in which
humanity can create and
destroy with wide-reaching
agency, what utility or
"good" does God, and belief
in God, have for our lives
and our communities?*

We conclude the issue with an excerpt from our 2014 Santa Clara Lecture, "Grace in Shakespeare," offered by Pulitzer Prize-winning author Marilynne Robinson, as well as her reflections on writing, discernment, and modern faith from an interview with *Santa Clara Magazine* editor Steven Saum.

The dialogues we have hosted this year through the 2013-2014 Bannan Institute, and which continue here through this issue of *explore*, probe the depths of the question: What good is God? We hope that you will be challenged and engaged in reading this issue, as you consider the question of "What good is God?" within your own life, work, and communities, and within our larger world and cosmos. [e](#)

NOTES

- 1 Saint Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I, q.6, a.1; I, q.6, a.3.

My Bright Abyss: Thoughts on Modern Belief¹

Excerpt from Fall 2013 Bannan Institute Lecture

Courtesy of Blue Flower Arts



BY CHRISTIAN WIMAN
*Senior Lecturer in Religion and Literature,
Yale Divinity School, Yale Institute of Sacred Music*

When you consider the radiance, that it does not withhold itself but pours its abundance without selection into every nook and cranny not overhung or hidden; when you consider

that birds' bones make no awful noise against the light but lie low in the light as in a high testimony; when you consider the radiance, that it will look into the guiltiest

swervings of the weaving heart and bear itself upon them, not flinching into disguise or darkening; when you consider the abundance of such resource as illuminates the glow-blue

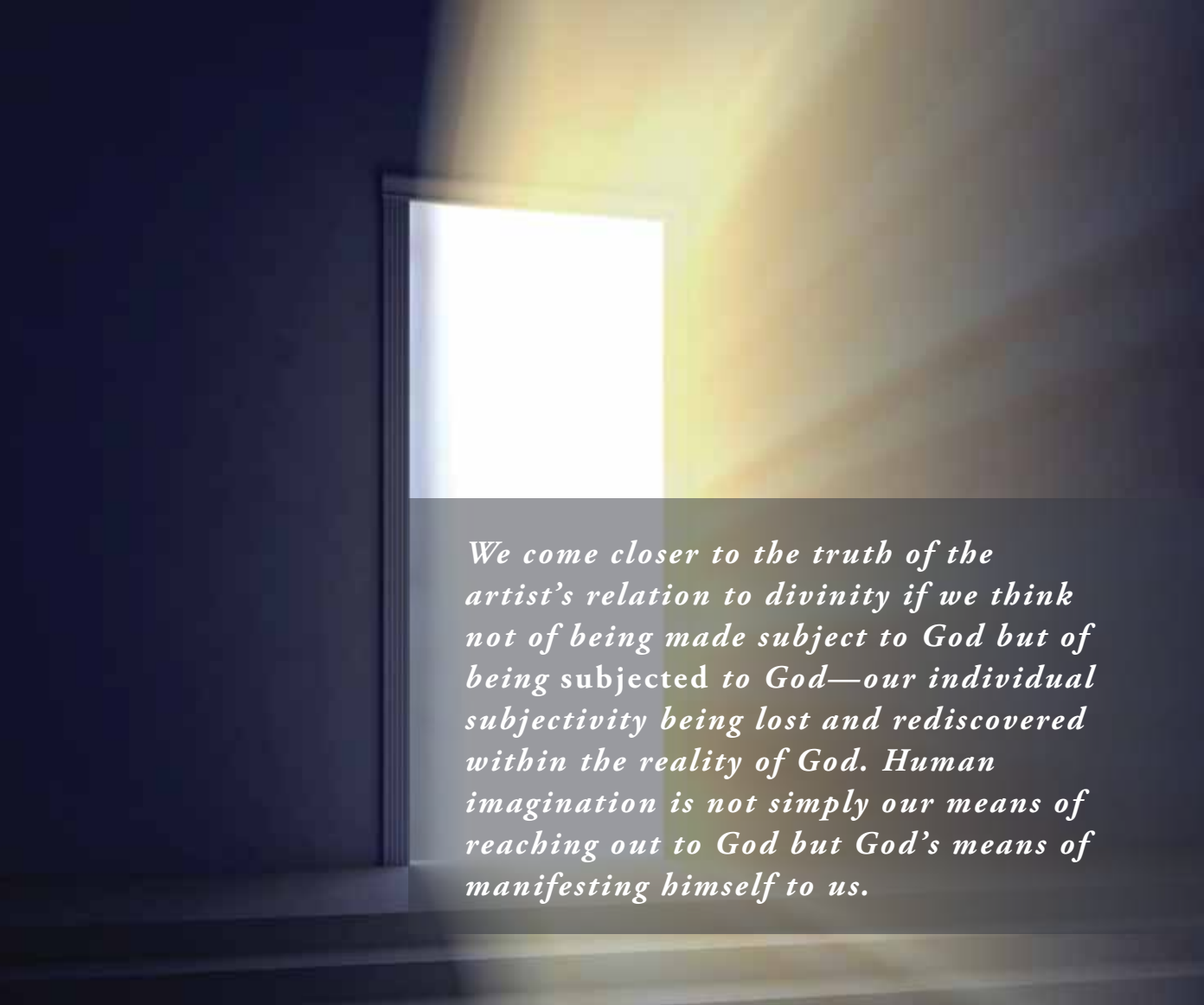
bodies and gold-skeined wings of flies swarming the dumped guts of a natural slaughter or the coil of shit and in no way winces from its storms of generosity; when you consider

that air or vacuum, snow or shale, squid or wolf, rose or lichen, each is accepted into as much light as it will take, then the heart moves roomier, the man stands and looks about, the

leaf does not increase itself above the grass, and the dark work of the deepest cells is of a tune with May bushes and fear lit by the breadth of such calmly turns to praise.

—A. R. AMMONS, "THE CITY LIMITS"²

AMEN. I BEGIN WITH THIS POEM—"THE CITY LIMITS," BY THE LATE, GREAT A. R. AMMONS, A WONDERFUL AMERICAN POET—FOR A COUPLE OF REASONS. ONE IS THAT I'M GOING TO TALK A LOT ABOUT ART AND FAITH AND PARTICULARLY CHRISTIANITY; AND THE WORD "ART" IS LIKE "FAITH" IN ONE SENSE—IF YOU USE IT ABSTRACTLY FOR VERY LONG, YOU JUST COMPLETELY LEECH IT OF ANY MEANING THAT IT HAS. Also, "The City Limits" feels like a religious poem; you will have noticed, right? I said, "Amen" at the end. It doesn't have "Amen" at the end, believe me. It feels like a religious poem. It feels like it could be a Christian poem; there's an incarnational sense to the poem. But the fact is Ammons had no religious belief at all, and he could actually be especially caustic about Christian manifestations of religious belief.



We come closer to the truth of the artist's relation to divinity if we think not of being made subject to God but of being subjected to God—our individual subjectivity being lost and rediscovered within the reality of God. Human imagination is not simply our means of reaching out to God but God's means of manifesting himself to us.

So that's another thing I would like to talk about ... what an art or faith might look like—what it looks like in the hands of someone who doesn't believe at all. Ammons represents a phenomenon in modern thought that by this point is probably pretty familiar to us: he's what you might think of as an unbelieving believer. He wouldn't believe in anything beyond the material world at all were it not for the insights that he's given in his own life in poetry. And yet, by means of these insights—these “spots of time” as William Wordsworth once called them—it becomes possible to live and even to praise. The great Jewish theologian Abraham Joshua Heschel defined faith as primarily faithfulness to a time when we had faith. We remember these moments of intensity and closeness to God, and we endeavor to remain true to them. It's a tenuous and tenacious discipline of memory and hope ...

I was raised in a very religious atmosphere. It was in far west Texas, where the milieu—if I can use that word for that place—was charismatic—fundamentalist in a kind of automatic way. This was long before what are now known as the culture wars. Visceral and very tense. I have no memory of meeting a real-life atheist until I went away to college, when a dauntingly hip and prep-school freshman announced his atheism to me as casually as a culinary preference. In all honesty I could not have been more surprised and terrified had he begun swiveling his head around and growling Aramaic.

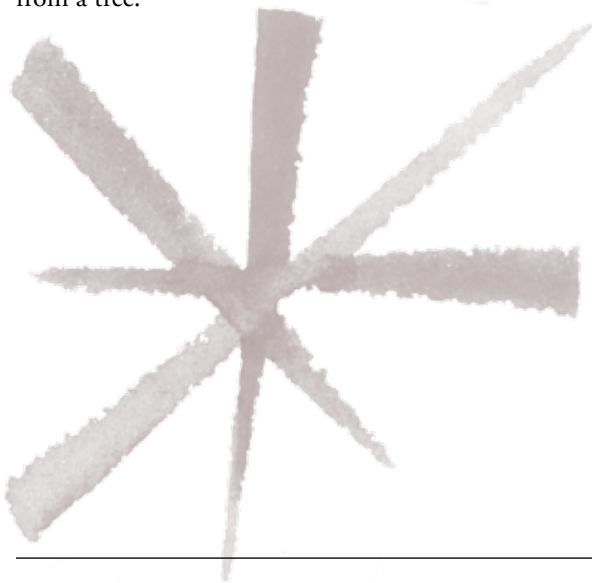
My faith fell away, or at least it seemed to, under the pressure of the books that I began to read. And for a long time I lived apart from God. And not simply apart from God, but ... apart from the world. Like many modern artists, the energy in my art seemed to come from this very distance.

That the energy was often a despairing one just seemed to me what modern art was.

I wasn't an atheist; I wouldn't have used that word. I was more someone fiercely devoted to his lack of faith, or fiercely devoted to a faith that had no object—either in this world or in any other. “Sumptuous destitution” is an evocative phrase Emily Dickinson uses. “Without my loneliness I would be more lonely,” writes Marianne Moore, “so I keep it.”

It took some serious events to shatter my notions, myself, and my art. I don't have time or the inclination to go in to all of that ... Let me give you the short version. Poetry, after being the main focus of my adult life, went dead in me for a number of years, and I couldn't write a word. It was three years. Then I fell in love. In a way that I knew immediately was both primal and permanent. And I got a terrible diagnosis that demanded some radical changes in the way that I lived. All these experiences were weirdly one experience in me. It took a while, but I eventually got it through my thick head what that experience was. It was the call of God.

Here, then, is one of my poems called “From a Window.” It was written sometime after those experiences in one quick, consuming, and mysterious burst that seemed so utterly of my own mind and yet so little under my control that I couldn't tell if it came from inside or outside of me. The scene here is someone looking out of a window when a flock of birds takes off suddenly from a tree.



From a Window³

Incurable and unbelieving
in any truth but the truth of grieving,

I saw a tree inside a tree
rise kaleidoscopically

as if the leaves had livelier ghosts.
I pressed my face as close

to the pane as I could get
to watch that fitful, fluent spirit

that seemed a single being undefined
or countless beings of one mind

haul its strange cohesion
beyond the limits of my vision

over the house heavenwards.
Of course I knew those leaves were birds.

Of course that old tree stood
exactly as it had and would

(but why should it seem fuller now?)
and though a man's mind might endow

even a tree with some excess
of life to which a man seems witness

that life is not the life of men.
And that is where the joy came in.

So nothing in this poem was planned. I didn't begin to have the realization that an experience of reality can open up into an experience of God and then go write a poem to illustrate my feelings. It's not the way poetry works. I wrote the poem one day out of anguish, emptiness, grief—all the emotions that had animated my earlier poems ... and the poem suddenly exploded into joy.

“God would have us know that we must live as men who manage our lives without him,” says Dietrich Bonhoeffer. And he goes on: “The God who lets us live in the world without the working



Christian Wiman delivers his Fall 2013 Bannan Institute Lecture, “My Bright Abyss: Thoughts on Modern Belief.”

Grace Oghara

hypothesis of God is the God before whom we stand continually. Before God and with God we live without God.”⁴

Clearly then, the question of exactly which art is seeking God and seeking to be in the service of God is much more complicated than it might seem. There is something in all original art that will not be made subject to God, if we mean by being made subject to God a kind of voluntary censorship or willed refusal of the mind’s spontaneous and sometimes disturbing intrusions into, and extension of, reality.

But that is not how that phrase ought to be understood. In fact, we come closer to the truth of the artist’s relation to divinity if we think not of being made subject to God but of being *subjected* to God—our individual subjectivity being lost and rediscovered within the reality of God. Human imagination is not simply our means of reaching out to God, but God’s means of manifesting himself to us.

It follows that any notion of God that is static is not simply sterile but, since it asserts singular knowledge of God and seeks to limit his being to that knowledge, blasphemous. “God’s truth is life,” as the poet Patrick Kavanaugh says, “even the grotesque shapes of its foulest fire.”⁵ One part of that truth, for even the most devout among us is the void of godlessness and—this part is crucial—the occasional joy of that void. What I’m trying to say, I suppose ... is that sometimes God calls a person to unbelief in order that faith may take new forms. e

CHRISTIAN WIMAN graduated from Washington and Lee University in Virginia. For years he traveled the world—from Guatemala to the Czech Republic—devoting himself to the craft of poetry. He later became the Jones Lecturer of Poetry at Stanford University, a visiting lecturer at the Yale Divinity School, and also taught at Northwestern University and the Prague School of Economics. From 2003 to 2013, Christian Wiman served as the editor of *Poetry* magazine, the oldest American magazine of verse. Under Wiman’s leadership, *Poetry* was honored with two prestigious National Magazine Awards in 2011. Wiman is now Senior Lecturer in Religion and Literature at Yale Divinity School and Yale Institute of Sacred Music. He is the author of three well-received books of poetry, a book of essays, and most recently, *My Bright Abyss: Meditations of a Modern Believer*.

NOTES

- 1 Christian Wiman, “My Bright Abyss: Thoughts on Modern Belief,” lecture, 2013–2014 Bannan Institute: What Good Is God? series, October 17, 2013, Santa Clara University. This essay is an excerpt from the lecture; a video of the full lecture is available online at: <http://scu.edu/ic/publications/videos.cfm>
- 2 A. R. Ammons, “The City Limits,” in *The Selected Poems* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1986), 89.
- 3 Christian Wiman, “From a Window,” in *Every Riven Thing* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2010), 31–32. Reprinted with permission of author.
- 4 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, ed. Eberhard Bethge, trans. Reginald Fuller and others, rev. ed. (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1967), 188.
- 5 from Patrick Kavanaugh, “The Great Hunger,” in *Collected Poems*, ed. Antoinette Quinn (New York: Penguin Books, 1968), 36.

On Modern Faith: “Out of the Eater Came Forth Meat”

A Response to Christian Wiman



Grace Ogihara

BY TIM J. MYERS
*Senior Lecturer, Department of English
Santa Clara University*

ONE FREQUENT CRITICISM OF RELIGION STRIKES ME AS PARTICULARLY MISINFORMED: THE CHARGE THAT BELIEF IS MERE COMFORT OR COMPLACENCE. OF COURSE SOME “FAITH” IS REALLY NO MORE THAN AMULET OR SECURITY BLANKET. BUT DECADES OF STRUGGLE AND PAIN LED ME TO THE DIVINE — AND THIS, IT TURNS OUT, IS A QUITE TRADITIONAL PATH. IT’S ALSO THE PATH CHRISTIAN WIMAN IS WALKING.

Wiman’s faith, embodied in writing of measured and luminous metaphysical ferocity, reflects the dynamic and seemingly bleaker modern world. But this makes it precious beyond words —precisely because faith must *live*, must answer to present reality, or else it doesn’t really exist.

This isn’t of course the only form faith takes. Many grow in belief from childhood and carry it forward without serious doubt. But not everyone is given that gift. And those who walk the longer path sometimes discover new dimensions of the sacred, or reinvigorate older ones.

It’s not only sharing the longer path, however, that makes me appreciate Wiman. Central to

his faith is the yearning, fearful, loving, haunted wilderness of the artist’s heart. It’s as if life itself dangles certain human beings over the abyss just to see what they’ll say. Wiman asserts that poetry “[is] a particular way of thinking that I find exists nowhere else in the world,”¹ a unique and mysterious epistemological enterprise, engendering insight through the labor, anguish, and sometimes utter surprise the shaping of a poem can entail. Poetry was even more potent in this regard than his incurable cancer and the suffering it brought him and his wife; that is, poetry—not to mention the love he found in marriage —had already led to the revelation he’d half-blindly sought. It’s no accident that he regularly quotes George Herbert’s “Bitter-sweet,” itself an act of spiritual balance through the crucible of art: “I will lament and love.”²

In my own artist’s life, belief and doubt whirl together in an endless dance. But I learned over time that the troubling of my faith is one of the most fruitful ways of growing it. Out of my joyous gratitude for that has also come, though, a distrust of easy expressions of faith. You’ll find no such disturbing ease in Wiman. And there’s good

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"Birth-Ascension" by Tim J. Myers.
Cover image from *Dear Beast Loveliness:
Poems of the Body* (BlazeVOX Press, 2013).

reason. As he said in his talk, “there’s an enormous number of people ... who find ... the language of religion in general inadequate ... And that’s ... a terrible bind to be in. To find yourself desperate to experience God but not trusting ... any of the language you have.”³ I listen to Wiman so raptly because he speaks with a sufferer’s experience. I listen even more when he says of spirituality, “You might not want to call it anything at all.”⁴ This is the Tao that cannot be spoken and is, to me, the first step on a genuine journey toward the Ultimate.⁵

One climax of all this is Wiman’s achingly beautiful poem “My Stop Is Grand,”⁶ where, again, all the brutal and casual wrong of the world is evoked with heart-stopping power. But the poem ends with an “and yet ...” I think of Issa, the Japanese *haijin*, master of a form that often asserts, through traditional metaphors like dew or falling blossoms, the utter transience of all things. After the death of his young son Sentaro, he wrote:

This dewdrop world
is but a dewdrop world
and yet ...⁷



Senior Lecturer Tim Myers asks a question of Christian Wiman at Wiman’s Fall 2013 Bannan Institute Lecture.

Issa’s “and yet,” torn from an essential human grief, to me constitutes a small aperture opening onto transcendence. “My Stop Is Grand” takes a similar hint but expands it. Out of a “screechingly peacocked/grace of sparks” from the Chicago El, Wiman senses a sacred culmination, one “that was most intimately me/and not mine.”⁸ In a modern/post-modern world seemingly stripped of religious perception, a poet of the sacred must strive for spiritually subtle discernment. We are, I think, in the midst of a centuries-long epistemological crisis, and art as a way of deeper seeing is part of the answer to that crisis.

“[T]he same impulse that leads me to sing of God leads me to sing of godlessness,”⁹ Wiman writes. Consider the full implication of this beautiful idea. I often use a simple metaphor for the faith-struggle, that of someone climbing a tree and deciding whether to step onto a particular branch. If the branch is rotten, you’ll plummet—so before you commit your existence to it, you make damn sure the branch is sound. A mindlessly accepted faith that ignores darker realities simply won’t bear the weight of our actual lives. “[A] notion of God that is static ... simply sterile ... assert[ing] singular knowledge of God and seek[ing] to limit His being to that knowledge”¹⁰ is such a branch, Wiman reminds us. A sound branch, by contrast, is green, growing, flexible. Wiman again: “[S]ometimes God calls a person to unbelief in order that faith may take new forms.”¹¹

If there ever really was a time when faith was simple, we’re not living in it now. But that hardly amounts to, as many claim, the end of faith. Wiman came to God partly through the observable reality of Incarnation in its broadest, most “secular” sense. He points to A.R. Ammons’ incandescent “The City Limits” as overflowing evidence of the radiance of the world, since Ammons, a poet with “no religious belief,” couldn’t help but bear witness to such sanctity.¹² In other words, poetry, through its white-hot engagement with the world as it is, can lead us to richer understandings of God.

This can also lead, I think, to a new emphasis on one of the most traditional religious ideas: that God is infinite. If we take this notion seriously, we’re forced to shift “religion” from rigid certainty

to a great and humble openness. In the essay “O Thou Mastering Light,” Wiman asks those who see the world as empty, “Really? You have never felt overpowered by, and in some way inadequate to, an experience in your life, have never felt something in yourself staking a claim beyond your self, some wordless mystery straining through words to reach you?”¹³ Religion, he continues, “is the means of making these moments part of your life, rather than merely radical intrusions so foreign and perhaps even fearsome that you can’t even acknowledge their existence Religion is ... preserving and honoring something that, ultimately, transcends ... whatever specific religion you practice.”¹⁴

I’m not terribly fond of Judges 14, where a testoronic Sampson tricks the Philistines with an unanswerable riddle then slaughters a number of them. But even as a child I was enthralled by the riddle. After killing a lion, Sampson later finds that bees have built a hive in the carcass. This inspires him: “Out of the eater came forth meat; out of the strong came sweetness.”¹⁵ That numinous duality is at the heart of many spiritual traditions, and it became a template for my own life, with Death as the ultimate “eater” and the honey of faith emerging from my struggle with it. So I love the irony whereby a superb poet and deeply honest person like Wiman will, through his refusal to ignore the realities of modern life, end up discovering in its depths an ancient and life-giving tradition of divine paradox.

And this half-dark, half-bright miracle of the poet’s work flows ever outward, since here I am, and others with me, drawing light into our lives out of Christian Wiman’s words, in a continuance of revelation passed, as it were, from hand to hand. **e**

TIM J. MYERS is a writer, songwriter, storyteller, and senior lecturer in the English Department at Santa Clara University. He’s been nominated for two Pushcarts, won a poetry contest judged by John Updike, has published two books of adult poetry, and has 11 children’s books out and four in press. His *Basho and the Fox* was a *New York Times* Children’s Bestseller and was read aloud on NPR. *Glad to Be Dad: A Call to Fatherhood* was featured on the *Parents Magazine* site and won the Ben Franklin Digital Award. Tim can actually whistle and hum at the same time. www.TimMyersStorySong.com.

NOTES

- 1 Christian Wiman, “My Bright Abyss: Thoughts on Modern Belief,” lecture, Bannan Institute “What Good Is God?” series, October 17, 2013, Santa Clara University. Based on Christian Wiman, *My Bright Abyss: Meditations of a Modern Believer* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2013). The full lecture is available online at: <http://scu.edu/ic/publications/videos.cfm>
- 2 George Herbert, “Bitter-sweet,” from *The Temple, Sacred Poems and Private Ejaculations* (Cambridge: Printed by Thomas Buck and Roger Daniel, 1656).
Ah my deare angrie Lord,
Since thou dost love, yet strike;
Cast down, yet help afford;
Sure I will do the like.

I will complain, yet praise;
I will bewail, approve:
And all my sowre-sweet dayes
I will lament, and love.
- 3 Wiman, “My Bright Abyss: Thoughts on Modern Belief,” lecture.
- 4 Ibid.
- 5 *Tao Te Ching*, first sentence, Chapter 1. See <http://www.taoism.net/ttc/chapters/chap01.htm>
- 6 Christian Wiman, “My Stop Is Grand,” unpublished poem. “My Stop Is Grand” is due to be published in an upcoming issue of *The Atlantic Monthly*.
- 7 In Kobayashi Issa, *Hachiban nikki (Eighth Diary)*, 1821, written in 1817.
- 8 Wiman, “My Stop Is Grand,” unpublished poem.
- 9 Wiman, “My Bright Abyss: Thoughts on Modern Belief,” lecture.
- 10 Ibid.
- 11 Ibid.
- 12 A. R. Ammons, “The City Limits,” in *The Selected Poems* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1986), 89.
- 13 Wiman, “O Thou Mastering Light,” *Harvard Divinity Bulletin* 37, no. 2 & 3 (Spring/Summer 2009). See: <http://www.hds.harvard.edu/news-events/harvard-divinity-bulletin/articles/o-thou-mastering-light>
- 14 Ibid.
- 15 Judges 14, *The King James Bible*. See: <http://biblehub.com/kjv/judges/14.htm>

God's Presence in Poetry

A Response to Christian Wiman



Grace Ogihara

BY SABRINA BARRETO '15
*English Major and Creative Writing Minor,
Santa Clara University*

“The clear expression of mixed feelings,’ W. H. Auden once called poetry. It’s why poetry of some sort is so essential to any unified religious life. What could be more necessary for the muddle of modern religious experience and life?”

—CHRISTIAN WIMAN¹

WHEN I STARTED OUT AS POETRY EDITOR OF THE *SANTA CLARA REVIEW* AND FIRST SORTED THROUGH THE SLOUGH OF SUBMISSIONS, I WAS STRUCK BY THE AMOUNT OF NIHILISTIC ENTRIES THAT Poured IN. A TONE OF BLEAKNESS PERMEATED MUCH OF WHAT I READ, AND STILL READ, PAIRED WITH A FAIR DOSE OF APOCALYPTIC SENTIMENTS. THOUGH MY INITIAL SHOCK IS LONG GONE, I HAVE NOT BEEN DESENSITIZED IN THE PROCESS. Rather, my sensitivity remains reserved, but very much alive, which is why I was so affected by Christian Wiman’s self-critique of one of his poems: “God is nowhere present within it. That may be what makes it modern.”² How heartbreaking. For, pessimism aside, my greatest joy as an editor is to receive those gems of poems

that are transcendent. Transcendent in both the secular and religious sense, of surpassing the limits of human experience and perception, as well as time and space. Transcendent in the sense of a spiritual yearning, equally applicable to those who belong to a faith tradition as to the “unbelieving believer” whom Wiman discusses.

But why even link poetry with faith? For a few reasons. Because literature reflects life; because God gives and affirms life; and because faith is an intense experience and poetry is an intense medium that matches faith’s depth and intimacy. Just as faith cannot be wholly understood, neither can poetry. The terror and beauty of having faith and reading poetry, the very essence of each, is in embracing mystery. John Keats best described this openness to enigma as *negative capability*, when a thinker is “capable of being in uncertainties,



John Keats best described this openness to enigma as negative capability, when a thinker is “capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason.”

Joseph Severn, “John Keats.” Used with permission. © National Portrait Gallery, London.

Poetry's impact is not life-changing in a grand sense. But on a quiet, reflective, personal level, poetry offers emotional connections, fresh perspectives, and, ideally, an altered state of engagement. Poems serve as a call to observing the minutest details of life, of recognizing significance in smallness, of noticing the humanity within one another.



Grace Ogihara

Students take in Christian Wiman's Fall 2013 Bannan Institute Lecture.

mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason.”³ What I find most refreshing about negative capability is Keats’ emphasis on a poet becoming a channel of expression. There is no place for ego when inspiration moves through, instead of originating from, a human being. The act of a poet serving as a channel allows his or her creation to take on timeless qualities, allowing the work to transcend, which dovetails with Wiman’s statement that “Human imagination is not simply our means of reaching out to God, but God’s means of manifesting himself to us.”⁴

I believe that the best poems distill a moment or emotion, include compelling imagery, and ultimately revitalize the spirit through the challenge or provocation of what the poem presents. Meaning, the poet’s catharsis and personal experience can impact the humanity of the reader’s experience. Poetry’s impact is not life-changing in a grand sense. But on a quiet, reflective, personal level, poetry offers emotional connections, fresh perspectives, and, ideally, an altered state of engagement. Poems serve as a call to observing the minutest details of life, of recognizing significance in smallness, of noticing the humanity within one another. Poems can thus crystallize how, as Wiman noted, “an experience of reality can open up into an experience of God.”⁵ Such an experience, I find, would be called grace.

Here is where unbelieving believers enter. In desiring and seeking spiritual fulfillment, people who do not partake in a religious tradition still open themselves to grace. I would call it a subconscious, unrecognizable experience of grace. Even if God and faith are not named by the person experiencing grace, a supernatural involvement is not precluded. Moreover, someone’s ability to look and mentally move beyond the limitations of being earth-bound, to long for a higher plane of engagement and soulful sustenance, suggests a person’s cognizance of another dimension. Here is where poetry meets spirituality.

Wiman mentioned that “poetry came first; it led me to theology.”⁶ A similar parallel can be made between love for another person—a relative, a spouse, a child, a companion—and love for God, as Wiman experienced with his

wife. Like humanity's deepest emotions and mere inklings of God, a poem is not something that can be ironed out or decisively calculated. Poetry's evocations and evasions fit particularly well with unbelieving believers because of the *possibility* of God's presence. Just as poetry transcends the boundaries of human thought, so does spiritual longing transcend the concrete confines of human experience. The potency exists within the distance.

But even more, there is a secular grace in revering life, as found in poems and in a hunger for spirituality. It is a grace that exists in unbelieving believers and in poetry that transcends, with or without explicit mention of God. Because God is not absent. Because although human consciousness can confine, humans' grasp can still exceed the corporeal.

I can't think of a contemporary poem that captures my beliefs better than one written by William Rewak, S.J.:

The Maker⁷

I can't sit here staring at a ceramic horse
all afternoon watching the sun move

from snout to rump and not think idly
that its maker must have adored his subject

so lovingly does it curve and swell, so
majestic its intent; how fondly has he

smoothed its neck and taught us tension,
how carefully the lesson expressed


that one must become something other
when one creates, something close

to an afternoon's movement of the sun.

When I consider my own engagement with poetry, I find that I can neither write nor fully appreciate a poem without a touch of the transcendent. It needn't be obvious—in fact, subtlety is all the more appreciated. But emotions and experiences would mean nothing without the movements, stirrings, or sublimation of the soul

in the process. A physically grounded existence is so restrictive, and offers no fulfillment on its own. I would not want to live in a world in which God was not present, and in this world, I feel His presence in many ways.

In the face of a loved one. In the sensation of water. In honest expression. In color and music and that exquisite necessity called an embrace.

What amazes me most about witnessing the creativity of others is that the creative spirit is rooted in the impalpable. Who knows precisely whence the visions of artists originate? What I can say is that the origin is not strictly human. And thank God for that. 

SABRINA BARRETO is a junior English major and creative writing minor at Santa Clara University, where she is the current poetry editor of the University's literary magazine, the *Santa Clara Review*. She received the University's Shipsey Poetry Prize in 2012, the Academy of American Poets Tamara Verga Prize in 2014, and two statewide Ina Coolbrith Memorial Poetry Prizes from U.C. Berkeley in 2013 and 2014. Her collaborations with German poetry magazine *Das Gedicht* can be viewed on the *Santa Clara Review* Poetry Blog at <http://www.santaclarareview.com/poetry-blog.html>.

NOTES

- 1 Christian Wiman, "My Bright Abyss: Thoughts on Modern Belief," lecture, 2013–2014 Bannan Institute: What Good Is God? series, October 17, 2013, Santa Clara University. A video of the full lecture is available online at: <http://scu.edu/ic/publications/videos.cfm>
- 2 Ibid.
- 3 From John Keats' letter to his brothers George and Tom Keats, December 1817. <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/learning/essay/237836?page=2>
- 4 Wiman, "My Bright Abyss: Thoughts on Modern Belief," lecture.
- 5 Ibid.
- 6 Ibid.
- 7 William Rewak, S.J., "The Maker," *Santa Clara Review* 100.2 (2013): 69. Reprinted with permission of author.

Why Is God for Christians Good for Nothing?¹

Excerpt from Fall 2013 Bannan Institute Lecture

Courtesy of Terry Eagleton



BY TERRY EAGLETON

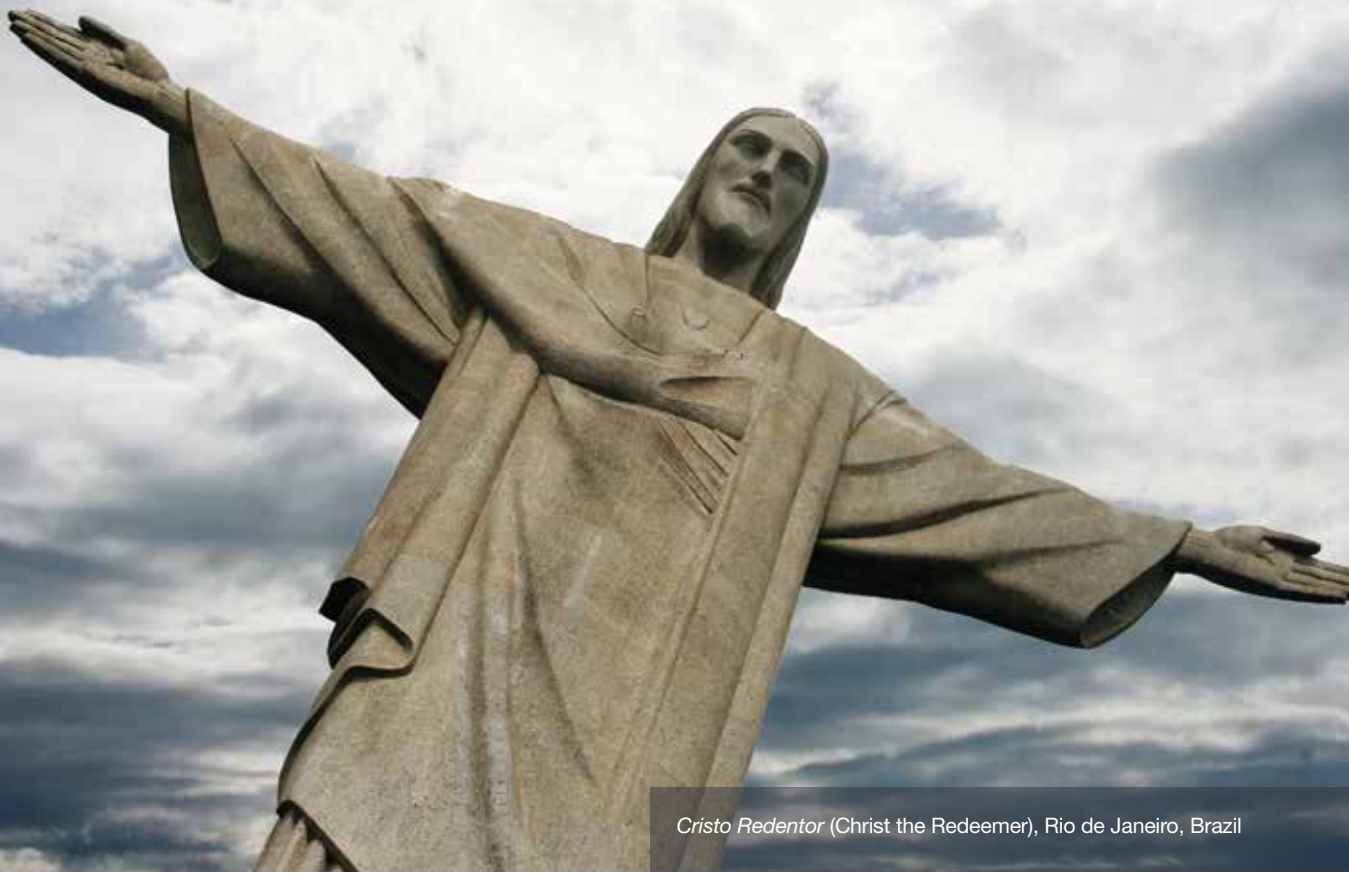
*Distinguished Professor, Department of English,
University of Notre Dame and Lancaster University*

THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN THEOLOGIANs, I THINK, AND OLD-FASHIONED NINETEENTH CENTURY RATIONALISTS LIKE RICHARD DAWKINS, IS THAT WHEN DAWKINS HOLDS FORTH ON GOD, HE DOESN'T KNOW WHAT HE'S TALKING ABOUT, BUT DOESN'T KNOW THAT HE DOESN'T, WHEREAS WHEN THEOLOGIANs TALK ABOUT GOD, THEY DON'T REALLY KNOW WHAT THEY'RE TALKING ABOUT, BUT THEY KNOW THAT THEY DON'T. THE DIFFERENCE, IN SHORT, IS BETWEEN UNKNOWN UNKNOWNs AND KNOWN UNKNOWNs ...

For the greatest post-ancient theologian who ever lived, Thomas Aquinas, all talk about God is fuzzy, nebulous, analogous, metaphorical, hit and miss, blurred at the edges, and in the end, so much garbage. Useful garbage perhaps, like a couple of dollar bills you might find in the trash can, but garbage nonetheless, which of course is why Aquinas was finally to describe his own mighty *Summa*, perhaps the greatest work of theology ever written, as so much straw, and lay down his pen after producing about the equivalent, I think,

of two or three novels a month in writing it, and fall silent for the few years or months remaining to him. As St. Augustine puts it in the *Confessions*, there's really not much point in talking about God, but that's no excuse for keeping your mouth shut either, although he said it rather more elegantly and also in Latin, which is even more admirable.

Since, in any case, I suppose God is the source of talk about himself, then he logically transcends it. We talk (don't we?) about going to the horse's mouth for the real story, but the irony of that is that horses don't speak, and neither does God, except perhaps through people like Thomas and Augustine. In fact, don't let this go beyond these four walls, but there are all kinds of things that God can't do, despite popular reports of his omniscience or omnipotence. He can't shave his legs, for example, because he doesn't have any. He can't fasten his shoelaces, prefer burgundy to madeira ... It's not even clear that God is able to be good. For one thing, not many theologians worth their salt these days, I suppose, would claim that God was a moral being. God isn't any kind of moral. Being moral is for creatures like us, who don't know how to be happy, who don't know what we really desire,



Cristo Redentor (Christ the Redeemer), Rio de Janeiro, Brazil

Flickr Creative Commons Public Use License, Doug Wheller, <https://flic.kr/p/7hNYNM>

and therefore who have to engage in interminable conversations about it called things like ethics and politics. God is luckily released from all that.

In fact, he isn't of course a being at all, in the sense of a determinate entity within the universe. He isn't any kind of entity. He's neither within the universe nor outside it, and he isn't an object, phenomenon, principle, or even a person in the sense in which Al Gore is arguably a person. So I think all good theologians then can surely agree with Dawkins and Dennett and the rest of that crew that God doesn't exist. He isn't any kind of existent entity. He's the reason why there are any existent entities at all, rather than just nothing. He can't be reckoned up with other things. God and the universe don't make two. Whatever other mistakes believers might make, and they make quite a few, not being able to count isn't one of them. Thinking that there's one more object in the universe than there actually is, is not the kind of mistake that believers make, whatever errors and crimes they may commit.

So what good is God? ... the word *good* can be used of God only analogously or metaphorically. When we call him good, we don't really know

what we're talking about. He certainly isn't good in the sense that he doesn't commit adultery, doesn't say things like "Oh, Christ," and always eats his five portions of vegetables a day. To say that he doesn't commit adultery isn't of course to say that he's chaste, just as to say that he doesn't curse isn't to say that he's impeccably verbally well-behaved. It's rather to say this whole sort of language is simply no more applicable to God than it is to a badger or a baseball bat.

God isn't a moral being, though he's the source of morality in others, which is to say he's the source of an ecstatic overflowing abundance of life. Morality, of course, having to do in the first place not with duty, obligation, responsibility, self-discipline, self-repression, and all those other rather grim-faced puritanical notions, but with human fulfillment, what human beings desire—how are they to know it, and how are they together to fulfill it? Duties, obligations, responsibilities, all that Kantian talk, may indeed have its place, but it has to find a place within that broader and deeper context of what morality is ...

Morality is really all about learning how to live life fully, enjoyably, and superabundantly,

whereas evil is a deficiency or defectiveness of life ... But because we are, of course, desperately opaque and impenetrable to ourselves, sometimes a lot more so than to each other, knowing how to fulfill ourselves is by no means an easy matter ... That morality is about pleasurable fulfillment is the good news. The bad news is if you're going to take that seriously, you're very likely to end up getting yourself crucified. Pleasurable fulfillment for *everybody* involves issues of justice. Issues of justice involve questions of conflict, and questions of conflict can well involve death. The message of the gospel is stark, simple, and utterly devastating. If you don't love, you're dead. And if you do, they'll kill you ... At the center of Christianity is the tortured, reviled figure of a suspected political rebel who spoke out for love and justice and was murdered by the state for his pains ...

What good is God? Traditionally, good is a functional term, isn't it? A good clock is one that keeps time. And a good knife, one that can cut.

But what function does God have? To create the universe perhaps? To get things off the ground? Well, the doctrine of creation, of course, has nothing whatsoever to do with how things got off the ground, whatever theological illiterates like Richard Dawkins or Daniel Dennett may think. Thomas Aquinas believed in the doctrine of creation but thought it perfectly plausible, possible, that the universe had no beginning, as indeed his great mentor, Aristotle, believed. He didn't actually believe that, because of the first book of Genesis, but he thought it was perfectly possible. It wasn't in any sense for him violating the doctrine of creation to believe that creation never had a beginning because it simply wasn't for him about that.

So, God has no function in that sense. It's not as though we needed somebody to kick the thing off and get things started. In fact, he doesn't have a function in any sense. He's completely useless, and that, of course, is the most precious



Grace Ogihara



Grace Ogihara

Professor Terry Eagleton engages audience members at his provocative Fall 2013 Bannan Institute lecture "Why Is God for Christians Good for Nothing?"

GOD & CULTURE

God ... is completely useless, and that, of course, is the most precious thing about him. He's his own grounds, reasons, ends, foundations, raison d'être, with absolutely no purpose beyond himself. He is, in fact, the supremely autonomous being.

thing about him. He's his own grounds, reasons, ends, foundations, *raison d'être*, with absolutely no purpose beyond himself. He is, in fact, the supremely autonomous being. With the word *autonomous*, of course, literally meaning a law unto himself. He's his own law. If atheist and theologian can agree on one proposition at least, it's surely there's no point to God whatsoever. What is he good for? Nothing. If we can speak of him as good, which is questionable, he's good for nothing. He's good for no reason, benefit, gain, practical advantage, instrumental end, simply good for entirely, purely entirely for its own sake. Or to adopt a more technical theological term, good just for the hell of it ...

So it is with people, human beings. Where they most resemble God is precisely in being pretty useless as well. That's to say, in living, in realizing their energies and capacities purely for their own sake, which is to say paradoxically, that where we belong most to God is where we're most autonomous, where we're most self-determining. That's where we belong to him most. Our dependency on him is the very ground and source of our freedom. Not the dependency of a servant or a slave to a master, rather as one's dependency on good parents will become in the fullness of time, if we're lucky, the source and ground of our free flourishing. There's no freedom without a prior, deeper, and more radical dependency.

Are human beings good for nothing then too? Well, according to the New Testament, I think they ought to be. They should be good, but for nothing, for no reason, gain, self-advantage, no return ... Not only should one expect no return, but one should give more than requested. Walk

two miles rather than one; give your cloak as well as your coat, as so on. These are deliberately surreal, extravagant, over-the-top gestures which are intended to make a mockery of exchange value, of tit for tat, of the strict equivalencies of the capitalist bookkeepers or the accountancy-minded Judas, whose surname by the way might just link him to the zealots. It's an eschatological ethics, one that suggests that there's no time for revenge, calculation, exact returns, tit for tat, and so on, because the Kingdom of God is almost upon us. ^e

TERRY EAGLETON was educated at Trinity College, Cambridge, and on graduating became a Fellow of Jesus College, Cambridge, the youngest Fellow since the 18th century. He has been a Fellow of four Oxford and Cambridge colleges, as well as Thomas Warton Professor of English Literature at the University of Oxford. He is currently Distinguished Visiting Professor in English at the Universities of Lancaster and Notre Dame. He has written over forty works of literary and cultural criticism, published hundreds of articles, and delivered hundreds of lectures in many countries throughout the world. He is an Honorary Fellow of Jesus College, Cambridge, a Fellow of the British Academy, a Fellow of the English Association and the holder of nine Honorary Doctorates of Letters. His books include: *Reason, Faith, and Revolution: Reflections on the God Debate* (2009), *On Evil*, (2010), *Why Marx Was Right* (2011), and *The Event of Literature* (2012).

NOTES

- 1 Terry Eagleton, "Why Is God for Christians Good for Nothing?," lecture, 2013-2014 Bannan Institute: What Good Is God? series, October 7, 2013, Santa Clara University. This essay is an excerpt from the lecture; a video of the full lecture is available online at: <http://scu.edu/ic/publications/videos.cfm>

Thinking Otherwise about God, Marx, and Eagleton

A Response to Terry Eagleton



Grace Ogihara

BY MARILYN EDELSTEIN
*Associate Professor, Department of English,
Santa Clara University*

TERRY EAGLETON HAS BEEN A LITERARY LUMINARY IN THE U.K. AND THE U.S. SINCE THE MID-1960S, BEST KNOWN FOR HIS INFLUENTIAL WORK IN MARXIST LITERARY AND CULTURAL THEORY AND CRITICISM, BUT ALSO AS A NOVELIST, MEMOIRIST, AND PUBLIC INTELLECTUAL. He is the enviably prolific writer of more than 40 books and countless articles, on topics ranging from Shakespeare, the 18th century British novel, and American versus British culture, to, more recently, “the meaning of life” (as he titled his 2007 book, in a display of both hubris and *chutzpah*), and, most relevant here, religion and “the God debate.”¹ He is a frequent reviewer (and provocateur) for *The Guardian* and the *London Review of Books* as well as an academic with a long, illustrious, and often controversial career at Oxford, Cambridge, the University of Manchester, and now, as Distinguished Professor at both Lancaster University in the U.K. and the University of Notre Dame in the U.S. His work is distinguished by its breadth as well as its wit, accessibility, and *élan* (not, alas, common features of academic writing).

I first read some of Eagleton’s work when I was in graduate school, and I began to use his best-selling *Literary Theory: An Introduction*² in the new “Contemporary Literary Theory and Criticism” course I created shortly after I began teaching at Santa Clara University in 1987. My students, often initially baffled by the complexities of the primary texts we read, have appreciated Eagleton’s lucid and engaging primer on theories ranging from New Criticism and structuralism to psychoanalysis, as well as his openness about his own Marxist perspective. Since I have read other work by Eagleton over the years, I was delighted to learn that he would be speaking at Santa Clara this past fall, but was a bit surprised that his talk would be on “Why Is God for Christians Good for Nothing?” rather than on Marxist literary or cultural studies.

Eagleton has been a committed Marxist theorist and activist from his earliest days at Cambridge—leafleting factories and publishing his first book, *The New Left Church*, when he was only 23—to the present, having recently published the boldly titled *Why Marx Was Right*.³ But Eagleton has surprised many of his long-time readers by

For Eagleton, both Christianity and Marxist thought provide, at their roots, radical visions of not only personal but also social and political transformation (akin to what we Jews call tikkun olam: healing or repairing the world) to achieve a world of peace, justice, and compassion in which all humans can thrive.

Marilyn Edelstein

his turn to questions of religion, in books such as *Reason, Faith, and Revolution: Reflections on the God Debate* and his just-published *Culture and the Death of God*.⁴ Yet, through reading some of his recent work, talking to him over lunch on campus, and listening to his lecture, I understand more fully why and how his Marxist views and his deepening interest in religion (specifically, Christianity) are intertwined.

For Eagleton, Christianity and Marx's ideas are not incompatible. We all know that Marx argued that religion was "the opium of the people," since, in his view, it provided illusory solace in a heartless world rather than inspiring political action to change that world. But for Eagleton, both Marxist thought and Christianity provide, at their roots, radical visions of not only personal but also social and political transformation (akin to what we Jews call *tikkun olam*: healing or repairing the world) to achieve a world of peace, justice, and compassion in which all humans can thrive.

Eagleton asserts in a 2009 interview that "a socialist revolution is quite as spiritual as the fight for the kingdom of God is material."⁵ This sounds a lot like the premises of liberation theology, itself a synthesis of Catholic and Marxist ideas,⁶ and like some strains of liberal and progressive Protestantism (e.g., in the social justice work of Martin Luther King, Jr., William Sloane Coffin, and Karen Armstrong) as well as reform Judaism.⁷ In a recent interview, Eagleton notes that the connection between his leftist politics and religion has perhaps "been the theme of my intellectual career," since his early days at Cambridge "as a left-wing Catholic in the heady days of the Vatican Council."⁸ However, he also acknowledges

that over the years religion has moved from the background to the foreground of his work. For Eagleton, religion should be a lived social and political (rather than merely individual) practice informed by faith, love, and hope, rather than merely a matter of doctrine or dogma.⁹

The nature of religion and, indeed of God, was the primary subject of Eagleton's lively and thought-provoking lecture here at Santa Clara. Before addressing the lecture series' central question "what good is God?" Eagleton began with the broader theological and ontological question: "what *is* God?" Eagleton asserted that God is not "a being at all, in the sense of a determinate entity within the universe ... He's neither within the universe nor outside it, and he isn't an object, phenomenon, principle ..."¹⁰ Eagleton went on to make the controversial claim that "all good theologians then can surely agree with Dawkins ... [and other New Atheists] that God doesn't exist."¹¹ Yet Eagleton, contra Dawkins, believes that God "is the reason why there are any existent entities at all, rather than just nothing."¹² Eagleton also argued that we can't really say that God is good, since "the word *good* ... can be used of God only analogously or metaphorically."¹³ As Eagleton puts it, "God isn't a moral being, though he's the source of morality in others, which is to say he's the source of an ecstatic overflowing abundance of life."¹⁴ Eagleton argues that morality (like religion) should not be primarily concerned with "duty, obligation ... self-repression, and all those other rather grim-faced puritanical notions, but [rather] with human fulfillment, what human beings desire—how are they to know it, and how are they together to fulfill it?"¹⁵ Eagleton's emphasis on

humans working *together* to achieve an “ecstatic overflowing abundance of life” in which no one’s fulfillment is at the expense of another’s suggests some of the ways in which he links socialist and Christian ideas of community, compassion, and justice—values shared by many of us who are not Christian and by many who do not consider themselves religious.

For many theologians and philosophers, trying to conceive of God, the divine, or the sacred without relying on anthropomorphic or all-too-worldly conceptual frameworks has proven difficult if not impossible. Hence the frequent recourse, in discussions of God or the sacred, to terms like “ineffable” or “transcendent.” But in the Judeo-Christian tradition, anthropomorphic language and imagery for God persist, as Eagleton’s own talk demonstrated.

In the Q & A period following Eagleton’s lecture, I posed this question: “Since you believe that God is not an existent, let alone an anthropomorphic one, why do you use the word ‘He’ rather than ‘It,’ or, even perhaps ‘She?’” Eagleton replied, “No reason at all, not, of course, because God is a woman any more than he/she is a man, because gender is part of our condition, not part of his/hers, its/theirs ... God defeats our pronouns and adjectives and so on. You’re absolutely right, yes.”¹⁶ Eagleton acknowledged in his response that one of the mistakes in saying “he” when referring to God is that doing so “instantly associates God with our mundane notions of power ... [ones we] need to transfigure.”¹⁷ My question reflected my years of teaching and doing research on feminist theory but was also theological and philosophical: Can we “think otherwise” about God (or “god-ness”) outside of traditional ideas and practices of power and of patriarchy? Can we conceive of God/god/the sacred in nonpaternalistic and even nonanthropomorphic ways?


William Wordsworth, in his 1798 poem “Tintern Abbey,” which I love and often teach, comes close to describing what I (and perhaps Eagleton) have in mind when trying to “think otherwise” about God or the sacred and about humans’ relationships to each other and to the nonhuman cosmos:

... I have felt
 A presence that disturbs me with the joy
 Of elevated thoughts; a sense sublime
 Of something far more deeply interfused,
 Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,
 And the round ocean and the living air,
 And the blue sky, and in the mind of man:
 A motion and a spirit, that impels
 All thinking things, all objects of all thought,
 And rolls through all things.

Poets, through metaphor, often come close to expressing the inexpressible. In this poem written upon his return visit to the ruins of a once-great abbey, Wordsworth suggests a nontheistic sense of the sacred as a sublime life-force that connects all human beings with each other and



J.M.W. Turner, “Tintern Abbey: The Transept,” watercolor, England, 1795. Used with permission.
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with the miraculous natural world. In this poem, Wordsworth also presents a simple ethics, one in which the “best portion of a good man’s [and woman’s] life” is “his [or her] little, nameless, unremembered, acts/ Of kindness and of love.”¹⁸ Although many people of faith regard God, their religion, and/or sacred texts as the only possible sources of morality, I believe we can theorize and practice a nontheocentric ethics based on loving-kindness (a prominent principle in Buddhism but one also running through many strands of Christianity, Judaism, and other religions as well as philosophical traditions) and on respect for persons and for the earth. One does not have to be a Marxist or a Christian or “religious” at all (although one can be, like Eagleton, all three) to believe in, imagine, and feel the interconnectedness of human beings with, and responsibilities toward, each other, the earth, and “something” (however one imagines or tries to describe that “something”) larger than ourselves. 

MARILYN EDELSTEIN is Associate Professor of English at Santa Clara University, where she also teaches in the Women’s and Gender Studies Program and in the Osher Lifelong Learning Institute. Before coming to SCU in 1987, she taught at UCLA and at Youngstown State University in Ohio. She holds a Ph.D. in English from SUNY at Buffalo, an M.A. in general studies in the humanities (emphasizing literature and religious studies) from the University of Chicago, and an interdisciplinary B.A. in literature, religion, philosophy, and creative writing from Goddard College in Vermont. Marilyn teaches courses in and has published articles and book chapters on contemporary American fiction, feminist theory, literary and cultural theory, postmodernism, multiculturalism, and literature and ethics. She is working on a book about empathy, ethics, and multicultural literature.

NOTES

- 1 Terry Eagleton, *The Meaning of Life* (New York and Oxford, U.K.: Oxford University Press, 2007) and *Reason, Faith, and Revolution: Reflections on the God Debate* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009).
- 2 *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (Oxford, U.K.: Basil Blackwell, 1983; Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 1983). As an indication of the text’s continuing popularity, a second edition was published by both Blackwell Publishers and the University of Minnesota in 1996 and then a 25th “anniversary edition” in 2008.
- 3 Terry Eagleton, *The New Left Church* (Baltimore: Helicon, 1966) and *Why Marx Was Right* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011). However, Eagleton is no apologist for communist regimes or such mass murderers as Stalin, who have not followed genuine Marxian principles and have committed horrors. Yet, for Eagleton, Marx’s thought, as a critique of capitalism and as suggesting though not prescribing alternatives to it, can still be of value, especially as we confront crises in global capitalism and rising inequality.
- 4 Terry Eagleton, *Culture and the Death of God* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014). This seemingly dramatic change in Eagleton’s emphases perhaps should not be so surprising from an author who wrote *Literary Theory* in 1983—a book profoundly influenced by postmodernism—and then books called *The Illusions of Postmodernism* (Oxford, U.K. and Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell Publishers, 1996) and *After Theory* (New York: Basic Books, 2003), both of which criticize the very ideas he had helped introduce to readers.
- 5 Nathan Schneider, “Religion for Radicals: An Interview with Terry Eagleton,” *The Immanent Frame* (September 17, 2009), <http://blogs.ssrc.org/tif/2009/09/17/religion-for-radicals-an-interview-with-terry-eagleton/>.
- 6 In fact, one of Eagleton’s colleagues at Notre Dame, the Peruvian theologian Gustavo Gutierrez, O.P., is widely considered the founder of liberation theology. See, e.g., Gutierrez’s *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, Salvation*, trans. Sister Caridad Inda and John Eagleson (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Press, 1973). Liberation theology has clearly been an influence on Pope Francis, too.
- 7 See, for example, the magazine *Tikkun*, founded by Rabbi Michael Lerner.
- 8 Alexander Barker and Alex Niven, “An Interview with Terry Eagleton,” *The Oxonian Review* 19.4 (June 4, 2012), <http://www.oxonianreview.org/wp/an-interview-with-terry-eagleton/>.
- 9 Schneider interview. Eagleton argues that New Atheists like Dawkins and the late Christopher Hitchens (a long-time friend of Eagleton’s), like “the great majority of believers, have been conned rather falsely into a positivist or dogmatic theology, into believing that religion consists in signing on for a set of propositions.”
- 10 Terry Eagleton, “Why Is God for Christians Good for Nothing?,” lecture, 2013–2014 Bannan Institute: What Good Is God? series, October 7, 2013, Santa Clara University. A video of the full lecture is available online at: <http://scu.edu/ic/publications/videos.cfm>
- 11 Ibid.
- 12 Ibid.
- 13 Ibid.
- 14 Ibid.
- 15 Ibid.
- 16 Ibid.
- 17 Ibid.
- 18 William Wordsworth, “Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey, On Revisiting the Banks of the Wye during a Tour, July 13, 1798,” *Lyrical Ballads* (London: J. & A. Arch, 1798).



El Greco (Domenikos Theotokopoulos), "Saint Francis Kneeling in Meditation" (1595/1600), oil on canvas, 36 3/16 x 24 1/8 in., Robert A. Waller Memorial Fund, 1935.372, The Art Institute of Chicago. Used with permission. © The Art Institute of Chicago

The Varieties of Goodness

A Response to Terry Eagleton



Grace Ogthara

BY JONATHAN HOMRIGHAUSEN '15
*Religious Studies and Classics Major,
 Santa Clara University*

“If atheist and theologian can agree on one proposition at least, it’s surely there’s no point to God whatsoever. What is he good for? Nothing. If we can speak of him as good, which is questionable, he’s good for nothing. He’s good for no reason, benefit, gain, practical advantage, instrumental end, simply good for entirely, purely entirely for its own sake. Or to adopt a more technical theological term, good just for the hell of it.”

– TERRY EAGLETON¹

TERRY EAGLETON, HOPING TO REMIND ATHEISTS OF THE DEEPER THEOLOGICAL CONTEXT OF THE GOD-DEBATE, AUDACIOUSLY ASSERTS THAT GOD IS GOOD *FOR NOTHING*. THEOLOGICALLY, I AGREE WITH HIM. BUT ON A MORE CONCRETE, HUMAN LEVEL, I WOULD ALSO ARGUE THAT GOD IS GOOD *FOR EVERYTHING*.

Eagleton wants to remind atheists that the theist view of God is not merely a concept to underpin morality or explain scientific unknowns. The goodness of God, Eagleton insists, lies in His autotelic nature: God is His own end-in-Herself. Personally, I too struggle when I see God used as an idol to be sacrificed at the altar of a political or psychological need, or a “Get out of Hell Free” card in soteriological Monopoly. But to look at the

question of “What good is God?” we must take into account the ways individuals and cultures use God, whether we find those uses palatable or not. While God is not merely an instrumental good, God (and what we believe about God) is quite meaningful, and meaningful *for everything*.

In his talk, Eagleton mentioned that Abraham did not ponder the existence of God. For Abraham and others across time and space, the deeper question is not “Does God exist?” but “Does God care?”² The world’s treasury of great religious literature testifies to our grappling with the care of God or gods, whether that care is expressed in covenant, cross, or abundant crop. The question of “What good is God?” must not only include the lofty theological discourse of Augustine and Aquinas but the lived human experience of individuals such as Abraham. The faith of the



Many Santa Clara University students attended Bannan Institute lectures through courses linked with each quarterly series.

Grace Ogihara

followers of Abraham holds that a divine reality (often called God) holds the metaphysical and moral order together. Eagleton compares God to modern art: Both are useless, ends in themselves, creation for the joy of creation rather than a social function. He contrasts this to ancient art. The tales of Odysseus and Beowulf are not just entertaining stories but epics enshrining a heroic ethos for their Greek and Anglo-Saxon cultures. That mythological function is why I always place my feet first toward the ancient and medieval displays at art museums as this art, to me, seems to be good *for something*.

In the same way, my studies in comparative religion and interfaith work have taught me that the meaning we humans crave is *always good for something*. As sociologist Peter Berger phrases it, we seek to live under a “sacred canopy” that provides order to individuals and societies.³ God is just one common tent-pillar of a sacred canopy. These sacred canopies, providing systems of moral and metaphysical meaning, are good *for everything*. As those of us in the comparative religion guild know, this meaning is both a promise and a peril.


Although I grew up in a nonreligious home and only came to my own Christian faith as an adult, I have been fascinated by the

My studies in comparative religion and interfaith work have taught me that the meaning we humans crave is always good for something.

worlds of religious meaning that people create since childhood. At fourteen I attended a local megachurch performance titled “Heaven’s Gates and Hell’s Flames,” featuring people in their last moments before death. They would be led up to the pearly gates, where St. Peter would look for their names in his gilded book. The elect would be let through the gates, and the rest would be dragged down to hell—the back of the church—by Satan and his screaming minions. Predictably, the performance ended with an altar call. Frightening as it was to me, I could see that for most of the audience the evening was consoling. They could leave reassured of the ultimate justice of the universe and the righteousness of their worldview. Depending on your paradigm, this display either strengthened their faith or reinforced their sacred canopy.

This liturgical performance is also a perfect example of one peril of a sacred canopy. In this case, the blessed heaven-dwellers must be balanced out with those not so lucky. I would postulate that deep in every religious tradition are central beliefs, theological fulcrum-points, which contain uncharitable or just plain inaccurate statements about religious others. “Heaven’s Gates and Hell’s Flames” certainly gave me the impression that *every* non-Christian is a moral failure. Even the textual heart of Christianity, the meditative and moving New Testament, contains some of this polemic.⁴ As the Jews in Matthew exclaim, “His blood be on us and on our children!”⁵ Similar studies in the texts and histories of Buddhism and Islam make me suspect that every religion has a stock of stereotypes used to paint religious others. Nineteenth-century Sri Lankan Buddhist apologists used centuries-old anti-Hindu apologetics against the possibility of God to refute British Christian missionaries.⁶ Some Muslims, citing the Qur’an, associate Christians with polytheists for their belief in the Trinity.⁷ These unfair depictions of religious others are one major peril of a sacred canopy.

Despite these perils, our sacred canopies structure our lives, whether for good or bad. Not only is God’s being good for everything key in the history of religions, it is what drives interreligious dialogue. I currently work as the Interfaith Ministries Intern in Santa Clara University’s Campus Ministry Department. I believe my work is premised on the fact that the beliefs we hold about God, gods, or no-gods are *good for everything*. For example, in a recent discussion with a young-earth creationist, I realized that his belief about God was part of a web of other beliefs about science, human reason, and scriptural inerrancy. While he did not convert me to his view, my stymied experience forced me to re-examine my sacred canopy and the portrait I had painted of him. It forced me to re-examine what science and the Bible mean to me. If our ideas about God or Ultimate Reality were only good for nothing, if they had no impact on our lives, we would have no need to talk about them. We would experience neither awakening nor frustration in those difficult dialogues.

Like Eagleton’s Jesus, this kind of interreligious encounter is not solely some fuzzy opiate of friendliness, but a challenge. In our pluralistic culture, it is also a necessity, as some in the atheist-humanist movement are recognizing.⁸ While it is true that God is good for nothing theologically, God (or whatever we believe about Ultimate Reality) is good *for everything* within so many dimensions of our human lives. Only when we understand this can we have a broader conversation about what kind of good God may or may not be. 

JONATHAN HOMRIGHAUSEN has never met a religion he didn’t like. A Christian tinged with Buddhism and paganism, he transferred to Santa Clara University after studying philosophy at Modesto Junior College. A religious studies major, he serves as Interfaith Ministries Intern in Santa Clara University’s Campus Ministry Department. In his other life, he is a classics major fascinated by all ancient languages and mythologies, on which he blogs regularly at jdhome.com. After graduating he hopes to pursue a Ph.D. in religious studies or theology in the hopes of furthering interreligious dialogue.

NOTES

- 1 Terry Eagleton, “Why Is God for Christians Good for Nothing?,” lecture, 2013-2014 Bannan Institute: What Good Is God? series, October 7, 2013, Santa Clara University. A video of the full lecture is available online at: <http://scu.edu/ic/publications/videos.cfm>
- 2 For this particular phrasing I am indebted to David Pinault, professor of religious studies at Santa Clara University.
- 3 Peter Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (New York: Anchor Books, 1969).
- 4 For example, see Amy-Jill Levine, *The Misunderstood Jew: The Church and the Scandal of the Jewish Jesus* (New York: HarperOne, 2006).
- 5 Matthew 27:25, NRSV.
- 6 R.F. Young and G.P.V. Somaratna, *Vain Debates: The Buddhist-Christian Controversies of Nineteenth-Century Ceylon* (Vienna: De Nobili Research Library, 1996).
- 7 See, for example, Qur’an 4.171, 5.73, 5.116; this theme continues in contemporary pro-Muslim apologetics, such as Muzaffar Haleem (ed.), *The Sun is Rising in the West: New Muslims Tell About Their Journey to Islam* (Beltsville, MD: Amana Publications, 1999).
- 8 See Chris Stedman, *Faithist: How an Atheist Found Common Ground with the Religious* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2012).

What Good Is God?

2013-2014 Bannan Institute Photo Essay

In an age in which religion is associated as much with violence as benevolence, where propositions of faith are often framed as oppositional to modern science, and one-fifth of all Americans self-identify as “none of the above” with regard to religion, the 2013-2014 Bannan Institute sought to publicly engage one of the most significant questions of our time through a series of lectures and facilitated dialogues with scientists, philosophers, literary scholars, engineers, theologians, poets, artists, and educators. We began in the fall quarter with a focus on God and culture, exploring the significance of secular and religious goods within civil society and then moved to engage the vexing and expansive intersections among contemporary scientific, technological, and religious paradigms under the theme of God and reality in the winter quarter. In the spring quarter, we concluded by considering the God-question within the life of a university, hosting a series of lectures and events around the role of religion within higher education.

Photos by Grace Ogihara



1. In a panel entitled “Keeping the Faith: Catholic Writers on Heroes of Conscience,” author and editor of Orbis books Robert Ellsberg reflects with author Bo Caldwell on their mutual contributions to *Not Less Than Everything: Catholic Writers on Heroes of Conscience from Joan of Arc to Oscar Romero*, ed. Catherine Wolff. This Fall 2013 Bannan Institute panel event also included the reflections of contributors Ron Hansen and Tobias Wolff.

2. The fall quarter of the Bannan Institute focused on the theme “God and Culture: Secular and Religious Goods in Civil Society.” Professor William Cavanaugh, director of the Center for World Catholicism and Intercultural Theology at DePaul University, offered a thought-provoking lecture on “Violent Religion or the Sacred State? Violence, Idolatry, and Religion in Civil Society.”



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3. More than 2,000 students, faculty, staff, alumni, and community members participated in the Bannan Institute offerings throughout the year, bringing a diverse range of perspectives and questions to deepen and enrich the dialogue.

4. Distinguished professor, cultural theorist, and literary critic Terry Eagleton offered a bold lecture entitled “Why Is God for Christians Good for Nothing?” An excerpt from this lecture is included in the current issue of *explore*, as well as responses from a Santa Clara University faculty member and a student.



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5. Fr. Robert Scholla, S.J., Bannan Faculty Fellow, facilitated an Ignatian Day of Prayer and Reflection around the theme: “Why Do We Suffer?” as part of the Fall 2013 Bannan Institute offerings.

6. In the winter quarter, the Bannan Institute focused on the theme of “God and Reality: Emergent Scientific, Technological, and Religious Paradigms.” Noreen Herzfeld of Saint John’s University and the College of St. Benedict delivered a lecture on “Outsourcing Memory: Google, Memory, and Forgiveness.”



Grace Ogihara

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Adam Hays

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Adam Hays

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Charles Barry 11



Charles Barry



Ashley Cabrera 13



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Charles Barry

7. Each quarter, Santa Clara University faculty are invited to collaboratively plan the Bannan Institute lecture series and associate their related courses with pertinent lectures. Here, a student in Professor Oliver Putz's Religious Studies course Religion and Science: Friends or Foes? asks a question at a Winter 2014 lecture linked with his course.

8. A major highlight within this year's Bannan Institute was the visit of Pulitzer Prize-winning author Marilynne Robinson. Robinson delivered the 2014 Santa Clara Lecture, "Grace in Shakespeare," an excerpt of which is included in this issue of *explore*.

9. During Robinson's time at Santa Clara University, she was able to join faculty, staff, students, and administrators in lively conversations over lunch and dinner, as well as share in a class visit with undergraduate students studying her celebrated novel, *Gilead*.

10. In Winter 2014, the Bannan Institute featured a two-day symposium on the topic "Science and Seeking—Rethinking the God-Question in the Lab, Cosmos, and Classroom," attracting nearly 200 attendees. The symposium was designed in partnership with Professor David Pleins of the Department of Religious Studies through the support of a 2013-2014 Bannan Grant award.

11. The Bannan Institute focused in the spring quarter on the domain of higher education, exploring the question "What good is God within the life of a university?" Jake Jacobsen (pictured here) and Rhonda Jacobsen of Messiah College offered a lecture entitled: "Containment or Engagement? The Shifting Role of Religion in Higher Education," with Julie Reuben of Harvard University's Graduate School of Education.

12. In collaboration with Santa Clara University's Jesuit Community, the Bannan Institute hosted four presidents of Catholic universities, including SCU President Michael Engh, S.J., to reflect together on the status of Catholic higher education today.

13. Faculty from the Philosophy, Theatre and Dance, Psychology, and English departments contributed to a Spring 2014 panel entitled: "What Good Is God Outside of Religious Studies? Interdisciplinary Reflections on the God-Question." Pictured here: Augustin Cardinal Bea, S.J. University Professor Thomas Plante and Senior Lecturer Kristin Kusanovich.

14. Inspired by Fr. Louis I. Bannan, S.J. (1914-1998), each yearlong Bannan Institute seeks to address matters of significance within the Jesuit, Catholic intellectual tradition, foster an ethic of dialogue among persons of diverse religious and philosophical commitments, and facilitate opportunities for interdisciplinary exchange across the University and broader community.

Why Science Needs God¹

Excerpt from Winter 2014 Bannan Institute Lecture

Courtesy of Br. Guy Consolmagno, S.J.



BY BR. GUY CONSOLMAGNO, S.J.
*Planetary Scientist and Curator of Meteorites,
Vatican Observatory*

ONCE I GAVE A TALK AT THE COLLEGE OF CHARLESTON, A BEAUTIFUL CAMPUS IN CHARLESTON, SOUTH CAROLINA, AND AFTER THE TALK AN UNDERGRADUATE CAME UP FULL OF ENTHUSIASM. “I WANT TO BE A GEOLOGIST!” HE TOLD ME. I THOUGHT THAT WAS GREAT; MY UNDERGRADUATE DEGREE IS IN GEOLOGY.

“SOUNDS GREAT,” I TOLD HIM.

“YEAH, BUT ...” HE SAID, “WHAT DO I TELL MY MOM?”

In the culture where he grew up, studying geology, with our ideas of billion-year-old rock formations, directly contradicted the way he had been taught about the Bible. To be a geologist for him would be like declaring war against his religion, his home, his family. His mom would be ashamed of him.

Scientists are people. We have families; we have desires; like every human being, we are a mixture of reason and heart, with hearts that have “reasons that reason does not know.” And like that student, we have to answer those desires inside us, and those desires inside the other people who are close to us.

There’s a temptation to divide our experience into separate categories—emotions versus logic, faith versus science. But it’s a false division. Real people are not just Kirk, or just Spock. Heck, even Kirk and Spock were not really all Kirk or all Spock. And we have to live with others who themselves are more than Kirk or Spock.

We make all the decisions of our life on the basis of both reason and gut feeling. In the case of the student in South Carolina, it meant choosing between science and religion. But to me, as someone who has lived with both science and religion all my life, that kind of choice was utterly puzzling. What was he thinking? Why would anyone even imagine you had to make such a choice?

Oddly enough, it was Captain Kirk who helped me understand the dilemma.

How I wound up talking to William Shatner—well, it’s a long story, too long to go into here. But when I described myself as a Jesuit scientist, he was flabbergasted. “Wait a minute, wait a minute!” he said. And as we talked, it suddenly became clear to me, something so obvious to him but that I had never grasped before. He saw religion and science as two



PIA16884 Under the 'Wing' of the Small Magellanic Cloud, NASA, Chandra X-Ray Telescope. Courtesy of NASA/JPL-Caltech.



Br. Guy Consolmagno, S.J. is a research astronomer and planetary scientist and currently serves as Curator of Meteorites at the Vatican Observatory. The International Astronomical Union named asteroid 4597 Consolmagno in his honor.

Courtesy of Br. Guy Consolmagno, S.J.

competing sets of truths. Two big books of facts. And what should happen if the facts in one book contradict the facts in the other?

But science is not a big book of facts. The orbits of the planets are facts; they can be described by Ptolemy's epicycles; or they can be described by Kepler's ellipses. Both descriptions can be tweaked to give equally accurate descriptions of those orbits—the facts. But only one of them, Kepler's, leads to the insight of Newton's law of gravity. It's not the facts of the orbits; it is what you do with those facts. And it is also being open to the realization that Newton's laws, too, are not the last word. Not even Einstein's general relativity, the modern replacement for Newton, is the last word. I suspect the science of 3014 will look very different from what we're teaching today.

Likewise, our faith is not based on rigid certainties. I had repeated to William Shatner the phrase that Anne Lamott famously used to describe faith: "the opposite of faith is not doubt; the opposite of faith is certainty."² That was completely the opposite of what he thought faith was about. He'd heard the phrase "blind faith" and thought that meant accepting something as certain without looking, or worse, closing your eyes to the facts and proceeding on emotion. But that's not faith at all. Certainty is the opposite of faith.

Why does any particular person choose to become a scientist? What does being a scientist

give you, that no other career can? What constitutes success? Tenure? Grant money? Prizes, honors, and awards? I suspect that what really gets us up in the morning is something more immediate: Joy. I remember once, a few years ago, I had a sabbatical year teaching physics at Fordham. I had a class of really bright students taking the introduction to electricity and magnetism. We'd learned Maxwell's equations. And I was writing them on the board in front of the class, doing the mathematical manipulations that Maxwell had done back in 1865 on how the equation for electricity gave rise to magnetism and how magnetic fields could give rise to electric fields. You took a derivative here, and put in a substitution there ... and as I wrote down the final equation—the result of all this manipulation, a complicated scrawl of E 's and t 's and Δ 's and μ_0 's—before I had a chance to turn around and explain what it all meant, my brightest student in the front row whispered, under his breath but loud enough for everyone to hear him: "Oh my God. It's a wave."


Every bit of science we can extract from the glorious pictures from NASA starts with Maxwell's equations, and the fact that—oh my God, it's a wave. The fact that it's a wave gives us radio; electric power transmission of alternating current; and eventually, special and general relativity. Now, it takes a couple of semesters of physics to get

Why does any particular person choose to become a scientist? What does being a scientist give you, that no other career can? What constitutes success? Tenure? Grant money? Prizes, honors, and awards? I suspect that what really gets us up in the morning is something more immediate: Joy.

there; but when you get there, take my word for it—take my student’s word for it—it’s an Oh My God moment.

In my forty years of research, I’ve had a handful of those moments. Nothing as big as Maxwell’s, of course. A couple, big enough to publish in *Nature*. But it’s not the final paper that I remember; it’s the gasp of amazement when suddenly I saw a pattern in nature that I had not anticipated.

What I am saying is that the meta-reasons underlying science are exactly the pointers that point toward God. The very thing that makes

science worth doing, and desirable to do, is the places where we see God. Science needs the “Oh My God” moment. Science needs Oh-My-God. Science wouldn’t happen without it. 

BROTHER GUY CONSOLMAGNO, S.J., is a planetary scientist and curator of meteorites at the Vatican Observatory. A native of Detroit, he studied at MIT (S.B. 1974, S.M. 1975) and Arizona (Ph.D. 1978), worked at Harvard and MIT, served in the Peace Corps, and taught university physics before entering the Jesuits in 1989. At the Vatican Observatory since 1993, he studies the physics of meteorites and asteroids and has written several popular books on astronomy and his life as a Jesuit scientist, including: *God’s Mechanics: How Scientists and Engineers Make Sense of Religion* (2007) and *The Heavens Proclaim: Astronomy and the Vatican* (2009). He served as chair of the American Astronomical Society’s Division for Planetary Sciences and a past officer of the International Astronomical Union, which named asteroid 4597 Consolmagno in his honor.

NOTES

- 1 Br. Guy Consolmagno, S.J., “Why Science Needs God,” lecture, 2013–2014 Bannan Institute: What Good Is God? series, February 11, 2014, Santa Clara University. This essay is an excerpt from the lecture; a video of the full lecture is available online at: <http://scu.edu/ic/publications/videos.cfm>
- 2 Anne Lamott, *Plan B: Further Thoughts on Faith* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2005).



Br. Guy Consolmagno, S.J. engages a full audience with his Winter 2014 Bannan Institute Lecture, “Why Science Needs God.”

Science and Religion: In Search of a Common Ground

A Response to Br. Guy Consolmagno, S.J.

Courtesy of Aleksandar Zecevic



BY ALEKSANDAR I. ZECEVIC

*Professor of Electrical Engineering, Associate Dean for Graduate Studies,
School of Engineering, Santa Clara University*

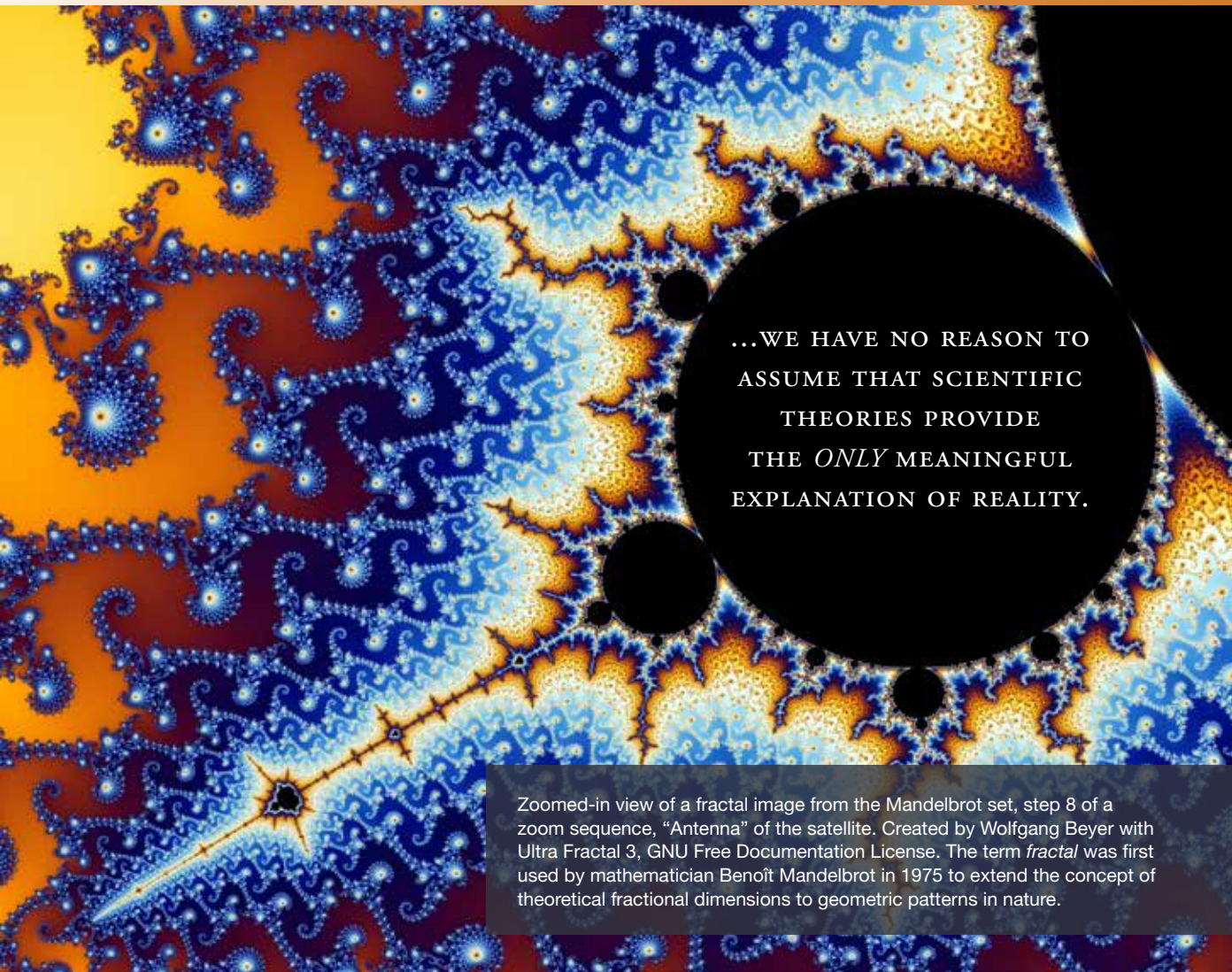
WHEN I TEACH MY CLASS ON SCIENCE AND RELIGION, STUDENTS OFTEN ASK ME WHETHER MY RELIGIOUS BELIEFS HAVE ANYTHING TO DO WITH THE WAY I CONDUCT MY RESEARCH. MY STANDARD REPLY IS THAT THEY DO NOT, SINCE THE LAWS OF NATURE AND THE RULES OF MATHEMATICS ARE NOT A MATTER OF PERSONAL OPINION. I HASTEN TO ADD, HOWEVER, THAT BELIEFS BEGIN TO MATTER A GREAT DEAL WHEN IT COMES TO *METAPHYSICAL INTERPRETATIONS* OF SCIENTIFIC RESULTS. SUCH INTERPRETATIONS SHOULD NOT BE DISMISSED OUT OF HAND, SINCE WE HAVE NO REASON TO ASSUME THAT SCIENTIFIC THEORIES PROVIDE THE *ONLY* MEANINGFUL EXPLANATION OF REALITY.

Comments of this sort usually raise a few eyebrows, since most of my students are not in the habit of questioning the supremacy of science. I therefore proceed cautiously, and ask them to consider what we can deduce from the chemical composition of a great painting. After some

discussion, we generally agree that even if we were to find out everything that can be known about its molecular structure, this would tell us nothing at all about its meaning, or why we find it beautiful. If that is what we are interested in, we would have to look to disciplines such as philosophy, art history, psychology and theology, each of which offers its own unique explanation.

At this point in the conversation, most (although not necessarily all) of my students conclude that scientific explanations cannot be automatically extended to the entire human experience, and that we must allow room for other forms of inquiry as well. The question then becomes one of boundaries—if the domain of science is indeed limited, how far does it extend? And is there any overlap at all with the domain of religion? While there are no easy answers to these questions, it might be helpful to frame them in terms of the following two claims, both of which resonate strongly with my own experience:

1. The way scientists and engineers go about their research is generally independent of their belief system, but the reason *why* they do it in the first place *is not*.



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Zoomed-in view of a fractal image from the Mandelbrot set, step 8 of a zoom sequence, “Antenna” of the satellite. Created by Wolfgang Beyer with Ultra Fractal 3, GNU Free Documentation License. The term *fractal* was first used by mathematician Benoît Mandelbrot in 1975 to extend the concept of theoretical fractional dimensions to geometric patterns in nature.

2. If scientific theories and mathematical rules are indeed something that we can all agree on, then perhaps this could be a natural starting point for a constructive dialogue between science and religion.

Let me say a few words about each claim, and try to justify its validity. Regarding the first one, I think that most mathematicians and scientists would agree that the pursuit of truth provides a powerful impetus for engaging in research and is often the driving force behind their work. For engineers, on the other hand, the situation is somewhat more complicated, since their research can never be completely separated from practical applications and users’ needs. As a result, their work is motivated not just by the desire to discover the truth, but also by a predisposition to design,

create, and improve the lives of others. I am not suggesting, of course, that such considerations are unique to engineers—just that they are essential to *what engineers do*. Since they build things that other people need and use on a daily basis, the aesthetic appeal of what they produce matters, as does its impact on other human beings (as well as the environment). I think many of my colleagues would agree that this mix of theory and practice is a big part of what makes the engineering profession so attractive—it provides us with an endless series of opportunities to combine “the true, the good, and the beautiful,” in ways that are imaginative and diverse.

What I have said so far may perhaps describe what makes scientists and engineers “tick,” but it does not explain *why* we think that truth,

Although new facts about the universe are being discovered at an ever-increasing pace, its fundamental structure remains elusive, and we now know that there are certain things that we can never know (even in principle). The fact that science acknowledges the existence of unknowable truths about the physical world is quite remarkable, when you consider the implications.

goodness, and beauty are desirable in the first place. I can't say that I have a clear answer to this question, but it seems to me that science is probably not the right place to start looking for it. Our ideas about what is and is not desirable are usually adopted from the tradition in which we are brought up and are in place well before we choose our profession. It therefore makes sense to begin by examining the roots of these traditional values, and that path will inevitably lead us to religion (since religious thought emerged long before philosophical thought). If we choose to follow this line of inquiry to its logical conclusion, we will find that although religion has little to do with the technical aspects of scientific research, it does provide the moral and aesthetic "preconditioning" that makes this work possible. The sense of "joy" that scientists and engineers experience in their work cannot be disassociated from their beliefs about what really matters, and the true source of these beliefs (at least, in my humble opinion) lies in the spiritual domain.

My second claim has to do with the fact that modern science portrays physical reality in a way that bears little resemblance to our everyday experiences. It is a thoroughly fascinating, counterintuitive, and often strikingly beautiful world, in which quantum particles continually pop in and out of existence, spacetime curves in the presence of matter, and uncertainty and novelty are the norm rather than the exception. Although new facts about the universe are being discovered at an ever-increasing pace, its fundamental structure remains elusive, and *we now know that there are*

certain things that we can never know (even in principle).


The fact that science acknowledges the existence of unknowable truths about the physical world is quite remarkable, when you consider the implications. The mere possibility that the universe could be organized in such a manner inspires a sense of genuine wonder and awe, leading one to believe that scientists and theologians are really not all that far apart when it comes to fundamental questions about reality. Unfortunately, most nonexperts, unaware of recent developments in mathematics, physics, and system theory, continue to think of nature in terms of the traditional Newtonian paradigm, which maintains that physical processes are generally "well behaved" and predictable. As a result, they tend to believe that science can (and eventually will) answer all the fundamental questions that have perplexed humanity since the dawn of history.

Those who do have a solid understanding of modern science know better and tend to be much more open to the possibility that a deep mystery lies at the heart of the cosmic order. But even if this outlook prevails at some point in the future, it still doesn't follow that we will achieve a consensus regarding the true nature of this mystery. It is likely that some of us will continue to embrace it as "good" and give it a "personal" dimension, while others will adopt a neutral and essentially indifferent attitude toward it. Both options are logically acceptable, and the differences between them should not be underestimated. Having said that, however, I should add that the existence of



Professor Aleksandar Zecevic delivered a captivating lecture within the Winter 2014 Bannan Institute entitled: “Unknowable Reality: Science, Mathematics, and Mystery.”

such differences does *not* imply that the scientific and religious worldviews are mutually exclusive. I fundamentally disagree with those who claim that science is the enemy of religion; I would argue instead that it is the *enemy of superstition*, which is a very different phenomenon. On this issue, I agree with Pope John Paul II, who wrote that: “Science can purify religion from error and superstition; religion can purify science from idolatry and false absurdities. Each can draw the other into a wider world, a world in which both can flourish.”¹

To me, this seems like an excellent starting point for a constructive conversation.² 

ALEKSANDAR I. ZECEVIC is a Professor of Electrical Engineering at Santa Clara University and the Associate Dean for Graduate Studies. His scholarly interests range from technical topics such as complex dynamic systems and chaos theory to aesthetics, ethics, and theology. His two recent books and his course on science and religion explore possible connections between these disciplines.

NOTES

- 1 Pope John Paul II, “Letter to the Rev. George V. Coyne, S.J., Director of the Vatican Observatory,” (June 1, 1988) in Robert J. Russell, William R. Stoeger, Pope John Paul II, George V. Coyne, *John Paul II on Science and Religion: Reflections on the New View from Rome* (Vatican Observatory Publications, 1990).
- 2 For more on Professor Zecevic’s own contribution to this constructive conversation, see: “Unknowable Reality: Science, Mathematics, and Mystery,” lecture, 2013–2014 Bannan Institute: What Good Is God? series, January 28, 2014, Santa Clara University, at <http://scu.edu/ic/publications/videos>. cfm. Also, *Truth, Beauty, and the Limits of Knowledge: A Path from Science to Religion* (San Diego: University Readers, 2012) and *The Unknowable and the Counterintuitive: The Surprising Insights of Modern Science* (San Diego: University Readers, 2012).

GOD & REALITY

Science, God, Life

A Response to Br. Guy Consolmagno, S.J.



Courtesy of Brian Green

BY BRIAN P. GREEN

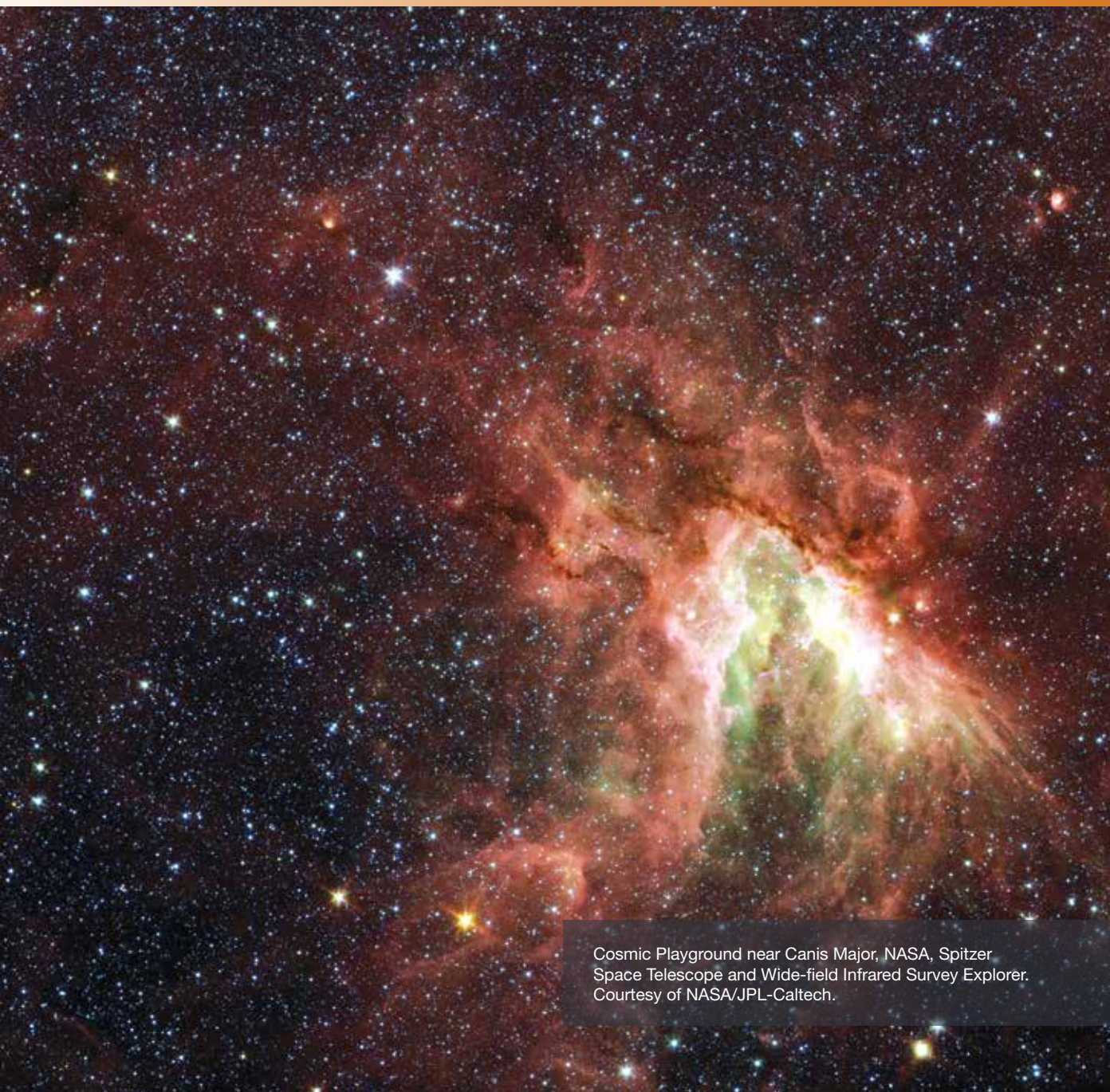
*Assistant Director of Campus Ethics Programs, Markkula Center for Applied Ethics,
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IN COLLEGE, MY MOTHER, WHO WAS NO DOUBT WORRIED ABOUT ME HANGING OUT WITH THE WRONG CROWD, GAVE ME A BOOK CALLED *BROTHER ASTRONOMER: ADVENTURES OF A VATICAN SCIENTIST*.¹ AT THE TIME I WASN'T MUCH INTERESTED IN CATHOLIC STUFF, BUT I WAS INTERESTED IN SCIENCE, AND THE GUY WRITING THE BOOK (WHOSE NAME ACTUALLY WAS "GUY"), WAS A JESUIT AND A SCIENTIST WHO WROTE IN A WAY THAT DREW ME IN ON THE VERY FIRST PAGE. ONCE I OPENED IT (MY FATAL MISTAKE!) I COULD NOT STOP READING. I READ THE WHOLE BOOK, DESPITE MY SUPPOSED LACK OF INTEREST. AND WHEN I DID FINALLY SET IT DOWN, I HAD MORE RESPECT FOR THE CATHOLIC CHURCH. AT THE TIME, THAT WAS NO SMALL FEAT.

Being young and thinking I knew everything, I was firmly in the science-answers-all camp. This was really another way of saying I was in the "I answer all" camp, since I knew science. There was one small gap in my science-answers-all armor, however. Biochemistry had taught me something about the immense complexity of even the

tinest living cell. I remember sitting in class one day in college, looking at the board covered in biochemical pathways, thinking "Oh, my God, we should all be dead!" It was all too much, molecules and enzymes flying everywhere, too impossible to think about, much less to actually have happen to maintain life. "Who came up with this stuff!? If this is what we are made of we should not be alive ... and yet we are alive." At the time I thought that my "Oh, my God" was no appeal to God, but perhaps God thought otherwise. That was a crack that made many other questions possible.

Years passed and life, especially a volunteering experience overseas, slowly drew me back toward the Catholic Church. I saw another of Brother Guy's books and read it too—another easy-to-read, fun book about being both Catholic and a scientist. For Brother Guy, there just was no conflict between the two, and the secular preoccupation with opposing religion and science simply made no sense. After I had read these books, it was the people holding the "conflict thesis" of science and religion who began to look strange to me. Those who held that science and religion were harmonious seemed to have the stronger case.



Cosmic Playground near Canis Major, NASA, Spitzer Space Telescope and Wide-field Infrared Survey Explorer. Courtesy of NASA/JPL-Caltech.

Years passed again. I transitioned from studying genetics to studying Catholic moral theology. Science and religion became the inescapable subtext of all of my work. How could Catholic ethics and science talk to each other, if at all, I wondered? Eventually I found an answer that I liked and got a Ph.D. for it. And then I started working at Santa Clara University, at the Markkula Center for Applied Ethics and School of Engineering, teaching practical ethics.

Enter Brother Guy Consolmagno, S.J., once more. When I learned Brother Guy was coming to speak on campus, I literally jumped out of my seat. Coming here! This “Guy” was important to the course of my life! What could I do?

I attended, of course. With two books to autograph.

Seeing Brother Guy in person was a joy. And I appreciated his talk even more than his books. He’s a great speaker, tells lots of jokes, and makes the

The wondrousness of nature should not only inspire our words but also our actions ... If science and theology, separately or together, tell us anything, it is that in this world there is nothing ordinary. If what we see is ordinary, it's only because we haven't really looked well enough.

material very accessible. He not only affirmed that science and religion need not substantively conflict (something I was well aware of, having studied so much myself), but that science actually *needed* God.

His lecture described the fit of a scientific worldview with a Christian perspective on the universe by reflecting on three axioms—three fundamental assumptions that make science possible.

First, you have to believe the universe is real. Seems pretty straightforward, right? Nope. The entire universe could be an illusion after all. This could all be a dream, or perhaps we are deceived by tricky superior beings, or we could be in a computer simulation. These might seem unlikely, but to assume against them is a choice, and not a logically necessary one. That reality is an illusion is a possibility, but not likely one that those who believe in a good, creative God would hold.

Second, you have to believe that the universe follows laws. It is not all chaos, or mere whim of nature spirits or other deities. The first step here is to separate natural explanations from theological explanations. Consolmagno recalled the story of Typhon versus Zeus. Typhon was a volcano god who periodically attempted to burst forth and storm the heavens, and Zeus would fight him back with lightning bolts, driving him underground. With an explanation like that, who needs science? It is not the laws of nature at work, with geologic heat and electromagnetism, but rather the inscrutable wills of dueling deities. However, Consolmagno posited that God is not gerrymandering nature; rather, God leaves nature under the guidance of laws, which humans can seek to discern via observation and experiment.

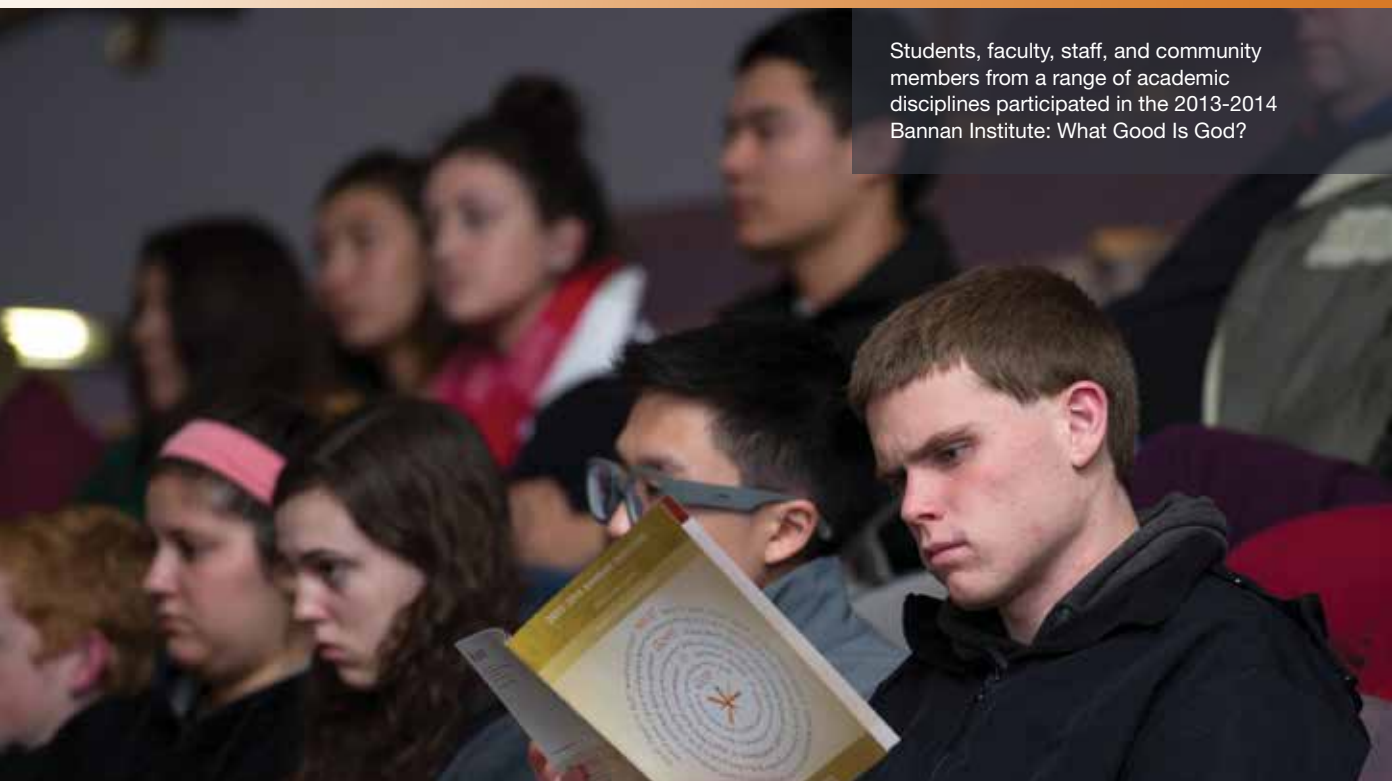
Third, once you determine that the universe is real and follows laws, you still might ignore them. Big deal, right? We are all forced to follow the laws of nature: Why bother knowing more than what we learn by falling out of a tree? After all, it's not like we can do anything about them!

But, of course, we *can* do something about natural laws—not changing them but working within them to produce amazing technological marvels. Yet technology itself did not inspire our forebears' scientific inquiries; rather, what they saw in the laws of nature was the handiwork of God. Wow, God made this, let's learn about it! Such were what Brother Guy called "Oh My God" moments.

During Brother Guy's two years teaching astronomy and physics in Kenya as a Peace Corps teacher, he discovered crowds eager to look through his telescopes and exclaim with awe and joy at the wonders of the sky. Looking at the stars makes us exclaim "Oh, my God!" Like Brother Guy, I also worked for two years in international service—my post was in the Marshall Islands with Jesuit Volunteers International. One night, far from any city lights, with cockroaches whizzing through the night air, I looked up at the moon with my host family. The father asked me, "Did people really go there?" I said they did. Silence. Then another question: "Why don't they go back?" I replied that I didn't know. More silence. Then, with some understatement: "I think they should go back."

"Oh, my God," was implicit in his words. He knew a good thing when he heard it. If *that* can be done, why ever stop? The joy of learning and discovery should propel us forward not just once, but forever.


Students, faculty, staff, and community members from a range of academic disciplines participated in the 2013-2014 Bannan Institute: What Good Is God?



Grace Ogihara

Brother Guy characterized the “Oh My God” response of science as “a human birthright” and the ultimate reason that science needs God. The discovery, amazement, and joy of understanding and experiencing something new take us one step beyond science’s three simple axioms; “Oh My God” makes science meaningful. As persons made in the image of God, we look up and see the creation from which we have come, which points to the God whom we reflect. Oh, my God!

There was another connection too. Such exclamations of amazement, of disbelieving wonderment, connect me to my earlier biochemistry bewilderment. We should rightly be dead, and yet we are not. Fifteen years on, my perspective has been completely inverted. Nothing changed about reality, of course, but now when I consider the complexities of existence I think: “Oh, my God, we should all be alive!” Fully alive, not just as a collection of metabolizing chemicals, but living as the best humans we can be: doing justice, loving beauty, teaching in ways that inspire wonder and awe, supporting each other’s transformation. We should live beyond physical life, to a higher life. The wondrousness of nature should not only inspire our words but also our actions. For some this may mean doing science, for

others it may mean teaching, for still others it may mean doing very ordinary tasks with great care. But if science and theology, separately or together, tell us anything, it is that in this world there is nothing ordinary. If what we see is ordinary, it’s only because we haven’t really looked well enough. 

BRIAN P. GREEN is Assistant Director of Campus Ethics Programs at the Markkula Center for Applied Ethics and Adjunct Lecturer in the School of Engineering at Santa Clara University. His undergraduate degree is in genetics from the University of California, Davis, and his M.A. and doctoral degrees are in ethics and social theory from the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley. His dissertation was on the relationship between natural science and Catholic natural law ethics.

NOTES

- 1 Br. Guy Consolmagno, S.J., *Brother Astronomer: Adventures of a Vatican Scientist* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2000).

The Fragility of Faith: How Can a Thinking Person Still Believe in God?¹

Excerpt from Spring 2014 Fr. Louis I. Bannan, S.J. Memorial Lecture



Charles Barry

BY MICHAEL C. MCCARTHY, S.J.
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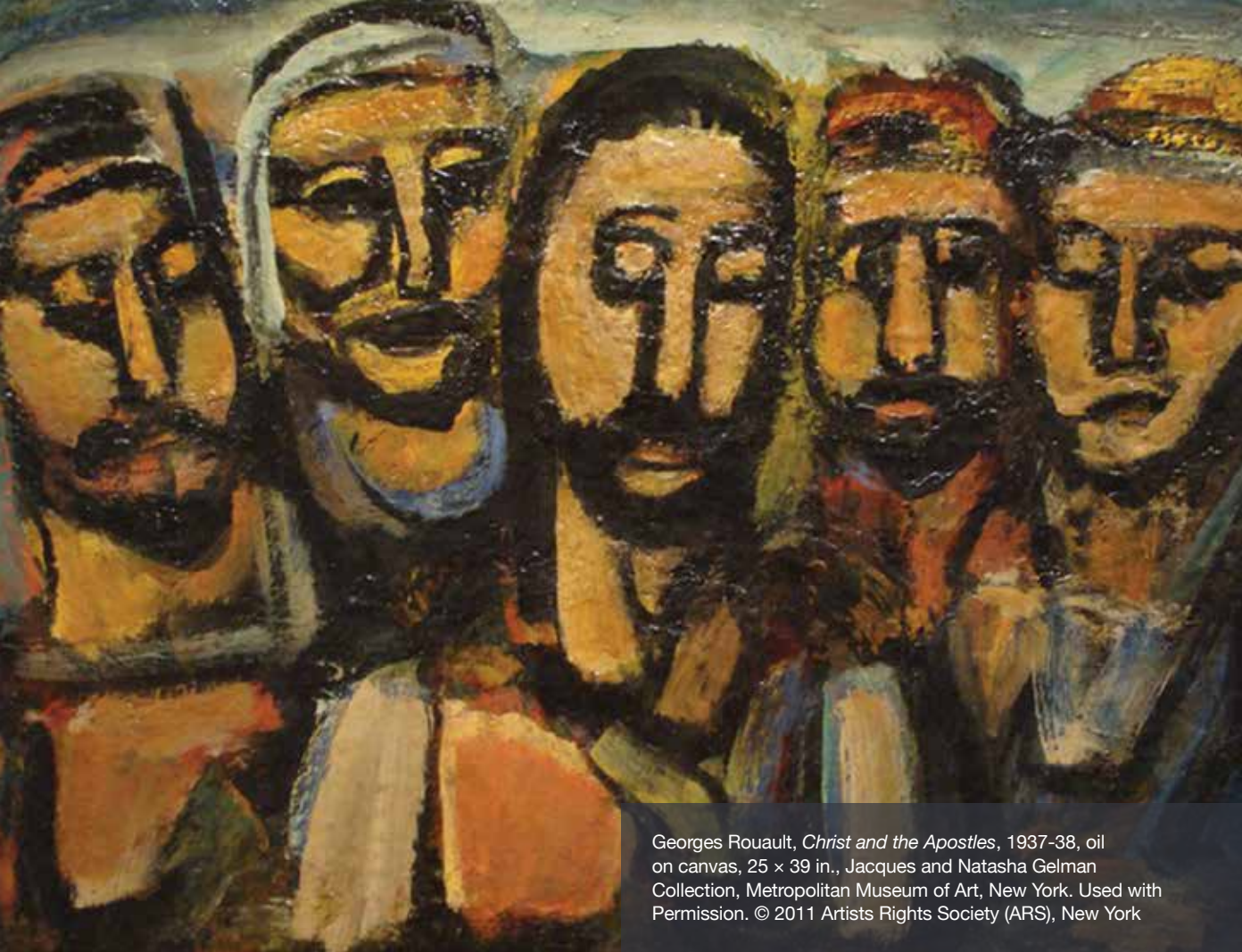
TO BEGIN, LET ME MAKE A CONFESSION. THE QUESTION THAT FORMS THE TITLE OF THIS LECTURE IS A REAL ONE FOR ME. I HAVE BEEN ASKING IT SINCE I WAS EIGHT YEARS OLD: HOW CAN A THINKING PERSON STILL BELIEVE IN GOD? IT'S AN IMPORTANT ACADEMIC QUESTION THAT GROUNDS A GOOD DEAL OF MY OWN RESEARCH. BUT FOR ME, IT'S ALSO A DEEPLY PERSONAL QUESTION THAT OFTEN ENTAILS CERTAIN PAIN. WITH MY LIFE, WITH MY COMMITMENTS, WITH MY VOWS AS A JESUIT, I HOPE ALWAYS TO OFFER A CONFIDENT, POSITIVE RESPONSE TO THE QUESTION. AS YOU CAN IMAGINE, I HAVE A LOT INVESTED IN IT.

At the same time, it is not a question on which I can promise or claim easy certainty. In the year 2014, it is an especially hard question. But I think in *any* age it's a hard question. At least for me and for many people I trust, faith is a deeply fragile reality. It deals with mystery so deep that it is difficult to talk about it in bright lines. In that respect (its fragility) faith is very much like life. We move forward (sometimes in hope, sometimes

in fear or hurt or anger) increasingly aware of our vulnerabilities, our doubts, our personal failures and of course our mortality. There are joys too—very real joys—but in some mysterious sense, those joys are often linked to what makes us fragile ...

This lecture is on “how *can* a thinking person still believe in God” rather than “why a thinking person *should* believe in God.” It's not my intention here to try to convince the skeptic or refute the unbeliever. To my mind, that would be a futile and presumptuous, if not outright toxic, exercise. Faith must always be a free response to an invitation that is deeply felt and received. Attempts to convince a person to believe in God or to argue a person into belief frequently disrespect that person's freedom so gravely that it becomes *more* difficult for them to entertain the possibility of faith.

Rather, I propose to identify some necessary conditions for a thinking person to believe in God. We speak a good deal these days of the importance of sustainability, the capacity to endure. A healthy ecosystem has certain requirements for its long-term well-being. If these conditions are not satisfied, the ecosystem will die from a thousand



Georges Rouault, *Christ and the Apostles*, 1937-38, oil on canvas, 25 × 39 in., Jacques and Natasha Gelman Collection, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Used with Permission. © 2011 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

different causes. So it is with faith. Like the environment (and again, like life itself), faith is quite fragile and requires certain sustenance if it is going to thrive.

Today, let me simply offer three practical suggestions for its sustainability. First, imagine bigger. Second, befriend intelligent believers. Third, take a risk.

IMAGINE BIGGER

In 2010 the syndicated talk show host Michael Krasny published a book entitled *Spiritual Envy*. “When I write of spiritual envy,” he says, “I mean envy of the consolation of faith.”² Krasny grew up a pious Jew but came to question the dogmatic claims of his faith. Still, he cannot completely discount them. He self-identifies as an agnostic, but as I read him, I feel I have more in common with him than not. That doesn’t exactly make me an agnostic, but it suggests there may be ways of being a believer (even of the Catholic variety) that have softer margins than we usually imagine.

When we listen sensitively to thinkers such as these, we realize how much common ground there is between people who believe in God and people who don’t. Even the pope has been remarkably validating of the goodness of atheists and in his Christmas address invited them to join believers in their desire for peace, “a desire that widens the heart.”³ But if there can be deep common ground between the atheist and the believer, we need to ask why “God” is such a fault line. Why is language about God so problematic, even so polarizing? Let me suggest one major problem is that we use the word in so many different ways. A major mistake that underlies so much public debate is the false presumption that people are using the word “God” the same way ...

When it comes to speaking of God, no words have ever been trustworthy. Traditional theology, for instance, has long maintained that whatever we say about God must also be unsaid. God is *like* a father or mother, but also quite certainly *not* like a father or mother. At the beginning of

his *Confessions*, St. Augustine asks: “What are you, my God?” The question leads to a long and highly rhetorical speech that exploits many contradictions: “[You are, Augustine says] most hidden yet intimately present, infinitely beautiful and infinitely strong, steadfast yet elusive . . .”⁴ The passage is a *tour de force* that shows Augustine’s own mastery of language. But then he gets to the end and asks rather simply: “After saying all that, what have we actually said? What does anyone who speaks of you really say, God?”⁵

At times in my own journey I have worried that religious expression is in some ultimate sense empty. Those can be dark and uncomfortable moments for anyone, let alone for a priest with the duties of preaching. In those dark and uncomfortable moments the line between belief and unbelief can seem thin. But they are also moments of a tremendous freedom, when the question comes in the starkest terms: “OK, then, where are *you*? What is it *you* stand for?”

When I say “I believe in God,” I am making a much bigger claim than simply positing God’s existence (whatever that may mean). Rather, I am saying something like this: “I put my trust in a reality that cannot be grasped or contained or controlled. I put my trust in a reality distinct from any entity or whole set of entities we know as ‘the world’ but that somehow interacts with the world the way being itself interacts with the world, that somehow is exceedingly close to the world in ways that I choose to describe as ultimately good or benevolent or loving. And in ways that are very real and important, my relationship to this reality orients me toward the world with hope.” But we need always to imagine bigger.

BEFRIEND INTELLIGENT BELIEVERS

I have often wondered what direction my life would have taken had I not gone to a Jesuit high school. I was a kid with a lot of questions. Where would I be on matters of faith without people of intelligent faith around me: people who thought deeply about things and were not afraid to ask difficult questions? I came to learn not only that my questions would be honored but that they could be shared. I came to learn that being a believer does not stifle critical thought,

nor that faith and reason, science and religion are ever enemies. I also came to be exposed to an intellectual tradition that does not close questions but offers a framework to think about them. And although we often do not arrive at perfect answers, we know we can pose significant questions with confidence. Questions like, “Why are we here?”

In his biography, Steve Jobs recounts the story of his classmate in school taunting him when she found out he was adopted. His real parents, she said, didn’t want him. Jobs said that was like lightning bolts going off in his head. So he ran to his parents, who sat him down and said, “No, you don’t understand. We specifically picked you out.”⁶ And the belief that he was wanted, that he was loved, made all the difference.

It strikes me that much of the purpose (or meaning) of the Bible is to reassure us the way his adopted parents reassured the young Jobs. Only in more recent history have many people read the book of Genesis as a quasi-scientific account of the way the world came to be. Intelligent believers throughout history have rather taken it as an attempt to answer a different kind of question: “Why are we here?” And intelligent believers have understood the drama of Genesis to respond: “Because you are wanted, intended. Your life is a freely given gift rather than an accident or the result of some necessity. You didn’t have to be here, but you are. Enjoy it. And solely by virtue of the fact that you are here, you are good, irreplaceable, and have certain inalienable rights.” Certainly this answer to the question “Why are we here?” can be a difficult thing to believe. It can seem too good to be true. Intelligent believers may struggle with it—I do. There are worthy alternative stories that may emphasize the randomness of why we are here. So choose which story to put your faith in. Decide which story gives you life.

For those coming from the Christian tradition, another question—“Who is Jesus?”—has enormous consequences. I am not sure most people recognize the significance of Jesus on the topic of how a thinking person can believe in God. Many friends have shared with me that they love Jesus’s teachings, his ability to cross religious and cultural boundaries, and so on. But to say that Jesus is the Son of God or that he *is* God is harder



If we entertain the possibility that God may have been incarnate in some definitive way in this person, Jesus, then our concept of God can no longer offer us some kind of easy release. It brings us closer to the heart of reality.

Adolfo Pérez Esquivel, "Jesus is Condemned," *Latin American Via Crucis*, painting, 1992. Jesus is led from prison, watched by the mothers of the Plaza de Mayo in Buenos Aires—the mothers of the disappeared.

to believe. And when my friends ask why do we have to believe that Jesus is the incarnation of God, I confess a lot of sympathy, because I wonder the same myself. Isn't it much easier to believe that he is great spiritual teacher, an extraordinary moral exemplar whom we are called to imitate? Isn't that enough? And maybe it is. But let me suggest what would be lost if we left it at that.

If you approach the classic Christian belief in the divinity of Jesus with the presupposition that the meaning of "God" (whether or not we believe in God) is relatively clear and known, then I may agree, the claim may just be silly. But if you approach it from a position of uncertainty or openness about what "God" actually means, then claims about the divinity of Christ can be a radically disruptive, even dangerous proposition. Because what do we know about Jesus? He doesn't just teach and tell those wonderful stories; ultimately he dies in a horrific fashion as a victim of complicated political-religious dynamics of the first century. And while Christians assert that he rose from the dead, if you take seriously that Jesus

really did die and was even a rather terrible failure (for everything we may like about him), and if you claim (as Christians have long done) that "Jesus is Son of God," then doesn't "God" mean something quite different from what we normally think it to mean? And all those things we usually attribute to God—omnipotence, omniscience, and more—what do they really mean if we take seriously that somehow God is identified in the flesh with someone who suffered a horrific death? Or, as St. Augustine said in the passage I mentioned earlier, "What does anyone who speaks of you really say, God?"

After all, both believers and nonbelievers have a tendency to think about God as an entity that floats "over the chaos of pain and particles in which we're mired."⁷ We can think of Jesus as "some shiny, sinless superhero."⁸ But if we entertain the possibility that God may have been incarnate in some definitive way in this person, Jesus, then our concept of God can no longer offer us some kind of easy release. It brings us closer to the heart of reality.

And that could mean something like this. God is to be found not only in what is easily recognizable as beautiful: the sunrise on Half Dome, the powerful experience of romantic love or love of one's children, the perception of some blinding truth or promise. God is also to be found even in crucified beauty. When in the circumstances that seem utterly tragic and even unredeemable people find themselves exercising a quality of compassion or moral courage or just a steadfast presence of which they had previously been unaware, somehow God is especially found there—not as some extrinsic object that one comes across but as an event or quality or dynamism one is participating in. You find yourself, almost suddenly, within the very reality of God

And it's only in company with intelligent believers that I am able even to think these things ... or continue to believe them. It is in company

with intelligent believers seeking understanding that I come to know a God who is so, so different from the one atheists so frequently deny.

TAKE A RISK

I used to think that believing in God would bring a great sense of security. I no longer think that. I used to think that God was a kind of divine safety net. I no longer think that. In fact, I believe the opposite. Faith invites us to take a risk ...

But I would like to end by pointing to a different kind of risk entirely, which is more of a social or even political risk. We live in a time where there is considerable disagreement, doubt, and anxiety regarding the place of faith in the public sphere. In a recent issue of the Jesuit-run *America Magazine*, a fairly conservative commentator argued that there is a trend in American society to marginalize religious influence or at least contain it in houses of worship.⁹ From a very different ideological position, Barack Obama has argued something similar. Before he was elected president, Obama gave a gutsy if controversial speech on religion and politics, in which he challenged the conservative claim that liberals have abandoned religion. At the same time, he conceded that members of his own party have, for the most part, taken the bait. Let me quote then-Senator Obama:

At best, we may try to avoid the conversation about religious values altogether, fearful of offending anyone ...

At worst, there are some liberals who dismiss religion in the public square as inherently irrational or intolerant, insisting on a caricature of religious Americans that paints them as fanatical, or thinking that the very word "Christian" describes one's political opponents, not people of faith.¹⁰

To speak of "God" outside the walls of a church requires great prudence, care, and—yes—risk. What that may mean for a university such as Santa Clara in 2014 is a particularly important question. Like many American universities founded in the 19th century, Santa Clara was established to advance the ideals of liberal education within a distinct religious framework. Academic culture has since become increasingly




Charles Barry

The Bannan Institute was founded in 1982 by three generations of the Bannan family to honor their "Uncle Lou," Fr. Louis I. Bannan, S.J. (1914-1918), a longtime professor, mentor, and advisor at Santa Clara University (pictured above). Michael C. McCarthy, S.J.'s lecture, "The Fragility of Faith: How Can a Thinking Person Still Believe in God?" served as the inaugural Fr. Louis I. Bannan, S.J. Memorial Lecture, which will become an annual event within each yearlong Bannan Institute.

secular, and for the most part that has brought significant gains. At its best, it allows us a common space to speak and interact using a nonsectarian language and to accomplish many things for a common good.

But secular discourse can also have a flattening effect if it censors groups and individuals from speaking their deepest convictions in the manner appropriate to them. There is often an expectation that serious public discussion remain within what one legal scholar has recently called “an ‘iron cage,’ in which life is lived and discourse is conducted according to the stern constraints of secular rationalism.”¹¹ In this paradigm God has no place in the university.

I do hope that a university such as Santa Clara would continue to be a place where that “iron cage” may be left unlocked, where we have the freedom to live and act according to our deepest convictions, using whatever form of expression is right. But that can only work if members of an academic community are willing to learn not just to tolerate religious and philosophical differences but really to learn what those differences are, to cultivate a more textured ability to understand and talk about these differences and disagree with a commitment to mutual understanding. I like to think that Santa Clara is a university confident enough of its own religious identity as to be capable of cherishing difference. We do not do that without particular tensions (sometimes grave tensions) and when we speak of religious values in their own distinctiveness, we will often run the risk of misunderstanding and offending each other.

I began by stating that faith is a deeply fragile reality. Faith is fragile, because we humans are fragile. Believing in God does not take that away but becomes the context for exploring the mystery of our rather surprising existence. At times that existence is filled with joy, at times with pain, but always it is the source of wonder. Not everyone needs to refer to God in order to wonder. But for those who do, belief can provide a provisional grammar for wondering together at ever deeper levels. For that grammar to remain at all useful, however, one must be willing always to imagine bigger, to befriend intelligent believers, and to take a risk. 

MICHAEL C. MCCARTHY, S.J. began his undergraduate career at Stanford University but then entered the Jesuits and earned his B.A. from Santa Clara University in 1987, attended Oxford University to complete the four-year M.A. in *Literae Humaniores*, earned a Master’s in Divinity from the Jesuit School of Theology at Berkeley in 1997, and earned his Ph.D. in Theology from the University of Notre Dame in 2003. Currently, he is the executive director of Santa Clara University’s Ignatian Center for Jesuit Education, and he holds the Edmund Campion, S.J., Professor endowed chair. He is also an associate professor with a joint appointment in the Religious Studies and Classics Departments as well as the Director of the Catholic Studies Program.

NOTES

- 1 Michael C. McCarthy, S.J., “The Fragility of Faith: How Can a Thinking Person Still Believe in God?” lecture, Inaugural Louis I. Bannan, S.J. Lecture, 2013–2014 Bannan Institute: What Good Is God? series, April 15, 2014, Santa Clara University. This essay is an extended excerpt from the lecture; a video of the full lecture is available online at: <http://scu.edu/ic/publications/videos.cfm>
- 2 Michael Krasny, *Spiritual Envy: An Agnostic’s Quest* (Novato, CA: New World Library, 2010), 5.
- 3 Pope Francis, “Urbi et Orbi Message,” 25 December 2013; http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/urbi/documents/papa-francesco_20131225_urbi-et-orbi-natale.html
- 4 Saint Augustine, *Confessions*, 1.4.4.
- 5 Ibid.
- 6 Walter Isaacson, *Steve Jobs* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2011), 4.
- 7 Christian Wiman, “Sorrow’s Flower,” in *My Bright Abyss: Meditation of a Modern Believer* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2013), 17.
- 8 Ibid.
- 9 Russell Ronald Reno, “Our Secular Future,” *America Magazine* (February 24, 2014), 13-18.
- 10 Senator Barack Obama, “Building a Covenant for a New America,” Call to Renewal Conference, speech, June 28, 2006 (Washington, D.C.).
- 11 Steven Smith, *The Disenchantment of Secular Discourse* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010), 23.



Been There, Done That: What Atheists Can Contribute to This Discussion

A Response to Michael C. McCarthy, S.J.



Courtesy of Jerome Baggett

BY JEROME P. BAGGETT
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Jesuit School of Theology, Santa Clara University*

I GREATLY APPRECIATED FR. MICK MCCARTHY'S FORTHRIGHT AND INSIGHTFUL INAUGURAL LOUIS I. BANNAN, S.J. LECTURE. I WHOLLY AGREE WITH HIM THAT CAREFULLY ATTENDING TO FAITH'S FRAGILITY AMID THE MODERN CONTEXT WILL INEVITABLY ENGENDER "DIFFERENT KINDS OF DISCUSSIONS" THAN ONE TYPICALLY HEARS WHEN RELIGIOUS MATTERS ARE ENGAGED WITHIN THE PUBLIC SPHERE.

Certainly they will be different from those initiated by the best-sellers penned by the so-called "new atheists." They uniformly depict religious faith as "belief without evidence" and, in doing so, reduce it to intellectually erroneous propositions about the natural world. To Richard Dawkins, religious faith, which he describes as a "persistently false belief held in the face of strong contradictory evidence," is really nothing more than shoddy science.¹ "Thanks to the telescope and the microscope," exults Christopher Hitchens in agreement, "[religion] no longer offers an explanation of anything important."² Approaching

religion this way, however, is tantamount to a confusion of genres. It is something akin to disparaging Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* for being an extremely poor entomology textbook. In fact, most religious people in the United States experience little conflict between science and religion (insofar as they see the latter as connecting them to something *supernatural*), and their actual lives and attitudes utterly defy ham-handed stereotypes about them being necessarily deluded, scientifically ignorant, and so forth.

Fr. McCarthy knows this about people of faith, and he does well to avoid trucking in simplifications about them. Yet, when he suggests three helpful ways to render contemporary faith sustainable—"imagine bigger," "befriend intelligent believers," and "take a risk"—I wonder if these imply a tacit stereotyping of unbelievers (read: they have not bothered to do these things) and thus, if taken as seriously as they truly deserve, these suggestions will engender "different kinds of discussions" than Fr. McCarthy himself anticipates. I make this query based on what I have learned through my current research



The very same tacks that can steer some people toward a faith deepened bring still others to a very different destination—a faith discarded.

project on everyday Americans who identify as atheists.

A proclivity to imagine bigger is precisely what brought many of them to atheism in the first place. During interview sessions, they told me again and again about how their growing in awareness eventually burst even their most deeply considered religious categories. The teenager who devoted a year to reading the Bible from cover to cover; the undergrad accounting major who decided to minor in philosophy; the soon-to-be mother who relentlessly engaged all her friends (of various faiths) in theological discussions; the retired fireman who, after reading Carl Sagan's *Cosmos*, became obsessed with astronomy; the self-described "seeker" who went from Pentecostalism to Catholicism to Zen: These people, and so

many others, all took on what they saw as the "big questions" quite sincerely—and came up with nonreligious answers. About one-third of them point to the spate of recently published books on atheism as being "very influential" in terms of their ultimately rejecting faith in God. Whereas, somewhat unexpectedly, a full two-thirds say this about their own intuitions and feelings, and nearly all (97 percent) say it about their own critical thinking.

Not only have nonbelievers interrogated their feelings and deployed their critical faculties in thinking bigger, they have also befriended intelligent believers. Fewer than one in five atheists in my study strongly agree with the statement, "most of my friends are not religious," and only a scant minority (5 percent) strongly agree that



Professor Jerome Baggett of the Jesuit School of Theology actively engages the audience in his Fall 2013 Bannan Institute Lecture, "Well I'll Be Damned: Considering Atheism in the United States Today."

Grace Ogihara


"I tend to dislike religious people." This is hardly front page news. Believers are often nonbelievers' neighbors, co-workers, family members, and, not infrequently, even their spouses. Is it any surprise that they are also among the ranks of their friends? After all, many of the more reflective ones frame their religious convictions as being true "for me"—a subtle caveat that appears more than once in Fr. McCarthy's lecture—as if to signal their unwillingness to either judgmentally underestimate the validity of other people's truths or hubristically overestimate the validity of their own. What's more, if this pervasive "live and let live" attitude among the religious makes them easy to befriend, atheists are also increasingly connecting with fellow irreligious travelers—other "believers" in secular worldviews. The number of atheism-related online support networks, forums, podcasts, blogs, and videoblogs is dizzying and seems to grow daily. So, too, is the number of in-person groupings. For example, founded in 2000, the Secular Student Alliance, the national umbrella organization for campus atheist and humanist groups, had fewer than fifty affiliates in 2007; by 2011 it had nearly

350 established at colleges and universities across the country.

Lastly and without doubt, the majority of the atheists I interviewed perceive themselves as risk-takers. In other words, rather than proceeding along religious traditions' well-marked pathways, they talk about what they experience as the far more precarious venture of cutting their own paths through life, often unsure whether the directions they choose are the right ones and yet taking responsibility for them all the same. Expressed by my interviewees, this is also a key leitmotif within the newly burgeoning atheist spirituality literature. "You and you alone are the sole arbiter of the meaning in your life," explains Eric Maisel, whereas "most [people] defer to the meaning-making apparatus of their culture, taking comfort in the fact that others have built a meaning nest for them."³

While this species of riskiness is certainly lauded among atheists, I am not agreeing with Maisel's presumption that believers simply "defer" to religious traditions and desire "comfort" solely. Nor am I saying that Fr. McCarthy's advice to

When lives of authenticity, moral seriousness, and profound aspiration ... are clearly underwritten by both religious and nonreligious narratives, then the discussion turns to questions concerning the worth of distinctly religious ways of situating oneself in the world. Is faith really for everyone? How different are religious convictions from nonreligious ones? Is it only faith commitments that are fragile today? These are vital and gathering questions for believers and unbelievers alike.

think bigger, befriend intelligent believers, and take a risk cannot sustain and indeed deepen one's faith. What I am saying is that the very same tactics that can steer some people toward a faith deepened bring still others to a very different destination—a faith discarded. And, importantly, widespread recognition of this reality should and, I think, inevitably will precipitate “different kinds of discussions” than seemingly endless religiously inspired “culture wars” debates or even more genial conversations about how to deepen faith. When lives of authenticity, moral seriousness, and profound aspiration—what, in his monumental text *A Secular Age*, the philosopher Charles Taylor calls lives of “fullness”—are clearly underwritten by both religious and nonreligious narratives, then the discussion turns to questions concerning the worth of distinctly religious ways of situating oneself in the world.⁴ Is faith really for everyone? How different are religious convictions from nonreligious ones? Is it only faith commitments that are fragile today? These are vital and gathering questions for believers and unbelievers alike. I am not sure I have the best answers to these questions. I am quite certain, however, that discussing them openly and thoughtfully will reveal (if I may) that the lion's share of what we claim to know and want is fraught with far more fragility than we typically realize.⁵ 

JEROME P. BAGGETT is Professor of Religion and Society at the Jesuit School of Theology of Santa Clara University, a member of the Graduate Theological Union's Core Doctoral Faculty, and Visiting Professor of Sociology at UC Berkeley. He is also the author of *Habitat for Humanity: Building Private Homes, Building Public Religion* (Temple 2001) and *Sense of the Faithful: How American Catholics Live Their Faith* (Oxford 2009). He is currently conducting research for a book, tentatively titled *The Varieties of Irreligious Experience*, on atheists in the United States.

NOTES

- 1 Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2006), 5.
- 2 Christopher Hitchens, *God Is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything* (New York: Twelve, 2007), 282.
- 3 Eric Maisel, *The Atheist's Way: Living Well Without Gods* (Novato, Cal.: New World Library, 2009), 66.
- 4 See Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007).
- 5 For more on Jerome Baggett's current research and contribution to this conversation see “Well, I'll Be Damned: Considering Atheism in the United States Today,” 2013–2014 Bannan Institute: What Good Is God? series, November 6, 2013, Santa Clara University; <http://scu.edu/ic/publications/videos.cfm>.

The Fragility of Ministry

A Response to Michael C. McCarthy, S.J.

Courtesy of Sarah Attwood



BY SARAH ATTWOOD '07
*Campus Minister,
Providence College*

OVER THE LAST FIVE YEARS I'VE GRAPPLED WITH THE COMPLEXITIES AND AMBIGUITIES OF BEING A PROFESSIONAL LAY ECCLESIAL MINISTER IN THE CATHOLIC CHURCH. AS I ENCOUNTERED THE LECTURE BY MICK MCCARTHY, S.J., ON "THE FRAGILITY OF FAITH: HOW CAN A THINKING PERSON STILL BELIEVE IN GOD?" HIS SUGGESTIONS FOR SUSTAINING FAITH IN TODAY'S INCREASINGLY SECULAR WORLD RESONATED WITH ME.

First, imagine bigger. Despite the bumper stickers and t-shirts that declare "Everything's Bigger in Texas," my transition from a high school student in Round Rock, Texas to a college freshman at Santa Clara University in the fall of 2003 catapulted me into bigger thinking. My unquestioned faith was radically challenged for the first time. But despite the fears that came along with all of the new questions, I fell in love with theology and wanted to know more and more.

Second, befriend intelligent believers. That insatiable

desire eventually led me into graduate studies in theology at Boston College. I immersed myself in a community of intelligent believers who grappled with similar questions, and I found solace, in particular, with women mentors in the church who taught me to boldly claim my calling. *Third, take a risk.* The risk-taking for me was inherent in that calling. As a public minister in the church I'm making an explicit statement: I'm staking a claim in a tradition and representing it for others. And yet to be a public minister is not simply to serve as an image. It's not a two-dimensional role; I'm not a billboard for the Catholic Church. Nor is my education in any way completed—all questions answered, no more work to be done. I am far from retired in my intellectual search. In fact, as one of the theologians I most admire, Karl Rahner, reminds me: "Nothing is more familiar and obvious to the alerted spirit than the silent question which hovers over all that it has attained and mastered—the challenging question, humbly and lovingly accepted, which alone makes it wise. In his heart of hearts, there is nothing man (*sic*)

knows better than that his knowledge, ordinarily so-called, is only a tiny island in the immense ocean of the unexplored.”¹

Imagine bigger. Befriend intelligent believers. Take a risk. Check, check, check. When I finished Mick McCarthy’s lecture, however, a haunting realization came to me—one that I essentially knew because of my current role as a campus minister, but one in which I hadn’t given sufficient thought: I now have the privilege and challenge to be an intelligent believer for others to befriend. Amidst my own struggles, I am a person of solace for others on their own faith journeys. I not only need to continually seek out intelligent believers myself, but I am and will be one whom others seek out. And that humbling reality catapults me into the cycle all over again but from a very different perspective. This time I have to go through the process in a much more public way. Gone are the days when I could wrestle with my faith behind the closed door of my professor’s office. Now I stand in a public role and acknowledge that even ministers struggle.

In his introduction to *Foundations of Christian Faith*, Rahner writes, “So I would like to formulate the thesis that in today’s situation all of us with all of our theological study are and remain unavoidably *rudes* in a certain sense, and that we ought to admit that to ourselves and also to the world frankly and courageously.”² Despite being one of the Jesuit theological greats, Karl Rahner admits to his beginner status and encourages all of us to do the same—trained in theology or not. And by acknowledging that, we become capable of being conversation partners for others.

During my graduate studies I had the opportunity to serve as a hospital chaplain in Boston. It was a profoundly humbling experience to sit with patients in the last hours of their lives, to comfort family members through the grief process, and most especially to bear witness to the deeply existential longings and questions of the human heart in relation to God. It is our human tendency to want answers, but my supervisor told me one of the most comforting responses I could give to a patient asking: “*Why me?*” is the simple statement: “*I don’t know.*” Ministers don’t have

all the answers. And this truth allows patients to know that they don’t have to limit themselves to an answer that alienates themselves from God—the falsehoods that they were sick because God was punishing them, God had abandoned them, or other harmful lies we tell ourselves and others. By acknowledging, “I don’t know” we can appropriately maintain the mystery, the bigness, of God.

Recognizing my own limitations has been an important learning experience over the last two years as a campus minister to undergraduate students. As I am confronted by their deeply personal, often painful, questions of faith I am always humbled. So often I walk across campus feeling like a fraud. I ask the same question patients asked about their illness: “Why me?” But my question centers on my identity as a minister. Why me? Why should people trust me? Certain pastoral situations over the last two years have thrown me out of my comfort zone entirely. At each step in my ministerial development I am challenged by a reality that goes beyond what I have learned previously. But when I fear the risk it takes to step out of my comfort zone, to step off of the tiny island of my knowledge and swim in the “immense ocean of the unexplored,” I am reminded of the simple truth that every spiritual director I’ve had has told me: “fear is not from God.” And so I jump, I take a risk, and I invite students to do the same, warning them that this is a lifelong journey. First, imagine bigger. Second, befriend intelligent believers. Third, take a risk. Repeat, repeat, repeat. **e**

SARAH ATTWOOD graduated with a religious studies degree from Santa Clara University in 2007. She then served as a Jesuit Volunteer in Portland, Oregon, and graduated from Boston College with a Master’s of Divinity in 2012. She currently lives in Providence, Rhode Island and works as a campus minister at Providence College.

NOTES

- 1 Karl Rahner, “The Concept of Mystery in Catholic Theology” [orig. 1959], *Theological Investigations*, Vol. 4, 58.
- 2 Karl Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Idea of Christianity* (New York: Crossroad, 1982), 9.

Grace in Shakespeare¹

Excerpt from 2014 Santa Clara Lecture

Courtesy of Marilynne Robinson



BY MARILYNNE ROBINSON
Pulitzer Prize-winning author

“GRACE IS GRACE, DESPITE OF ALL CONTROVERSY.”² THESE WORDS ARE SPOKEN BY THE CHARACTER LUCIO IN SHAKESPEARE’S *MEASURE FOR MEASURE*. LUCIO IS A FOOL AND A SCOUNDREL, A FANTASTIC, ACCORDING TO THE *DRAMATIS PERSONAE*. BUT HE IS ALSO THE LOYAL FRIEND WHO TAKES STEPS TO SAVE A MAN FROM SUFFERING DEATH AS A PENALTY FOR AN OFFENSE THAT IS ONLY MADE PUNISHABLE BY AN EXTREMELY RIGID INTERPRETATION OF LAW. THESE WORDS ARE PART OF A HALF-SERIOUS EXCHANGE WITH TWO ANONYMOUS GENTLEMEN IN A HOUSE OF ILL REPUTE, AND LUCIO ENDS HIS REMARK WITH A JIBE, “AS FOR EXAMPLE, THOU ART A WICKED VILLAIN, DESPITE OF ALL GRACE.”³

In this scene Lucio and the Gentlemen are playing back and forth between two meanings of the word “grace,” as “the thanksgiving before meat,”⁴ and as a central concept of Christian theology, by which, in Lucio’s taunting instance, a villain might be rescued from his wicked proclivities in this life. Still, Lucio’s words are worth pausing over. “Grace is grace”—simply itself, not accessible to paraphrase. This would

indeed put it beyond controversy, since there is no language in which it can be controverted, and it would give it a special character, most notably in the Shakespearean world where associations among words, figures, similes, are constant and central. Lucio’s exchanges with the Gentlemen mention that table grace is to be heard in any religion, with the further implication that one would be better for hearing it. In this sense also it is put beyond controversy, and every religion is, so to speak, graced by it. I propose that, in his later plays, Shakespeare gives grace a scale and aesthetic power, and a structural importance, that reach toward a greater sufficiency of expression—not a definition or a demonstration of grace or even an objective correlative for it, but the intimation of a great reality of another order, which pervades human experience, even manifests itself in human actions and relations, yet is always purely itself. Hamlet speaks of ideal virtues, calling them “pure as grace.”⁵ Prospero, after the scene of rather detached and unceremonious reconciliations, speaks his amazing Epilogue to the audience, asking them to release him from his island, “As you from crimes would pardoned be.”⁶ He says, “My ending is despair, Unless I be relieved by prayer, / Which pierces so that it assaults / Mercy itself and frees all faults.”⁷ Prayer opens on something purer

In answer to the question: Which side are you on? “I’m still deciding” or “I see merit in a number of positions” would not have been more pleasing to the enforcers of any orthodoxy than outright heresy would be. High-order thinking is not so readily forced into pre-existing categories ... What is grace, after all? What is the soul?

and grander than mercy, something that puts aside the consciousness of fault, the residue of judgment that makes mercy qualitatively a lesser thing than grace.

The word “Reformation” suggests that the primary source and effect of the controversy that fascinated Europe was a change in church polity. In fact, in this period people were pondering the deepest thoughts and traditions they shared as Christians. The powerful intervened and criminalized the expression of one or another theology, depending on the regime in power at the time, and this created a factionalism and repressiveness that perverted a rich conversation. Critics and historians have followed this precedent, often eager to identify the sympathies of any figure who did not, himself or herself, make them absolutely clear, as if a leaning were an identity, and might not change from year to year, depending on whom one had spoken with lately, or what one had read, or how an argument settled into individual thought or experience. In answer to the question: Which side are you on? “I’m still deciding” or “I see merit in a number of positions” would not have been more pleasing to the enforcers of any orthodoxy than outright heresy would be. High-order thinking is not so readily forced into pre-existing categories. If we step back from seeing the period as a political struggle first of all, the official view of it, we might see it as passionate and profoundly interesting, entirely consistent with the richness of its philosophic and literary achievements. What *is* grace, after all? What *is* the soul?

Again, I eschew any attempt to identify Shakespeare as the partisan of any side of the controversy, with a few provisos. First, to express any opinion or attitude that offended authority was extremely dangerous, to life and limb and also to the whole phenomenon of public theater. So tact must be assumed. I think it is appropriate to see Shakespeare as a theologian in his own right, though the perils that attended religious expression made his theology implicit rather than overt. Second, Shakespeare tests various and opposed ideas, giving each one extraordinarily rich expression. He savors a good idea.

My third point is a little more complex. Broadly speaking, English religious culture during this period was divided into three parts: Catholic, Anglican, and Protestant. Catholicism was traditional and had major support from the Continent. Anglicanism was the British withdrawal from communion with Rome and from papal authority, with selected aspects of Catholicism and of Reformed teaching retained or absorbed. The Protestants, as I call them here, are elsewhere called Calvinists or Puritans. They were the faction that became strong enough by the beginning of the 17th century to carry out a successful revolution and to depose, try, and execute the king, Charles I. This happened after Shakespeare’s death, but a movement of such strength would have to have been formidable for decades ...

These three highly distinctive, theologically articulate religious cultures in Elizabethan England were not the usual triad of Catholics, Protestants,

and curmudgeons. When the Laws of Uniformity were passed under Elizabeth, they criminalized both Catholic and Protestant forms of worship for departing from Anglican practice. Both Catholics and Protestants lost most of their civil rights, which were not restored until the 19th century. Both suffered persecution and martyrdom. So, if Shakespeare seems cautious and elusive, it could mean that he was Catholic, or that he was Protestant, or that he did not want to align himself with or against any faction. His younger contemporary, René Descartes, was similarly elusive, probably on these same grounds. He described himself as masked, like an actor. It was the nature of the times.

But if Shakespeare did take seriously the great questions bruited in his civilization during the whole of his lifetime, then he might have reflected on the meaning behind, or beyond, it all—not the geopolitics of it, but the essential, shared truth that underlay these aggravated differences. Grace is grace. How would this be staged?

In February 2014, Pulitzer Prize-winning author Marilynne Robinson delivered the 2014 Santa Clara Lecture as part of the 2013–2014 Bannan Institute lecture: What Good Is God? During Marilynne Robinson's visit to campus, Santa Clara Magazine editor Steven Boyd Saum spoke with Robinson about grace in her own writing, how to teach discernment, and what it means to be a modern believer.

You're here to give a talk called "Grace in Shakespeare." What about grace in Robinson, since that's a term that is so often applied to your writing?

The interpretation of Shakespeare plays that I'm doing is suggesting a different way of turning the question of grace than I myself would have thought of without pondering those plays. I think about that phrase from the Gospel of John, "full of grace and truth"—it suggests more than an *accidental* relationship between grace and truth. The grace of God, I think, is almost simultaneous with the word *God* itself. From the human point of view, I think that when you participate in grace, you're elevated above worldly considerations—

grudges, fears, resentments—all those things that you accumulate in the clutter of self-protectiveness that arises as you develop in life. The moments of grace are the moments in which your vision of reality is, for the moment, actually free. You are out of the trenches. And I think that is something that people very often feel they have experienced, that experientially it is true. I often talk to people who have no theological vocabulary, but the minute the concept of grace becomes available to them, they recognize it. They love it. It could so easily be the core of any sort of reconstruction of our religious sensibilities.

Have you experienced that in your writing workshops?

Oh, yes. My students are wonderful. Like everybody else, they're shy about any kind of religious issue and made anxious by it. But these are the kinds of ideas that do engage them. A lot has happened to corrupt the vocabulary of religious thought. It's always been hard, I think, for writers to feel that they could use it as a subject, but it's much harder when the generous impulses of fiction seem to run contrary to the ungenerous constructions that are made of religious sensibility. That's a problem that religious institutions have to solve. Nobody else can do it.

Let me ask you a question that Michael Engh, S.J., the president of Santa Clara, asked the Dalai Lama when he was just here: How do you teach students discernment?

I don't know. I think that human beings are basically discerning and that you have to be careful not to distract them or mislead them or alarm them. I think that a great deal of the best teaching is simply to take away anxiety: *You can do this, it's in your nature, what do you think?* It is in people's nature, and they can think for themselves. We have created this sort of culture of "right" answers that's based on an irrationalist model that really is blown sky-high. I mean, it has no leg to stand on. Like science, for example—which, God bless, I love science—it has created a dialect of intellectual speech that gets imposed on people through education, and if it fits badly with the uses


that they would want to make of language, with the articulations of experience they would want to express, they're left sort of baffled. It silences them, because usually this sort of dialect has such authority. It is learning, as far as they're concerned; it's intellectualism, even. So you can actually sort of freeze people, even in their own thoughts, by giving them conclusions. I think that's one of the things we're dealing with all the time now: people who think that you can't believe XYZ because, rationally—which means in Newtonian terms—it's not possible. But that's just an archaic mode of thought.

And you're very articulate in talking about what you call the "miraculous" that one discovers through science—this sense of wonder and amazement, whether it's quantum mechanics or the surface of Mercury.

Exactly. A lot of scientists act as if what they are doing is deflating awe, and what they're doing, in fact, is making the universe into a theatre of awe that nobody could've imagined. I'm glad that they don't act consistently with their own sort of very poor public relations. I mean, I think it's an incredible privilege to live now, when the blossoming of scientific consciousness is just unbelievably beautiful.

This fall we had Christian Wiman here. He talked about what it means to be a modern believer. I'm wondering what that means for you. I think saying you're *religious* versus being *spiritual* can be a challenge.

I'm religious. I mean the traditions are articulations of a truth that is greater than any specific articulation. And that, conceptually, they're the language we have, in the same way that English is the language we have. *Spirituality* seems often to me to be unserious at the deepest sense. You know what I mean? I know about things historically, that's just my habit of mind. But it makes me very aware that very thoughtful people have shaped and considered, and that ideas that are enormously valuable to me have come down through a chain of transmission—which is my religious tradition, our religious tradition. It would seem inhumane

to me to try to step free of what is, in many cases, the most beautiful thinking people have done. I really do believe, very deeply, that reverence toward God has to be simultaneous with reverence toward humankind and history too. And that if you refuse the gifts, the best—but also the most painful in many cases, and the most frightening and most tragic—you're sort of betraying all those generations before that were in conversation with God, too. It seems holier-than-thou, in a way, to say "I'm *spiritual* and not *religious*." 

MARILYNNE ROBINSON is the author of *Gilead*, which won the 2005 Pulitzer Prize for fiction and the 2004 National Book Critics Circle Award for Fiction. Her most recently published novel, *Home*, a companion to *Gilead*, won the 2008 *L.A. Times* Book Prize for fiction and the 2009 Orange Prize for fiction. Robinson is also the author of the modern classic *Housekeeping*, which won the PEN/Ernest Hemingway Award for First Fiction and the Richard and Hinda Rosenthal Award from the Academy of American Arts and Letters and was a Pulitzer nominee. She is also the author of four books of nonfiction, *Mother Country*, *The Death of Adam*, *Absence of Mind*, and *When I Was a Child I Read Books*. Her fresh novel due out this fall is titled *Lila*. Robinson did her undergraduate work at Pembroke College, the former women's college at Brown University, receiving her B.A. *magna cum laude* in 1966. She also received her Ph.D. in English from the University of Washington in 1977. She teaches at the University of Iowa Writers' Workshop.

NOTES

- 1 Copyright © 2014 by Marilynne Robinson. Reprinted by permission of Marilynne Robinson. Marilynne Robinson, "Grace in Shakespeare" lecture, 2014 Santa Clara Lecture, 2013–2014 Bannan Institute: What Good Is God? series, February 26, 2014, Santa Clara University. This is an excerpt from the lecture; a video of the full lecture is currently available online at: <http://scu.edu/ic/publications/videos.cfm>
- 2 William Shakespeare, *Measure for Measure*, Act 1, Scene 2.
- 3 Ibid.
- 4 Ibid.
- 5 William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, Act 1, Scene 4.
- 6 William Shakespeare, *Tempest*, Act 5, Epilogue.
- 7 Ibid.

What Good Is God for Grief and Loss?

Courtesy of David Feldman



BY DAVID B. FELDMAN
*Associate Professor, Department
of Counseling Psychology,
Santa Clara University*

Courtesy of Robert Gressis



BY ROBERT A. GRESSIS
*Assistant Professor, Department
of Philosophy, California State
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GRIEF AND DEATH ANXIETY ARE INEXTRICABLY LINKED WITH HUMAN EXISTENCE. IN A REAL SENSE, LOSS PERMEATES OUR LIVES. ACCORDING TO NATIONAL STATISTICS PERTAINING TO LIFE EXPECTANCY AND AVERAGE AGE OF CHILDBIRTH, CHILDREN BORN IN THE YEAR 2012 ARE LIKELY TO LOSE THEIR GREAT-GRANDPARENTS (ON AVERAGE) AROUND THE AGE OF 11, THEIR GRANDPARENTS DURING THEIR THIRTIES, AND THEIR PARENTS IN THEIR SIXTIES. SUCH LOSSES INEVITABLY REMIND INDIVIDUALS OF THEIR OWN MORTALITY.

According to research in the realm of existential psychology as well as a venerable tradition in existential philosophy, constructive acknowledgment of death anxiety can be a major motivator of positive functioning whereas avoidance or denial of such anxiety can be a source of dysfunctional behavior and even psychopathology. Surprisingly, however, little empirical research has addressed the impact of religious belief on how people experience and cope with loss and death anxiety.

Scholars writing from the viewpoint known as “meta-atheism” have asserted that, in their estimation, religious belief has little or no impact on how people grieve. These writers assert that religious believers, on some deep level, do not actually believe their own religious assertions, and so these assertions have little impact on their actual behavior. To address this issue head on, we have

undertaken a project designed to empirically test the relationships between certain religious beliefs and people’s experiences of grief and levels of death anxiety.

The Bannan Institute’s 2013–14 theme is “What Good is God?” The proposed research project, funded by a Bannan Institute Research Grant, seeks to answer this exact question with regard to grief and loss. Specifically, we seek to examine whether beliefs in God and an afterlife are “useful” with regard to facilitating the grief process and lessening death anxiety. Anecdotally, believers often assert that their beliefs in a loving God and a blissful afterlife comfort them in times of loss. We seek to examine empirical evidence to test whether these beliefs indeed materially alter the experiences of loss and death anxiety.


We have recently collected in-depth surveys from over one hundred people around the United States, representing diverse ages and education levels, and plan to continue to collect data. Following our analyses of these data we plan to present the results at a professional conference in psychology or philosophy (or both) and to submit our findings to a psychology journal (discussing the methods and statistical results) and to a philosophy journal (discussing implications regarding the meta-atheist arguments). 

If you are interested in learning more about upcoming Bannan Grant opportunities, please visit our website: <http://lscu.edu/ic/bannan/grants.cfm>.

2014-2015 Bannan Institute: Ignatian Leadership

In the first principle and foundation of the *Spiritual Exercises*, St. Ignatius of Loyola urges: “I ought to desire and elect only the thing which is more conducive to the end for which I am created.” Drawing on the *Spiritual Exercises*, the 2014-2015 Bannan Institute will explore the theme of Ignatian leadership as a vocational practice, a way of proceeding.

We will begin in the fall quarter with a focus on the practice of justice within Ignatian leadership, exploring how the work of educated solidarity and the *projecto social* has become central to the mission of Jesuit higher education worldwide. In the winter quarter we will turn our attention to the role of faith within the practice of Ignatian leadership, considering how commitments to contemplation, discernment, dialogue, and interior freedom underwrite the larger life vocations of Ignatian leaders. In the spring quarter, we will conclude by considering the importance of the intellectual life in the exercise of Ignatian leadership.

We hope that your participation within the 2014-2015 Bannan Institute will challenge you to explore Ignatian leadership as a practice, a way of proceeding, and invite you to discern how justice, faith, and the intellectual life are integrated within your own vocational commitments and leadership. 

For more information on upcoming events and lectures visit scu.edu/ic.




The Thriving Neighbors Initiative: An Engaged Scholarship Partnership between Santa Clara University and the Greater Washington Community in San Jose, California

Central to Santa Clara University’s Jesuit, Catholic values and identity is a commitment to creating a more just and equitable world. SCU gives meaning to this commitment by working with our most vulnerable community members to overcome barriers to social and economic inclusion while celebrating community strengths and resilience.

The Thriving Neighbors Initiative (TNI) is a collaborative engaged scholarship and sustainable development initiative facilitated by SCU’s Ignatian Center for Jesuit Education. Our initial focus is on the Greater Washington community in San Jose, California, which is home to a driven and dedicated populace with a large immigrant population, strong community organizations, and seasoned community leaders. Conversely, it is also one of the most socioeconomically challenged regions of Santa Clara County.

The core goal of TNI is to build local capacity for entrepreneurship, educational choice, healthy living, and legal support while engaging the University’s students, faculty, and staff in partnerships with Washington residents, community leaders, and organizations to promote mutual learning, critical dialogue and transformational relationships.

Through a mutually led dialogue process, we have identified four loci of collaborative interest; Education Initiatives (after-school education, college readiness, and arts education for youth), Health and Wellness Initiatives (fitness, nutrition, and access to medical services), Business Development, and Legal Justice, and have begun collaborative projects in each of these areas. 

To learn more about or contribute to the Thriving Neighbors Initiative visit scu.edu/ic.



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explore

www.scu.edu/explore



Nicole Kelly and Margaret Glomb

As part of our 2013-2014 Bannan Institute series, we asked audience members to describe a significant idea or question that they took away from each lecture. At the end of the series, we compiled all of the responses into a word cloud to illustrate the significant themes that arose for the more than 2,000 audience members throughout the series. Words or phrases most widely referenced in the responses are displayed the largest, with those less frequently cited appearing in smaller sized fonts.