#### Hidden Price Tags An Eastern Orthodox Look at the Dark Side of Technology and Its Best Use

# Volume 2: Works of Art

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You are invited to visit the author website at https://cjshayward.com, and explore other, related titles on his bookshelf at https://cjshayward.com/books/. To Dr. David Fletcher, a hospitable soul who gave me the warmest welcome when I struggled in a crisis of conscience

#### C.J.S. Hayward

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# Foreword to the *Hidden Price Tags* Series

I gave my heirarch and abbot a copy of *The Luddite's Guide to Technology* for Christmas, and told him, "If I've contributed something to the conversation, it's probably in this book."

This collection is intended to break the contents of that book and a few related works into smaller and more manageable volumes, and give an introduction and discussion questions for individual works.

My life as a whole has been heavy with technology and heavy with theology / patrology, and my distinctive contributions may lie in relation to both. It's very easy to have your life taken over and run by technology; this is about unplugging to an extent, mastering the technologies you use, and using technologies so that they are beneficial instead of draining you. The reality is that without a conscious effort, and perhaps with many kinds of conscious effort, you will be hit by the dark sides of technology.

If this series succeeds, it will be relevant both when it was written, and later on when there are some of the same kinds of forces at play but the list of technologies that are *au courant* has shifted in significant ways.

I do not wish to continue to update this series to

continue to give the impression that it was just written, but there is something timeless even to good books on technology. As regards television, I unhesitatingly draw on Neil Postman's 1985 Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in an Age of Show Business,<sup>1</sup> Jerry Mander's 1978 Four Arguments for the Elimination of Television.<sup>2</sup> and Marie Winn's 1977 The Plug-in Drug<sup>3</sup> as worth listening to today. None of them anticipate ubiquitous mobile devices, and Jerry Mander is skeptical about whether computers would be of any real use for consumers. I don't mean that Mander was skeptical about whether personal-use computers would be an overall improvement to the picture; I mean that he did not anticipate personally owned computers or computer networks at all, let alone mobile Internet devices. But when you read one of his arguments, the argument of "artificial unusualness,"4 under "Argument Four: The Inherent Biases of Television,"<sup>5</sup> a relatively light edit could give the impression of an incisive analysis of technology-today-whose ink is still wet on its pages. Artificial unusuality was part of television when he wrote it, it is more a part of television now, it is a feature of social media, and it is a core part to how you make technology addictive today.<sup>6</sup> It is not just because I have heard people say that television is the future of the Internet that I believe these books about technology are relevant. Much may have changed in the intervening 40-50 years

- <sup>1</sup> Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Showbusiness* (London: Methuen, 2007).
- <sup>2</sup> Jerry Mander, *Four Arguments for the Elimination of Television* (New York: Perennial, 2002).
- <sup>3</sup> Marie Winn, The Plug-in Drug (New York: Penguin, 1985).
- <sup>4</sup> Jerry Mander, *Four Arguments for the Elimination of Television* (New York: Perennial, 2002), 299-322.
- <sup>5</sup> Jerry Mander, *Four Arguments for the Elimination of Television* (New York: Perennial, 2002), 263-346.
- <sup>6</sup> See, for instance, "The Acceleration of Addictiveness," The acceleration of addictiveness, accessed November 18, 2022, http://www.paulgraham.com/addiction.html.

since Mander wrote his title, but *the more some things change, the more some things stay the same*. The principles in these precursors to this series are still relevant, and I believe the principles in this collection will likely be at least partially relevant when smartphones and smartwatches are no longer the cutting edge of mainstream consumer use of technology, and, perhaps, there will seem to be something quaint about the concept of watching porn on a flat and external screen.

When I first wrote " 'Social Antibodies' Needed: A Request of Orthodox Clergy" (in volume 4 of this series)<sup>7</sup> in 2014, I made multiple attempts at a literature search on Amazon found nothing much on some other queries, and "orthodox technology" turned up, among Orthodox Christian works on technology: my own work and nobody else's.

At the time of this writing that is no longer true. The first result for that search is no longer one of my own: *Religion, Science, and Technology.*<sup>8</sup> Jean-Claude Larchet's *The New Media Epidemic: The Undermining of Society, Family, and Our Own Soul*<sup>9</sup> is on Amazon now and eminently worth reading. But my own works represent six of the first page Amazon search results for that query. As I said in " 'Social Antibodies' Needed," about what I found when I searched Amazon, "Um, **thanks**, I think. I guess I'm an expert, or at least a resource, and even if I didn't want to, I should probably make myself available to Orthodox clergy, with my spiritual father and bishop foremost." But for the most part, I am a somewhat obscure local expert if I

<sup>7</sup> #Create internal footnote.

- <sup>8</sup> Katina Michael, M. G. Michael, and Kallistos, *Religion, Science & Technology: An Eastern Orthodox Perspective ; an Interview with Metropolitan Kallistos Ware* (Wollongong, Australia: University of Wollongong, 2017).
- <sup>9</sup> Jean-Claude Larchet and Archibald Andrew Torrance, *The New Media Epidemic: The Undermining of Society, Family, and Our Own Soul* (Jordanville, NY: Holy Trinity Publications, The Printshop of St Job of Pochaev, Holy Trinity Monastery, 2019).

am in fact a local subject-matter expert.

There may be a number of things I fail to project about the practical realities of the Internet of Bodies but I suspect this book, an attempt at outlining Orthodox ascesis governing technology use, will be somewhere on the scene then. There are some technologies that I have avoided using at all on overpowering negative intuitions, like SecondWife, er, SecondLife, and recommendations may shift from "Use freely," to "Use carefully," to "Use very cautiously," to "Better not to use," to "Don't use at all." We are having more concentrated versions of earlier precursors today, like eighty proof liquor followed age-old wine in ages past. And the case for abstinence may grow increasingly strong as the list of technologies that are *au courant* grows increasingly strong.

So you have in your hands something that may turn out to be significant, possibly moreso than my Amazon reviews may reflect. (After I posted a critique of the "Blessed Seraphim Rose" crowd,<sup>10</sup> admirers were not sated by giving that specific work one star reviews. They also follow through to see that positive Amazon ratings and reviews of any of my works continue to be taken down if they can be dislodged. This may also be part of why my works get one star reviews simply alleging, in two words, "Poorly written."<sup>11</sup>)

Reading Marie Winn's *The Plug-in Drug*<sup>12</sup> helped me appreciate why my political science professor at Calvin forcefully told a class, "*Playboy* is more Christian than *Sesame Street*!<sup>13</sup>" I am writing at a time when technologies

- <sup>10</sup> C.J.S. Hayward, The Seraphinians: "Blessed Seraphim Rose" and His Axe-Wielding Western Converts (Wheaton, IL: C.J.S. Hayward Publications, 2012).
- <sup>11</sup> "Amazon.com: The Luddite's Guide to Technology: The Past Writes Back to Humane Tech!," Amazon, accessed November 18, 2022, https://www.amazon.com/Luddites-Guide-Technology-Writes-Humane/dp/1731439539.

<sup>12</sup> Marie Winn, The Plug-in Drug (New York: Penguin, 1985).

<sup>13</sup> I believe his reason this forceful and possibly exaggerated statement is

are addictive and need to be carefully used if they are used at all, and works like "The Acceleration of Addictiveness" (at https://paulgraham.com/addiction.html)<sup>14</sup> suggest that such caution will only be more thoroughly justified as time continues and further modifications of technology unfold before us.

#### Why Orthodoxy?

One Orthodox community member talked about how he asked people, "I want to understand Orthodoxy. What books should I read?" He got an answer of, "You don't understand Orthodoxy by reading a book. You understand Orthodoxy by attending services." And that is how he answers requests other people make of him for reading recommendations to understand Orthodoxy.

Orthodoxy is an oral culture that uses reading, and monasticism more so. This book is not intended to explain Orthodoxy; you must attend Orthodox services if you want that. But Orthodoxy is how I understand being human and Orthodox theology has "Who are we?" for one of the biggest questions to answer.<sup>15</sup> This big question includes another capitally important question: "What is good for us as human beings?" This in turn includes "What use and abstention from technology is good for us as human

that *Playboy* is an open and undisguised evil that young people are warned about; *Sesame Street* is a whitewashed tomb full of rotten things which masquerades as a messenger of all things good, wholesome, and educational, and that is a bigger mark of the satanic. ("And no marvel; for Satan himself masquerades as an angel of light," 2 Corinthians 11:14, *Classic Orthodox Bible*.)

- <sup>14</sup> "The Acceleration of Addictiveness," The acceleration of addictiveness, accessed November 18, 2022, http://www.paulgraham.com/addiction.html.
- <sup>15</sup> When I was beginning studying theology at Cambridge in 2002, in an early tutorial supervision I was told that the three fundamental questions in theology are "Who is God?", "Who are we?", and "How do we relate to God?"

beings?" That question drives this whole series. I do not write to reason you into being Orthodox, but I would be mistreating you to use anything less than the best resources I know to answer the challenges of technology and using technology without burning yourself.

Electronic technology has perhaps been around for a couple hundred years or less.<sup>16</sup> Our genus *Homo* has been around for millions of years,<sup>17</sup> and our subspecies *Homo* sapiens sapiens has been around for over a hundred thousand years.<sup>18</sup> This means that for well over 99% of the time our human race has been around, electronic technology was simply not part of the picture for anyone. Maybe the keys to human flourishing and the conditions that the human person are adapted to, are older than electronic technology, and perhaps there are things we need to learn from what was normal human life. Let's go!

- <sup>16</sup> "History of Technology Timeline," Encyclopædia Britannica (Encyclopædia Britannica, inc.), accessed November 18, 2022, https://www.britannica.com/story/history-of-technology-timeline.
- <sup>17</sup> "Homo," Wikipedia (Wikimedia Foundation, November 7, 2022), https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Homo.

<sup>18</sup> Glenn Elert, "Age of Homo Sapiens," Age of Homo Sapiens - The Physics Factbook, accessed November 18, 2022, https://hypertextbook.com/facts/1997/TroyHolder.shtml.

#### Foreword to "Works of Art"

In the beginning of my career as a writer, a partly formed idea would come to me, and I would begin a process of simultaneously wrestling with the creation to master it, and wrestling with myself to get out of the work's way. Sometimes I ended up with something very different than I envisioned. The result, as one critic wrote about one of my collections, is interesting: <sup>19</sup>

> Each piece is a delight: partially because each 'speaks' using a different voice and partially because a diversity of topics and cross-connections between theology and everyday living makes the entire collection a delight to read, packed with unexpected twists, turns, and intellectual challenges.

That creative process has changed as I have aged; creative works are more infrequent and I more commonly just write prose articles as I have aged. Still, a few of these works of art are recent.

This volume represents many of my most creative works on the topic.

<sup>19</sup> "MBR Bookwatch," MBR: MBR Bookwatch, April 2012, accessed November 18, 2022, https://www.midwestbookreview.com/mbw/apr\_12.htm#donovan.

#### Note on Footnotes and Claim to Originality

It has been a thing to want originality, and to footnote debts to other authors but otherwise at least implicitly claim, "Except as I explicitly document otherwise, I was born in a house that I built with my own two hands."

There may be some original content in my writing, even strikingly original and possibly groundbreaking, but the claim I make to originality is nil. I have many debts to many people and more than I can trace (such may be classified as "unintentional plagiarism"), and I do not believe I was born in a house I built with my own two hands. I attempt the renovation and expansion of a mansion whose first roots I cannot trace and which has been touched by many hands before me, and God willing will be touched by many hands after.

When I was an aspiring scholar with an academic library, and I had an essay or assignment, I would do a literature search among the scholarly literature, and document what were often genuine dependencies and my genuine sources. That is not my situation now. *That is not the situation of my readers now*. I made footnotes for the book the first volume in this series was largely drawn from, and what I found was that I was doing five minute Googlepedia hits that may have documented a claim but generally had nothing to do with where I got my ideas. And today, when in the title of one book I would probably like, we are *Amusing and Informing Ourselves to Death*, people carry cellphones and those who trace a footnote are probably about as capable as I am of a five minute Googlepedia hit.

Additionally, this work as it originally stands has a little more than a thousand pages of various kinds of unfootnoted writing. If we say that comes with an average of three footnotes per page and five minutes per footnote, that comes to over fifteen thousand footnotes, taking more than two hundred and fifty hours, or more than six uninterrupted forty hour workweeks. And I hardly have forty hour workweeks to spare.

Footnoting in this collection is essentially as original, meaning half-fledged Googlepedia hits for the first volume, standard scholarly footnoting in originally academic work, and naming of important sources in the remaining five out of seven volumes.

My apologies for readers who want footnotes; I know it's considered a sign of a serious or formal book, but I would rather make this collection available soon than wait indefinitely for all the half-fledged Googlepedia footnotes to be available.

## Introduction

C.S. Lewis's "Learning in Wartime"<sup>20</sup> is a sermon preached when Europe was descending into a world war. It looked like the end of Western civilization. Yet Lewis does not seem to think this changes the game very much. He says elsewhere, for instance, that "mortality is total in all generations," and the questions which war brings to the fore are questions which Christians would do well to address in peace-time but unfortunately neglect. Lewis reminds his audience—or perhaps tells them something they should know but do not-saving that earlier Christians "thought it good for us to always be aware of our mortality." And Orthodoxy indeed makes much of remembrance of death. He points out that natural death is often painful, and perhaps the only place where one can easily die a painless death is on a battlefield. He asks, "If active service does not persuade a man to prepare for death, what conceivable concatenation of circumstances would?"

He goes on to confront the idea that in war-time one should only be occupied with war. He is no pacifist, and he asserts that some have a civic duty to fight the war. However, he writes:

Thus we may have a duty to rescue a drowning man and, perhaps, if we live on a

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https://bradleyggreen.com/attachments/Lewis.Learning%20in%20 War-Time.pdf. dangerous coast, to learn life-saving so as to be ready for any drowning man when he turns up. It may be our duty to lose our own lives in saving him. But if anyone devoted himself to life-saving in the sense of giving it his total attention—so that he thought and spoke of nothing else and demanded the cessation of all future human activities until everyone had learned to swim—he would be a monomaniac.

He speaks of fulfilling every duty as an offering to God, and places the work of poets and shoe shiners on a level if their work is done as an offering to the Lord.

(I might briefly add that shoe shining may eclipse writing poetry, because it is easier to be humble. You can be a poet and be narcissistic, and the Zeitgeist I am aware of for poetry is narcissistic. The process of shining shoes involves repeatedly bowing before someone on a raised thronelike chair. One text I read in grad school talked about an adaptation of footwashing where the Irish-American priest of an African-American parish shined the shoes of a dozen older African-American men.)

I do not want to further attempt to trace Lewis's reasoning beyond stating that he concludes that doing the work God has provided you is appropriate in wartime as well as peace, and if you are at Oxford in the beginning of the war, it may well be because God wants you to be at Oxford, pursuing your studies.

#### A note on this collection

This collection represents some of my most artistic writing as it relates explicitly to the topic of technology's hidden price tags. Lewis elsewhere says that the term for taking people's money for literature and giving them homilectics is "stealing," but this is literature largely driven by concerns about the question of who we are as mankind, and more specifically what is good for us, and more specifically what is good for us as regards technology use and non-use.

The analogy that motivated my choice of C.S. Lewis's "Learning in war" is an analogy between world war and conditions in which as much of our lives as possible are taken over by technology. Amusing Ourselves to Death, Four Arguments for the **Elimination** of Television, and The Plug-in Drug address the seriousness of always-on vegging out before televisions. None of the original versions anticipate address the always-on screen that you carry with you. This collection may address the always-on screen that you carry with you but not future changes that even more deeply invade our lives. There may be major features of future change that are simply not thought of in this writing, as I earlier failed to anticipate the significance of mobile devices in my second novel, Firestorm 2034. However, I expect continued salience in my attempts to address the question of what is good for us as human beings. My analysis of always-on screens you carry with you is not intended to repeal others' earlier findings that television is not good for us as human beings.

This collection then has a dual status. It is literature, as under the heading of culture, and it is also a "war-effort," or part of one, since where I cry "*Foul!*" there are other voices crying "*Foul!*" too.

Is the comparison between technology and a world war just?

The Black Book of Communism tallied up the body count under Naziism against a greater body count from Marxism, but the authors wished to distance themselves from getting into a grisly calculus of what is worse. The spirit was quite the opposite of one where someone said that six million Jews died in World War II, and someone else said "that is nothing," and pointed out the over one hundred millions murdered in the USSR. To which I would say "Six million is *not* nothing!" Furthermore, if future circumstances lead to the murder of a billion people, the one hundred and fifty million who died under Marxism in one country will not be insignificant.

I don't want to get into a discussion of wars that kill many millions and technologies that are sapping billions. I specifically do not assert that technologies at their worst are comparable to world war. I assert that world wars are horrible things and frying brains on an epic scale is a horrible thing. I could point out that Lewis is skeptical over whether war makes people less likely to die with a good balance sheet, while a medium that includes unsolicited porn does much to make people less likely to die with a good balance sheet. But I repeat my assertion that *world wars are horrible things and frying brains on an epic scale is a horrible thing.* 

But enough of this; let's get on to the volume with the works of art in this series. (The Socratic dialogues are often meant as works of art, but they get their own volume.)

I hope you enjoy them.

# Introduction to "Beware of Geeks Bearing Gifts"

Damon Knight's classic "To Serve Man" has seemingly benevolent aliens come with all sorts of wonderful devices asking nothing in return, and after there are ten-year "exchange groups," a horrified UN translator recognizes that the aliens' book *How to Serve Man* is a cookbook.<sup>21</sup>

This is a parody set in our days. The book is written from the viewpoint of an elite member, who is looking for the best interests of the "Herd."

It closes with someone scandalized about book contents.

This might be considered an alternate fictional representation making the point that C.S. Lewis tried to make in *The Abolition of Man*,<sup>22</sup> at a much shorter length than *That Hideous Strength*.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>21</sup> "To Serve Man," Wikipedia (Wikimedia Foundation, November 12, 2022), https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/To\_Serve\_Man.

<sup>22</sup> C.S. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man*, New York: MacMillan 1947.

<sup>23</sup> C.S. Lewis, *That Hideous Strength*, New York: Scribner, 1945, 1946.

#### Beware of Geeks Bearing Gifts

Why did we call ourselves the Katana? It was in the excitement of a moment, and a recognition that our project has some off the elegance of a Katana to a Japan fan. We were more current than today's fashions and for that matter *made* today's fashions, but representing an unbroken tradition since Plato's most famous work, what *they* call the world's oldest, longest, least funny, and least intentional political joke: *The Republic*. Things would have been a lot easier if it weren't for *them. They* obstructed the Katana.

The Katana have a dynamic thousand-or-so goals, but there is only one that counts: the relentless improvement of the Herd. Some of the older victories have really been improving agriculture what seems like thirty, sixty, or a hundredfold, with mechanized engineering for farming and a realization that you can have meat costing scarcely more than vegetables if you optimize animals like you'd optimize any other machine, under conditions that turn out to be torture for farm animals. There are some lands where the Herd has been imbued with enough progress that the middle class has about as much creature comfort as there is to be had, and for that matter among the poor the #1 dietary problem is obesity. Maybe we made the Herd look more like pigs, but please do not *blame* us! *We* aren't eating that much!

We have been providing the Herd with progressively greater "space-conquering technologies", as they are sold, which neuter the significance of their having physical bodies and the structure of life that was there before us. First we gave gasoline-powered Locomotives and great Airbirds, devices that could move the meat of the human body faster. Now we are unfolding another wave of body-conquering technologies, which obviate the need to move meat. They are powered by a kind of unnatural living thing. Perhaps the present central offering in this horn of plenty, or what we present as a horn of plenty, is a Portal: a small device carried by many even in the poorest lands, that draws attention to itself and such stimulation it offers, disengaging from ancient patterns of life.

Things would be so much easier if it weren't for *them*. We tried to tell people that *they* hate women; now we've told people that *they* hate gays. *They* still get in the way of progress.

Yesterday there was a planned teleconference, a town hall among the Katana after an important document from *them* had been intercepted. It was encrypted with a flawed algorithm, but cryptanalysis is easy and semantics is hard, and we gave the document to the semanticians for analysis.

The title of the document was straightforward and one that the Katana was happy to see: "How to Serve Man". But the head semantician came late, and his face was absolutely ashen. It took him some time to compose himself, until he said—"The book... *How to Serve... How to Serve Man...* It doesn't contain one single recipe!"

[With apologies to Damon Knight, "To Serve Man"]

# Discussion questions for "Beware of Geeks Bearing Gifts"

- 1. How much of this world do you see in this story?
- 2. What do you think the Katana represents in this story?
- 3. What do you think the Herd represents?
- 4. Do you think the Katana has the Herd's best interests at heart? Why or why not?
- 5. What things can you do to not be managed as part of the Herd?
- 6. What piece of technology in your life is most like what the Katana is providing for the Herd?
- 7. Has your life been significantly changed by gifts from geeks?
- 8. What are the biggest intrusions of technology in your life?
- 9. How can you regain some control?

10. Have you researched Humane Tech, or might you? Its site is at https://humanetech.com.

## **Introduction to "That Hideous Impotence"**

This work represents an affectionate parody of C.S. Lewis, *That Hideous Strength*.<sup>24</sup>

Part of why it works is how apt *That Hideous Strength*<sup>25</sup> is in portraying the kind of spiritual forces at work in the world today. But the resonances extend far beyond that.

The title, "That Hideous Impotence," is in the shadow not only of C.S. Lewis's books but Orthodox liturgy, which mentions "the feeble audacity of the demons,"<sup>26</sup> and says that the demons and evil have power over us ultimately only so much as we give it to them. A leitmotif under a previous parish priest was, "Everything that happens to us is either a blessing from God or a temptation that has been allowed for our strengthening," and as a cancer survivor I think he is right.

<sup>24</sup> C.S. Lewis, *That Hideous Strength*, New York: Scribner, 1945, 1946.

<sup>25</sup> C.S. Lewis, *That Hideous Strength*, New York: Scribner, 1945, 1946.
<sup>26</sup> Holy Trinity Orthodox Church, "Orthodox Calendar,"

http://www.holytrinityorthodox.com/calendar/index.php?year=20 92&today=10&month=12&trp=1&tzo=0, seen November 21, 2022.

### **That Hideous Impotence**

Thimble even maintained that a good critic, by his sensibility alone, could detect between the traces headknowledge and heart-knowledge had left on literature. "What common measure is there between IT hackers with their obscure and esoteric interests, their unworldly collections of skills that ordinary mortals scarcely even hear of, their attendant servers and daemons, and figures like the saints, who seem to produce results simply by trusting and following God?" Heart-knowledge and head-knowledge differ profoundly; heart-knowledge (though this is doubtful) may be as difficult to acquire; it is certainly a better exercise of the whole person.

The NASTY (the NASTY Association for Scientism's and Transhumanism's Y-combinator) had, in a spirit of jest, one member occasionally call another member "more evil than Satan himself." But in fact the many members fitting into NASTY had one-by-one filled in pieces: now by FaecesBook, now by the Twits' Crowd, now by dark Goggles, now by MicroSith, now by Forbidden Fruit, all offering such treasures that in countries as poor as Africa, No Such Agency would know not only every web search and every text, but to any who could obtain a smartphone and a watch, every step, every breath, every heartbeat.

As time passed on, the technological dragnet only drew tighter. And people naturally think that all of this is

the creative genius of man.

But there was always, always individual human freedom.

"It is *rather* horrible. The newer technologies together represent something like a secularized occult. I mean even our time (we come at the extreme tail end of it), though you could still use that sort of technology innocently, you can't do it safely. These things aren't bad in themselves, but they are already bad for us. They sort of withered the person who dealt with them. On purpose. They couldn't be adopted by the masses if they couldn't. People of our time are withered. Some millennials are quite pious and humble and all that, but something has been taken out of them. Take away their gadgets for a day and they will show a quietness that is just a little deadly, like the quiet of a gutted building. It's the result of having our minds laid open to something that broadens the environment.

"Orthodoxy is a last and greatest view of an old order in which matter and spirit are, for a modern point of view, confused. For some saints every operation on Nature is a kind of personal contact, like coaxing a child or stroking one's horse. Now we have the modern man to whom Nature is something dead—a machine to be worked, and taken to bits if it won't work the way he pleases, and postmodern varieties with their 'spirituality' which drives ever much deeper the chasm separating the sacred from the secular. The Orthodox Church, with her saints, represent what we've got to get back to do and an ever-open door. Did you know that Orthodox are all forbidden to pursue systematic theology?"

But Redemption already knew, in fact, that there was Eldilic energy and Eldilic knowledge behind the NASTY. It was, of course, another question whether the human members knew of the dark powers who were their real organisers. And in the long run this question was not perhaps important. As Ransom himself had said more than once, "Whether they know it or whether they don't, much the same sort of things are going to happen. It's not a question of how the human members of NASTY will act the Dark-Eldils will see to that—but of how they will think about their actions."

For Redemption already knew of the constant stings of temptation come to all of us and try to entice us to believe ideas we think our own and embrace to our slow spiritual depth. The Philokalia, second only to the Bible among Orthodox classics in recent history, was a manual on the spiritual life that kept returning to the activities and operations of demons. Its authors know well enough about the continuing warfare of thoughts to desire this or that that have been assaulting us for the ages, and demonic temptations occur not only to some rare specialty of people deeply enmeshed in e.g. the occult. (And we are briefly told, "Men hold on to sin because they think it adorns them.") Demonic possession through occult or other means is of course a worse problem, but whether we like it or not a great deal of what we think of as our thoughts and our desires are stings of demons attacking us. As one student had approached Redemption and said, with great excitement, "I've just had a completely new idea," Ransom answered, "I am very excited for you and for your having this new idea. However, this idea was had before by Suchand-such particular monk in the fourth century, and furthermore he is still wrong."

Redemption opened *The Luddite's Guide to Technology* and called out:

#### A HYMN TO ARROGANCE.

The Saint opened his Golden Mouth and sang, 'There be no war in Heaven, Not now, at very least, And not ere were created. The roval race of mankind. Put on your feet the Gospel of peace, And pray, a-stomping down the gates of Hell. There were war in Heaven but ever brief. The Archangel Saint Michael, Commander of the bodiless hosts, Said but his name, "Michael," Which is, being interpreted, "Who is like God?" With that the rebellion were cast down from Heaven. Sore losers one and all. They remain to sharpen the faithful, God useth them to train and make strength. Shall the axe boast itself against him that heweth therewith? Or shall the saw magnify itself against him that shaketh it? As if the rod should shake itself against them that lift it up, Or as if the staff should lift up itself, As if it were no wood. Therefore be not dismayed, If one book of Holy Scripture state, That the Devil incited King David to a census. And another sayeth that God did so. For God permitted it to happen by the Devil, As he that heweth lifteth an axe. And God gave to David a second opportunity, In the holy words of Joab. Think thou not that God and the Devil are equal, Learnest thou enough of doctrine,

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#### C.J.S. Hayward

To know that God is greater than can be thought. And hath neither equal nor opposite, The Devil is if anything the opposite, Of Michael, the Captain of the angels, Though truth be told. In the contest between Michael and the Devil, The Devil fared him not well. The dragon wert as a little boy, Standing outside an Emperor's palace, Shooting spitwads with a peashooter, Because that wert the greatest harm, That he saweth how to do. The Orthodox Church knoweth well enough, 'The feeble audacity of the demons.' Read thou well how the Devil crowned St. Job, The Devil and the devils aren't much. Without the divine permission, And truth be told, Ain't much with it either: God alloweth temptations to strengthen; St. Job the Much-Suffering emerged in triumph. A novice told of an odd clatter in a courtyard, Asked the Abbot what he should do: "It is just the demons. Pay it no mind," came the answer. Every devil is on a leash, And the devout are immune to magic. Thou shalt tread upon the lion and adder: The young lion and the dragon shalt thou trample under feet. The God of peace will soon crush Satan under vour feet. Wherefore be thou not arrogant towards men, But be ever more arrogant towards devils and the Devil himself:

"Blow, and spit on him."

And Redemption agreed. He said, "Faecesbook's oldschool database-like limit on specifying one's religion are constricted. The facilities are sorely lacking to give one's religion as, "*Alter Christus*: "Follower of Jesus" means "Another Christ!""

Thimble asked, "And what of the Arthurian legends?" Redemption said, "What about them?"

Thimble said, "Please, I want to hear."

Redemption said, "Well, one can say that there is no option to *achieve* the Holy Grail, nor to *acquire* it. The only game in town is to *become* the Holy Grail. But that is on the periphery."

iPun said, "I'm no literary critic, nor do I know about the Holy Grail, but it sounds an awful lot to me like you're holding out on us for an answer."

Redemption said, "Perhaps the most damning remark about medieval literature is that of all that one of the greatest literary legacies, and the only one on ordinary non-medievalists' radar, is that of the Arthurian legends."

Thimble said, "Could you be a little more concrete?"

Redemption said, "Take the figure of Merlin. His name, rendered as 'Myrddhin' in Lawhead's account, was changed to 'Merlin' in the Brut in order not to sound like a French swear-word, today 'merde.' The Brut, formally the *Historia Regum Britanniae*, is a twelfth-century example of history as society would like it to be, like some conspiracy theory works today, which is to say that is pseudo-history that today would ordinarily be introduced as fiction, with masterful storytelling but no connection to actual history. Also, the legends were importantly no longer offered in Celtic language, but Latin that could quickly spread through Europe. The legends spread like wildfire through Europe even centuries later, and interestingly spread in the vernacular, possibly carried by the troubadours who would inspire the name of Francis of Assisi.

"But about Merlin specifically. There have been efforts to Christianize him, and not just in recent history: Robert de Boron represents a medieval teller of Arthurian tales who tried to anchor them to Christian doctrine. In Sir Thomas Mallory, the hinge between the medieval flourishing and almost all subsequent English retellings of the legend, Merlin is not called a 'wizard,' but a 'prophet.' There is in the medieval legends pseudo-Christian working out of pseudo-doctrine that the Devil was to have a son by an almost-perfect virgin who had slipped in her prayers but once, and he would be something like an incarnate Anti-Christ, but Christians fortunately got wind of this and said many powerful prayers, to the effect that Merlin was born the Devil's son, but without the Devil's evil, so someone who commanded the Devil's power was yet good and Christian. And the same is to be said of C.S. Lewis, in whom we read:

"And where would Merlin be?"

"Yes. He's the really interesting figure. Did the whole thing fail because he died so soon? Has it ever struck you what an odd creation Merlin is? He's not evil: yet he's a magician. He is obviously a druid: yet he knows all about the Grail. He's 'the devil's son': but then Layamon goes out of his way to tell you that the kind of being who fathered Merlin needn't have been bad after all. You remember: "There dwell in the sky many kinds of wights. Some of them are good, and some work evil."

"It *is* rather puzzling. I hadn't thought of it before."

"I often wonder," said Dr. Dimble, "whether Merlin doesn't represent the last trace of something the later tradition has quite forgotten about-something that became impossible when the only people in touch with the supernatural were either white or black, either priests or sorcerors.

"Perhaps like no other character in literature, C.S. Lewis's Merlin is 'the really interesting figure.' He rivets all attention on himself, and for good reason. The standard distinction between flat and rounded characters in literature has said to be that a rounded character believably surprises the reader. Merlin comes remarkably close to delivering nothing but believable surprises.

"And Lewis has Merlin, and reference to being the Devil's son; the opening prehistory of the main story has a figure say, 'Marry, sirs, if Merlin who was the Devil's son was a true King's man as ever ate bread, is it not a shame that you, being but the sons of bitches, must be rebels and regicides?', but even Amazon reviewers have asked why Lewis has Merlin come if he's not allowed to do anything. And indeed one monumental goal when the Pendragon speaks with him is to shut down every single service Merlin offers to do for him (and finally corner him into one terrifying service)."

Thimble said, "Well and done, but does that one character tarnish into oblivion the entirety of the encyclopedia's worth of Arthurian legends that have been written?"

Redemption paused, and said, "Now that you mention it. I think it does in a much more direct way than I expected."

Thimble said, "How's that?"

Redemption said, "The Arthurian legends represent a never-never land to us, but it shows historical insensitivity to assume that they were realistic fiction to the Brut's first audience, or Chrétien de Troyes, or Sir Thomas Mallory. The Arthurian legends were a never-neverland when the ink

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on those pages was still wet: a land in which anything can happen, at least *anything* wondrous or supernatural. Commerce never sullies the pages, and one of very few peasants to get a physical description has a striking description that seems to describe a pachyderm more than any human. The dates for Arthurian legends to spread through Europe like wildfire are twelfth century and following, but the dates given as ostensible historical references for the original events are fifth or sixth century. In other words, the medievals telling the legends lived about as far after Arthur's supposed time as we are after them. There are a similar number of centuries in between.

"Furthermore, you get comments, in relation to chivalry and courtly love, that 'People don't really love nowadays, not like they loved then,' which is a perfect recipe for the same thing as you get today in the Orthodox Church with a nuclear family all wearing cassocks like monks and priests, and having an Irish last name. It's an attempt to re-create a past that never existed, and that is a gateway drug not just to silliness but trouble."

Thimble said, "Yes, but are stories about never-never land really as bad as a baptized Merlin?"

Redemption said, "I'm trying to think of a pleasant analogy. An unpleasant analogy might be to ask if soft porn is really as bad as hard porn. We ought ideally steer clear of both.

"In the desert, monks were perennially warned of the danger of escapism. When escape seems like something we need, it is a temptation, and the proper way of dealing with it is to keep on praying. Escape and the occult both have a sense that we know better than God what circumstances we should be in, and not see the here and now as a gift from God the Father. The whole temptation is a hydra. Whatever else Muslims have wrong, there is a very good reason why, historically, Muslim science may have been very good at observation, but very bad at entertaining competing theories: the basic objection is, in Christian terms, 'How can you want anything but what God in his Sovereignty has willed?' And this repugnance stems from something Western Christianity has lost in its transition to modernity.

"And this is why Lewis's distinction between 'fairy magic', meaning fairy-tale magic, which he saw as harmless and most often supplying plot devices, and 'real magic', meaning realistic depiction of occult practice, which he condemned, does not hold well enough. Of course the distinction is to be made, but when one reads the Chronicles of Narnia and reads Aslan saying, 'This was the very reason why you were brought to Narnia, that by knowing me here for a little, you may know me better there,' one wants to be in Narnia in escape and not to set down Narnia to experience real joy. To wish to be in Narnia represents the same passion, in the classical sense, as to wish to be Merlin.

"And if a tree may be judged by its fruit, the many fantasy authors who have followed Lewis in writing medieval fantasy have scarcely understood medieval history or been Christians, writing for Christian edification. Even as far as escape goes, Aslan sends all the children back from Narnia to our world, and says that trips to Narnia are only appropriate up to a certain age. In some subsequent works, the traveler from our world never returns: he remains in escape."

Thimble asked, "So we're best off leaving the Arthurian legends, and Merlin, with the medieval world?"

Redemption said, "I have trouble answering that question Aye or Nay."

Thimble asked, "Why? You see shades of grey?"

Redemption said, "No. I don't believe we've left the medieval world."

Thimble asked, "How's that?"

Redemption said, "I don't believe we've left the medieval world. I believe we've delved deeper into it than any figure who died before modern or postmodern history. If you know anything about how the katana—the sword that was called the soul of the samarai—is made, you would know that a smith makes a particular iron block, then stretches it and folds it in on itself, then that is hammered until it is stretched out, then folded in on itself, and the process is repeated many, many times. When the manifold steel is shaped into a sword, the blade is sharp as a razor, incredibly strong, and will last for ages, perhaps for centuries. The medieval West, isolated from the Greek Fathers, then later on infatuated with "the Philosopher" Aristotle to Thomas Aquinas's own great harm, and with its stream of Renaissances, represents that block of steel stretched out and folded in on itself. The chain continues for more than the more spectacular eccentricities to be found in the postmodern world. But the future sword blade stretched out and folding in on itself is a process of and by the medieval world, and a process that will perhaps continue until that terrible day when the Lord comes again in glory to judge the living and the dead—and may help pave the way for it!"

iPun said, "Do you not make allowances for greater ignorance in the past?"

Redemption said, "I do not make any allowance for greater ignorance in the past, although allowances for *different* ignorance in the past are more negotiable. You, personally, would do well to make allowances for greater ignorance in the *present*."

iPun said, "Do you not deny that we live in the ongoing wake of an explosion of knowledge in the sciences?"

Redemption said, "Knowledge can be ignorance. There has been a shift, as the steel has folded in on itself, of moving from heart-knowledge, knowledge of the whole person, to head-knowledge, to a knowledge that in its proper use serves as a moon to the sun of heart-knowledge. And in that sense we have gone from seeing by sunlight to being expert at seeing by moonlight. In the heyday of Arthurian legends, Rome warned its members about "idle romances," and even someone as foundational as Chrétien de Troyes has a privileged woman reading a romance on top of a sweatshop. As far as an explosion goes, we are spiritual heirs to the wreckage of a bomb exploding, so that even in Africa it is common to have multiple mobile devices per house. Lewis wrote of the press as spewing Western venom across the world; we've done his press one better, or perhaps many better for that. And the press of his day did not match the vile content on the web, nor accept as normal the intrusion of unsolicited porn, except that today you need a pill to make love.

"It is as if you stopped using the light of the sun himself, and would only see by the light of the moon, and as events unfolded you regained the natural human ability to see truly but imperfectly by the light of moon and star, and then you invented night vision systems that let you see by infrared indication of heat, or the little bit of green light that takes the lion share of natural light by night, and then to your pride combined them to make one cadaverous combination. And in all of this you remain in Plato's cave, and will not step out in the light of the sun, and not only because the people who see by moonlight would call it lunacy if you helped them see by the light of the sun."

Thimble said, "And in the light only of the moon herself, intimacy itself turns artificial."

Redemption said no more.

Gain flipped the page of the book, and read:

...accounts of Satan as God's jester. For all of us do the will of God; that is not the question. The real question is whether we will do God's will as instruments, like Satan and Judas, or Sons, as St. Peter and St. John.

That is why Christians need not fear the Antichrist, even if he is knocking at the door.

For Satan will ever remain God's jester, and though an Antichrist be possessed of God's jester or not, to Christians there is no Antichrist and Christ is ever present to those who only "keep their eyes on Jesus." Do you fear not being able to buy and sell if you do not accept the Mark of the Beast on your hand and forehead? Know then that, as is said in the *Philokalia*, a man can live without eating (or drinking) if God so wills? Do not worry that the grace of God which so strengthened the martyrs in ages past need fail if you cannot buy bread or perhaps water. God is merciful, and no one can use force to stop God from being gracious to you. Remain faithful, that is all. Christians may, in the end, be saved simply because they refused the mark of the beast. Many monastics would have given everything to buy the grace of God at such a light price!

Gain heard footsteps on the floor behind the door, snapped shut the book and turned red, and then slowly opened it again.

Redemption laughed.

# Discussion questions for "That Hideous Impotence"

- 1. What of the changes between *That Hideous Strength* and this work surprised you the most?
- 2. What of the changes surprised you the least?
- 3. What was the most interesting continuity you saw?
- 4. What part challenged you the most?
- 5. Do you see the parallels between what Merlin represents and Eastern Orthodoxy?
- 6. What do you think about this work as a whole?
- 7. Do you see any changes in your own life that you might follow up on?

### Introduction to "Religion Within the Bounds of Amusement"

This piece of satire was written after reading Neil Postman's *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in an Age of Show Business*, and attending a church service that was so TV-like that there was a rectangular hanging like what you see on a TV screen ?above? the pulpit.

Neil Postman said, "I am not worried about religion becoming the content of television. I am worried about television becoming the content of religion."

This work was written after I tried, a student, to engage the pastor of the television-as-religion service, and he refused to dispute with me. It is also one of the first works that I wrote under "inspiration," a condition where a half-formed work comes to me and I struggle to give it flesh, wrestling both to master it and to get myself out of the way for it to be properly expressed (these are paradoxically two sides of the same coin).

### **Religion Within the Bounds of Amusement**

On the screen appear numerous geometrical forms prisms, cylinders, cubes — dancing, spinning, changing shape, in a very stunning computer animation. In the background sounds the pulsing beat of techno music. The forms waver, and then coalesce into letters: "Religion Within the Bounds of Amusement."

The music and image fade, to reveal a man, perfect in form and appearance, every hair in place, wearing a jet black suit and a dark, sparkling tie. He leans forward slightly, as the camera focuses in on him.

"Good morning, and I would like to extend a warm and personal welcome to each and every one of you from those of us at the Church of the Holy Television. Please sit back, relax, and turn off your brain."

Music begins to play, and the screen shows a woman holding a microphone. She is wearing a long dress of the whitest white, the color traditionally symbolic of goodness and purity, which somehow manages not to conceal her unnaturally large breasts. The camera slowly focuses in as she begins to sing.

"You got problems? That's OK. You got problems? That's OK. Not enough luxury? That's OK. Only three cars? That's OK. Not enough power? That's OK. Can't get your way? That's OK. Not enough for you? That's OK. Can't do it on your own? That's OK. You got problems? That's OK. You got problems? That's OK. Just call out to Jesus, and he'll make them go away. Just call out to Jesus, and he'll make them go away."

As the music fades, the camera returns to the man.

"Have you ever thought about how much God loves us? Think about the apex of progress that we are at, and how much more he has blessed us than any one else.

"The Early Christians were in a dreadful situation. They were always under persecution. Because of this, they didn't have the physical assurance of security that is the basis for spiritual growth, nor the money to buy the great libraries of books that are necessary to cultivate wisdom. It is a miracle that Christianity survived at all.

"The persecution ended, but darkness persisted for a thousand years. The medievals were satisfied with blind faith, making it the context of thought and leisure. Their concept of identity was so weak that it was entangled with obedience. The time was quite rightly called the Dark Ages.

"But then, ah, the Renaissance and the Enlightenment. Man and his mind enthroned. Religion within the bounds of reason. Then science and technology, the heart of all true progress, grew.

"And now, we sit at the apex, blessed with more and better technology than anyone else. What more could you possibly ask for? What greater blessing could there possibly be? We have the technology, and know how to enjoy it. Isn't God gracious?"

There is a dramatic pause, and then the man closes his eyes. "Father, I thank you that we have not fallen into sin; that we do not worship idols, that we do not believe lies, and that we are not like the Pharisees. I thank you that we are good, moral people; that we are Americans. I thank you, and I praise you for your wondrous power. Amen."

He opens his eyes, and turns to the camera. It focuses in on his face, and his piercing gaze flashes out like

lightning. With a thunderous voice, he boldly proclaims, "To God alone be the glory, for ever and ever!"

The image fades.

In the background can be heard the soft tones of Beethoven. A couple fades in; they are elegantly dressed, sitting at a black marble table, set with roast pheasant. The room is of Baroque fashion; marble pillars and mirrors with gilt frames adorn the walls. French windows overlook a formal garden.

The scene changes, and a sleek black sports car glides through forest, pasture, village, mountain. The music continues to play softly.

It passes into a field, and in the corner of the field a small hovel stands. The camera comes closer, and two halfnaked children come into view, playing with some sticks and a broken Coca-Cola bottle. Their heads turn and follow the passing car.

A voice gently intones, "These few seconds may be the only opportunity some people ever have to know about you. What do you want them to see?"

The picture changes. Two men are walking through a field. As the camera comes closer, it is seen that they are deep in conversation.

One of them looks out at the camera with a probing gaze, and then turns to the other. "What do you mean?"

"I don't know, Jim." He draws a deep breath, and closes his eyes. "I just feel so... so empty. A life filled with nothing but shallowness. Like there's nothing inside, no purpose, no meaning. Just an everlasting nothing."

"Well, you know, John, for every real and serious problem, there is a solution which is trivial, cheap, and instantaneous." He unslings a small backpack, opening it to pull out two cans of beer, and hands one to his friend. "Shall we?"

The cans are opened.

Suddenly, the peaceful silence is destroyed by the blare of loud rock music. The camera turns upwards to the

sky, against which may be seen parachutists; it spins, and there is suddenly a large swimming pool, and a vast table replete with great pitchers and kegs of beer. The parachutists land; they are all young women, all blonde, all laughing and smiling, all wearing string bikinis, and all anorexic.

For the remaining half of the commercial, the roving camera takes a lascivious tour of the bodies of the models. Finally, the image fades, and a deep voice intones, "Can you think of a better way to spend your weekends?"

The picture changes. A luxury sedan, passing through a ghetto, stops beside a black man, clad in rags. The driver, who is white, steps out in a pristine business suit, opens his wallet, and pulls out five crisp twenty dollar bills.

"I know that you can't be happy, stealing, lying, and getting drunk all of the time. Here is a little gift to let you know that Jesus loves you." He steps back into the car without waiting to hear the man's response, and speeds off.

Soon, he is at a house. He steps out of the car, bible in hand, and rings the doorbell.

The door opens, and a man says, "Nick, how are you? Come in, do come in. Have a seat. I was just thinking of you, and it is so nice of you to visit. May I interest you in a little Martini?"

Nick sits down and says, "No, Scott. I am a Christian, and we who are Christian do not do such things."

"Aah; I see." There is a sparkle in the friend's eye as he continues, "And tell me, what did Jesus do at his first miracle?"

The thick, black, leatherbound 1611 King James bible arcs through the air, coming to rest on the back of Scott's head. There is a resounding thud.

"You must learn that the life and story of Jesus are serious matters, and not to be taken as the subject of jokes."

The screen turns white as the voice glosses, "This message has been brought to you by the Association of Concerned Christians, who would like to remind you that you, too, can be different from the world, and can present a positive witness to Christ."

In the studio again, the man is sitting in a chair.

"Now comes a very special time in our program. You, our viewers, matter most to us. It is your support that keeps us on the air. And I hope that you do remember to send us money; when you do, God will bless you. So keep your checks rolling, and we will be able to continue this ministry, and provide answers to your questions. I am delighted to be able to hear your phone calls. Caller number one, are you there?"

"Yes, I am, and I would like to say how great you are. I sent you fifty dollars, and someone gave me an anonymous check for five hundred! I only wish I had given you more."

"That is good to hear. God is so generous. And what is your question?"

"I was wondering what God's will is for America? And what I can do to help?"

"Thank you; that's a good question.

"America is at a time of great threat now; it is crumbling because good people are not elected to office.

"The problem would be solved if Christians would all listen to Rush Limbaugh, and then go out and vote. Remember, bad people are sent to Washington by good people who don't vote. With the right men in office, the government would stop wasting its time on things like the environment, and America would become a great and shining light, to show all the world what Christ can do.

"Caller number two?"

"I have been looking for a church to go to, and having trouble. I just moved, and used to go to a church which had nonstop stories and anecdotes; the congregation was glued to the edges of their seats. Here, most of the services are either boring or have something which lasts way too long. I have found a few churches whose services I generally enjoy—the people really sing the songs—but there are just too many things that aren't amusing. For starters, the sermons make me uncomfortable, and for another, they have a very boring time of silent meditation, and this weird mysticism about 'kiss of peace' and something to do with bread and wine. Do you have any advice for me?"

"Yes, I do. First of all, what really matters is that you have Jesus in your heart. Then you and God can conquer the world. Church is a peripheral; it doesn't really have anything to do with Jesus being in your heart. If you find a church that you like, go for it, but if there aren't any that you like, it's not your fault that they aren't doing their job.

"And the next caller?"

"Hello. I was wondering what the Song of Songs is about."

"The Song of Songs is an allegory of Christ's love for the Church. Various other interpretations have been suggested, but they are all far beyond the bounds of good taste, and read things into the text which would be entirely inappropriate in holy Scriptures. Next caller?"

"My people has a story. I know tales of years past, of soldiers come, of pillaging, of women ravaged, of villages razed to the ground and every living soul murdered by men who did not hesitate to wade through blood. Can you tell me what kind of religion could possibly decide that the Crusades were holy?"

The host, whose face had suddenly turned a deep shade of red, shifted slightly, and pulled at the side of his collar. After a few seconds, a somewhat less polished voice hastily states, "That would be a very good question to answer, and I really would like to, but I have lost track of time. It is now time for an important message from some of our sponsors."

The screen is suddenly filled by six dancing rabbits, singing about toilet paper.

A few minutes of commercials pass: a computer animated flash of color, speaking of the latest kind of candy; a family brought together and made happy by buying the right brand of vacuum cleaner; a specific kind of hamburger helping black and white, young and old to live together in harmony. Somewhere in there, the Energizer bunny appears; one of the people in the scene tells the rabbit that he should have appeared at some time other than the commercial breaks. Finally, the host, who has regained his composure, is on the screen again.

"Well, that's all for this week. I hope you can join us next week, as we begin a four part series on people whose lives have been changed by the Church of the Holy Television. May God bless you, and may all of your life be ever filled with endless amusement!"

## Questions for discussion regarding "Religion Within the Bounds of Amusement"

- 1. Do you think his *Religion within the Bounds of Reason* was a good idea?
- 2. What of the heart is left out in such a project?
- 3. Do you think "Religion within the Bounds of Amusement" is a good option for worship?
- 4. What of the heart and head is left out in such an option?
- 5. Where have you experienced religion within the bounds of amusement?
- 6. Once you have given up attacks on the head, can you take the longest journey you will ever take, the journey from our head to our heart?
- 7. Did you get a good laugh out of this piece?

## Introduction to "Game Review: Meatspace"

I was a gamer until beyond the point that it is time to put childish things behind, and by the same stroke did not appreciate what God gave me as real. Some form of this syndrome, I think, is remarkably common, perhaps mediated by cellphones.

George MacDonald, in one fairy tale, talked about "the doll that opens and closes its eyes."

This is written as an appreciation of a doll that opens and closes its eyes, and the incomparable gift of reality.

It should perhaps be read alongside "God the Spiritual Father" (https://cjshayward.com/father/) and other works like "Why I'm Happy I'm Living Now, at This Place, at This Time, in This World"

(https://cjshayward.com/why-im-glad-im-alive-now-at-this-time-in-this-world/).

But even read without reference to the others, it represents an interesting work.

### **Game Review: Meatspace**

#### **Game:** Meatspace

Score: ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ (7 out of 5 possible!) Category: First Person Immersive/Puzzle/Real Life Adventure

> **meatspace**: /meet'spays/, n. The physical world, where the meat lives — as opposed to *cyberspace*. Hackers are actually more willing to use this term than 'cyberspace', because it's not speculative — we already have a running meatspace implementation (the universe). Compare *RL*.

The New Hacker's Dictionary, "meatspace"

I am faced with the daunting task of reviewing Meatspace. The temptation is to say, "This is stunning! It makes [*insert name of classic*] look like a bad Pong clone! I want to play it again and again!" It's a *temptation*, not because the game doesn't live up to that praise, but because discerning readers read reviews like that and their defenses go up against a reviewer who is, to put it delicately, getting slightly carried away.

So I'll let go of the obvious temptation, and talk about how Meatspace handles physics. There's another game we all know where player slang for a smoke grenade is "lag bomb", because the physics of the smoke is so taxing that it slows the other player's computer to a crawl: a smoke grenade, aka lag bomb, is a cheap way to half-paralyze other players. Maybe that's an extreme example, but haven't we all dealt with games where things get choppy (maybe just a little) when there's a lot going on?

That doesn't happen in Meatspace. End of discussion. Period. For one example, one of a million little effects done *perfectly* is a squirrel running across your path. It's a throwaway effect, really: the game would appear quite convincing without it, but every single detail, from how the furry little body changes shape as it moves to the artificial intelligence controlling its motion to every single perfectly rendered hair, is flawless. Trying to find something that works as a lag bomb simply doesn't work. Move over, physics engines that have a reasonably convincing rag doll effect. Move over, for that matter, the supercomputers I used at the National Center for Supercomputing Applications. The physics is absolutely stunning.

But to say that and stop there is to paint a deceptive picture. Very deceptive. The physics and the graphics are the best I've seen, but there is more to the game than the physics. Many players don't give the physics a second thought. However well done the physics may be, and however stunningly advanced, the physics is one piece among a million. A beautiful piece, admittedly, but not even one of the biggest. At least to most players; there are some players who play only for the sight and sound aspect, but you can play the game well without those things even being much of a consideration. As impressive as the physics are, and as impressive as every sensory effect is, it would be deceptive at best to say that the game is driven by sight and sound.

In *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* (the book, but unfortunately not the movie), Zaphod Beeblebrox is drawn towards the Total Perspective Vortex, which we learn is a horrifying death, before learning *why* it is a horrifying death. The Total Perspective Vortex shows a person's absolute (in)significance within the universe as an insignificant and forgettable item in a universe that is vast beyond measure. And that is such a horrifying experience that people die from the trauma. Except that Zaphod walks into the Total Perspective Vortex and walks out not only not dead, but contented, happy, proud, and even more full of himself than usual.

What has been happening is that Zaphod has been in an alternate universe, and more specifically an alternate universe that completely revolves around him. *He* is the most important feature of the universe, and the universe knows it. Had he been thrown into the *real* universe's Total Perspective Vortex, he would have been destroyed by it.

And in fact with the other computer games I've played and written, the player is the center of the universe. And that's not the end of it. The universe revolves around the player, and in fact nothing is put into the game but things that are for the player. In a room in a first person shooter, there are millions and in fact billions of ways to see the room. But, if there is a player in the room, only one of those perspectives or angles is calculated: the player's. Everything else is simply ignored. If there isn't a player in the room, the room might as well not be visible. And the rooms themselves exist for the player. The player is a good deal more than the center of the universe: if it's not there for the player, it's not there.

Maybe I've been the center of the universe in other games I've played. In Meatspace, I am *not* the center of the universe. Meatspace has such an immense, fathomless universe that you or I could never be its center.

In Meatspace, if I am in a room and I can see, the light goes just as well where I can't see it as where I can see it. If I leave the light on and walk out of the room, the room is visible-the physics calculations go on-just as well as I am in the room. There are places I could get to, and places I could never get to, and both are developed in full detaileven though there are many more places I couldn't get to than places I could (conceivably) travel to. When I play the game-or, to be more exact, when I join the game-there are billions of others in the game, the vast, vast majority of whom have no idea that I am there. If I'm the center of a game's universe, the universe is miserably small. In Meatspace, there is a universe with so many stars that no one inside the game knows exactly how many, and one planet on one of those stars is a rich enough world that no matter how long you played you could never see more than a tiny slice of its treasures.

And AI in the game... To talk about artificial intelligence, I need to draw an analogy with anime. When people watch anime, they are not so imperceptive that they think that the pictures look exactly like people, or cars, or whatever. What they do is cooperate with pictures that most people would never confuse with the real thing, and make believe with some not-very-realistic cartoons, and in their minds give something that isn't really there. The pictures certainly *suggest* people, or whatever else they are supposed to represent. But people watching it cooperate and overlook some rather vast differences between the pictures and what people pretend the pictures are.

In games, the artificial intelligence is like this. You can pretend that you're really having a conversation, or even that the non-player characters move around in a natural way. You can cooperate with the artificial intelligence the way anime enthusiasts cooperate with the cartoon. But you're being generous.

I didn't have to pretend the Meatspace people were

intelligent. They *were* intelligent, without my pretending. The game was much more interesting than if the universe, and everybody's life, revolved around me. People had an infinite wealth of experiences, stories, goals, projects, desires, habits, and I may have been part of the picture, but the picture was far bigger than me. When I talked with people, I was not pretending they were intelligent. There was no need. I was stepping into a larger world. In a fantasy world, characters talk about selling magic items, rumors, joining a party, and other things that revolve around a cramped player. I can't list all the things people talk about in Meatspace (my hard drive only has 30 gigabytes of free space), but talking with another person is an encounter with a larger world that includes more than your priorities. The way other people appear in Meatspace is something I've never seen in another game: an opportunity to step into something deeper and vaster than "Me! Me!"

And this is deceptive, because it generally describes something in a game where nothing is generic—everything is always specific. I'd like to give a slice of specifically what I encountered.

I went through a meandering course that took me through shops with sundry wares, ended up purchasing a few square feet of something very much like leather, and settled down at a place where I could get a food ration. Except "food ration" is a generic and therefore inappropriate term; they did not sell me a "food ration", but (in this case) a delightfully spiced beef curry with vegetables and rice.

As I was waiting for them to make my food, there were pictures around. There was one picture of a beautiful Asian woman sitting on a low stone wall in front of a French formal garden and chateau, one picture of a beautiful Asian woman sitting on a camel in front of an Egyptian pyramid, and one picture of a beautiful Asian woman sitting against a powerful red sports car. There were other pictures obscured by stacked boxes of soda. The women, as well as being beautiful and wearing flattering Western clothes, had the general build and almost the complexion of a Western ideal of beauty.

I had seen this kind of artwork in previous levels of Meatspace—in one large area, there was simply no other kind of picture you could buy on a calendar—but I'd always been puzzled by it. This time, there was something else I could see. They were almost like religious icons. This is not to say that people specifically believed religious doctrines about them, or that there was some failure of perceivedly due reverence in stacking boxes of soda in front of them, or some other things like that, but it *is* to say that they aren't just pictures of what they show. What they show is not only exotic but the emblem of something transcendent that's shining through. And I can be saddened by some things about them—those pictures can easily slide into the pornographic—but there is something I was saddened by that I am no longer bothered by.

The image of beauty and transcendence is Western much for some of the same reasons that (for a tongue in cheek example) we have a Great White Ninja played by Chris Farley in *Beverly Hills Ninja*. The West is exotic to the East, and the East is exotic to the West. The pictures are misunderstood if they are not seen as a sort of stained glass window that people look at because they see something shining through it.

There's probably a lot more to be said. If I spent several more years of play just to investigate the question, I might also be able to tell you why the shops allowed me to purchase about a square yard of an artificial surrogate for leather, and a few yards of cord, for less money than I would earn in an hour. For now, my game play has included little research into how communities can produce or fail to produce wealth. I just know enough to know that a detail like that, like the kind of system where there are poor people who eat meat with every meal, is a balancing act that has never before been managed in two and a half million years of human community, and quite probably a balancing act that will not survive longer than its civilization, any more than a tree can keep growing once its river runs dry.

There is something about the Meatspace levels we find ourselves in that makes it harder to see the gems around us. The medieval and the Arthurian looks a certain way to us after they no longer exist. What do things look like if we look at our placement in Meatspace as it might appear when our technological society is but a memory?

My avatar (but one could take a long time explaining how it is more than an avatar) was just in a place with Gothic lettering on a sign on the ground, saying, "Spaccarelli Meditation Garden." A pale, almost luminous statue of the Virgin overlooks a waterfall, rocks, plants, and a bench. The garden is small, but in its enclosed space one can be drawn into the quiet of the waterfall's song, forget about the outside world, even the nearby Gothic buildings— Gothic buildings that did not exist in the Middle Ages but do exist on a level that didn't exist in the Middle Ages. I have since moved to a building that combines the Gothic with the modern: I can see stonework that evokes the Gothic, and I see it through a glass wall which would have been extremely unlikely at a time when glass cost as much as a precious metal.

Some players entered the game wishing they were set in the future instead of the past—anything but where they are now. What would my life have been like if I were born in the Middle Ages? That's simple enough. I would have died in infancy, and my mother with me. Usually when I imagine myself in the Middle Ages, I take any number of things for granted.

The Middle Ages—the knights in armor of Arthurian legend, a picture which becomes even more interesting when it is deepened with scholarly resources to include a different way of perceiving time and space, the shadow of Plato, minstrels singing love songs, precursors to scientific method which become all the more interesting if one looks not at what they became but what they came from—all of this makes for a lost world that is all the more haunting because it can only be entered as a memory.

The character I play is studying theology at a university. "University" means a tradition that began in the Middle Ages, and it means living in community with other students and scholars, free to use technology but always connecting face-to-face and meeting as flesh and blood. As well as the older kind of university, the technology in Meatspace has allowed another kind of education which is a new enough possibility that many players remember when it would have been impossible. In the new model, a student may never meet any of his teachers; there is no sense of living together in community and no real sense that a path or way which has defined teaching since before the ancients is necessary. Not everyone in the ancient model understood or even would accepted the idea that a university should be an embodied community. But the only alternative, the older kind of correspondence school, never enjoyed the same prestige. Now there is another model, not so much another kind of community as a way to substitute for community and embodied presence, and it is gaining a massive ground in a short time. It is a real threat to the older university.

Given the rapid ascent of the "bodiless university", it seems to me quite possible that by the end of my game, I will have seen the old order of a university as an embodied community as it has been since its medieval birth, will have vanished as the horse-drawn carriage vanished after Henry Ford introduced what seemed to simply be another option (besides riding a horse). Perhaps this will never happen, but if you consider how much could vanish, and how much is easy to take for granted, the scholarly community has something as hauntingly beautiful as the knight in shining armor, or perhaps more beautiful, and this is not only because the university is a medieval institution and some universities have Gothic architecture. The roots run much deeper than that. And that is only one slice of the game—a rather small slice, all things considered.

Technology in this area of the game is interesting. and more importantly than just the technology, the cultural forces surrounding technology are interesting. They hold a tragic beauty, in its own way as tragic and as beautiful as the tale of Arthur's death: two armies stood across from each other. and each had been ordered not to attack unless the other side drew a sword. Then one soldier saw a snake in the grass, drew his sword to protect himself. Then the battle began, and King Arthur was mortally wounded. On the side of technology, the community had achieved technology that opened up possibilities that never existed before partly because it had oriented itself toward technology as no such community had done before. That made for a sorceror's bargain that made it difficult to perceive other kinds of beauty in other cultures-or for that matter, their own. The full cultural story—were it possible to fully understand—is even deeper in its tragic beauty than the bittersweet hypothesis of a disembodied university opening up something new while hurting the older tradition. One cannot seriously examine technology without seeing its power-and even its *beauty*-yet in this society, it is a minority at best who know what it means, and what the beauty would consist of, for a society ordered around other principles like contemplation.

Yet to say that is silly. It's like reviewing a chess program by describing the art history behind the pictures representing the pawns. Interesting, perhaps, and perhaps impressive, but it falls short of the mark, as does any serious attempt to review Meatspace. I haven't discussed 99% of an expanse of pavement stretching as far as the eye can see and then further, nor a room that lets me look out over trees and buildings as if I were suspended in the sky, nor a melting pot which combines the wealth of Africa, indigenous Americans, Europe, and Asia and which is believed to be the birthplace of hip hop, nor indeed what it means to be in an outer borough in the "capital of the world," nor why some dismiss the Bronx as being not a very nice place to live. I believe I have deeply failed to capture the global spirit of Meatspace because I gave too little attention to the unique local character of my level-and you cannot play Meatspace without encountering such a unique local character. To play Meatspace is to enter a world rich with apples and appearances, books and buttercups, children and cats, drivel and daydreams, electronics and excellence, fables and fairy tales, grandeur and giggles, horses (yes, they still exist!) and houses, igloos and imagination, jumping and justice, kites and katana, languages and laughter, microscopes and megaphones, noses and noise, operas and obverses, porpoises and porcupines, quiet and quickness, roaches and Russia, Swiss Army Knives and spirit, transportation and tummies, understanding and understatements, vowels and vices, water and wisdom, xanthan gum and xylophones, vule logs and youth, zebras and zits. It is far beyond my power to describe them.

# Discussion questions for "Game Review: Meatspace"

- 1. Have you ever felt a need to escape from a situation where you didn't really need to escape?
- 2. Was the situation terrible, or was it something in your heart?
- 3. Do you see how we live in a lovely world?
- 4. What can you do to embrace the here and now that God has given us?
- 5. What have you enjoyed in games?
- 6. How lasting was the satisfaction at escape?
- 7. What is your favorite thing in this world that can't be found in any game?

### Introduction to "Technonomicon: Technology, Nature, Ascesis"

The *Philokalia of the Watchful Fathers* is a collection across centuries, second in importance in Orthodoxy after the Gospels. One particular tradition represented in its works is a series of short, dense "chapters," often not longer than a paragraph, and perhaps a short paragraph at that, but with a lot to say.

This is one of my pieces written in imitation of that tradition. It looks about how use of technology, nature, and ascessis or spiritual exercises fit together.

In the *Philokalia*, the person who lives according to nature is pre-eminently the virtuous man, and this is a look at the interaction between technology and virtuous living.

## Technonomicon: Technology, Nature, Ascesis

- 1. Many people are concerned today with harmony with nature. And indeed there is quite a lot to living according to nature.
- 2. But you will not find something that is missing by looking twice as hard in the wrong place, and it matters where one seeks harmony with nature. In monasticism, the man of virtue is the quintessential natural man. And there is something in monasticism that is behind stories of the monk who can approach boar or bear.
- 3. Being out of harmony with nature is not predominantly a lack of time in forests. There is a deeper root.
- 4. Exercising is better than living a life without exercise. But there is something missing in a sedentary life with artificially added exercise, after, for centuries, we have worked to avoid the strenuous labor that

most people have had to do.

- 5. It is as if people had worked for centuries to make the perfect picnic and finally found a way to have perfectly green grass at an even height, a climate controlled environment with sunlight and just the right amount of cloud, and many other things. Then people find that something is missing in the perfect picnic, and say that there might be wisdom in the saying, "No picnic is complete without ants." So they carefully engineer a colony of ants to add to the picnic.
- 6. An exercise program may be sought in terms of harmony with nature: by walking, running, or biking out of doors. Or it may be pursued for physical health for people who do not connect exercise with harmony of nature. But and without concern for "ascesis" (spiritual discipline) or harmony with nature, many people know that complete deliverance from physical effort has some very bad physical effects. Vigorous exercise is part and parcel to the natural condition of man.
- 7. Here are two different ways of seeking harmony with nature. The second might never consciously ask if life without physical toil is natural, nor whether our natural condition is how we should live, but still recognizes a problem—a little like a child who knows nothing of the medical theory of how burns are bad, but quickly withdraws his hand from a hot stove.
- 8. But there is a third kind of approach to harmony with nature, besides a sense that we are incomplete without a better connection to the natural world, and a knowledge that our bodies are less healthy if we live sedentary lives, lives without reintroducing physical

exertion because the perfectly engineered picnic is more satisfying if a colony of ants is engineered in.

- 9. This third way is ascessis, and ascessis, which is spiritual discipline or spiritual exercise, moral struggle, and mystical toil, is the natural condition of man.
- 10. The disciples were joyous because the demons submitted to them in Christ's name, and Christ's answer was: "Do not rejoice that the demons submit to you in my name. Rejoice instead that your names are written in Heaven." The reality of the disciples' names being written in Heaven dwarfed the reality of their power over demons, and in like manner the reality that monks can be so much in harmony with nature that they can safely approach wild bears is dwarfed by the reality that the royal road of ascesis can bring so much harmony with nature that by God's grace people work out their salvation with fear and trembling.
- 11. The list of spiritual disciplines is open-ended, much like the list of sacraments, but one such list of spiritual disciplines might be prayer, worship, sacrament, service, silence, living simply, fasting, and the spiritual use of hardship. If these do not seem exotic enough for what we expect of spiritual discipline, we might learn that the spiritual disciplines can free us from seeking the exotic in too shallow of a fashion.
- 12. The Bible was written in an age before our newest technologies, but it says much to the human use of technology, because it says much to the human use of property. If the Sermon on the Mount says, "No man can serve two masters... you cannot serve both God

and money," it is strange at best to assume that these words applied when money could buy food, clothing, and livestock but have no relevance to an age when money can also buy the computers and consumer electronics we are infatuated with. If anything, our interest in technology makes the timeless words, "No man can serve two masters" all the more needed in our day.

- 13. Money can buy everything money can buy and nothing money cannot buy. To seek true glory, or community, or control over all risk from money is a fundamental error, like trying to make a marble statue so lifelike that it actually comes to life. What is so often sought in money is something living, while money itself is something dead, a stone that can appear deceptively lifelike but can never hold the breath of life.
- 14. In the end, those who look to money to be their servant make it their master. "No man can serve two masters" is much the same truth as one Calvin and Hobbes strip:

**Calvin:** I had the scariest dream last night. I dreamed that machines took over and made us do their bidding.

Hobbes: That must have been scary!

**Calvin:** It wa—*holy*, would you look at the time? My TV show is on!

But this problem with technology has been a problem with property and wealth for ages, and it is foolish to believe that all the Scriptural skepticism and unbelief about whether wealth is really all that beneficial to us, are simply irrelevant to modern technology.

- 15. There was great excitement in the past millennium when, it was believed, the Age of Pisces would draw to a close, and the Age of Aquarius would begin, and this New Age would be an exciting dawn when all we find dreary about the here and now would melt away. Then the Age of Aquarius started, at least officially, but the New Age failed to rescue us from finding the here and now to be dreary. Then there was great excitement as something like 97% of children born after a certain date were born indigo children: children whose auras are indigo rather than a more mundane color. But, unfortunately, this celebrated watershed did not stop the here and now from being miserable. Now there is great hope that in 2012, according to the Mayan "astrological" calendar, another momentous event will take place, perhaps finally delivering us from the here and now. And, presumably, when December 21, 2012 fails to satisfy us, subsequent momentous events will promise to deliver us from a here and now we find unbearable.
- 16. If we do not try to sate this urge with New Age, we can try to satisfy it with technology: in what seems like aeons past, the advent of radio and movies seemed to change everything and provide an escape from the here and now, an escape into a totally different world. Then, more recently, surfing the net became the ultimate drug-free trip, only it turns out that the web isn't able to save us from finding the here and now miserable after all. For that, apparently, we need SecondLife, or maybe some exciting development down the pike... or, perhaps, we are trying to work out a way to succeed by barking up the wrong lampost.

- 17. No technology is permanently exotic.
- 18. When a Utopian vision dreams of turning the oceans to lemonade, then we have what has been called "a Utopia of spoiled children." It is not a Utopian vision of people being supported in the difficult ascetical pursuit of virtue and ultimately God, but an aid to arrested development that forever panders to childish desires.
- 19. Technology need not have the faintest conscious connection with Utopianism, but it can pursue one of the same ends. More specifically, it can be a means to stay in arrested development. What most technology offers is, in the end, a practical way to circumvent ascesis. Technological "progress" often means that up until now, people have lived with a difficult struggle—a struggle that ultimately amounts to ascesis—but now we can simply do without the struggle.
- 20. Through the wonders of modern technology, we can eat and eat and eat candy all day and not have the candy show up on our waistline: but this does not make us any better, nobler, or wiser than if we could turn the oceans to lemonade. This is an invention from a Utopia of spoiled children.
- 21. Sweetness is a gift from God, and the sweeter fruit and honey taste, the better the nourishment they give. But there is something amiss in tearing the sweetness away from healthy food, and, not being content with this, to say, "We think that eating is a good thing, and we wish to celebrate everything that is good about it. But, unfortunately, there is biological survival, a holdover from other days: food acts as a nutrient whether you want it or not. But

through the wonders of modern science, we can celebrate the goodness of eating while making any effect on the body strictly optional. This is progress!"

- 22. Statistically, people who switch to artificial sweeteners gain more weight. Splenda accomplishes two things: it makes things sweeter without adding calories, and it offers people a way to sever the cord between enjoying sweet taste, and calories entering the body. On spiritual grounds, this is a disturbing idea of how to "support" weight loss. It is like trying to stop people from getting hurt in traffic accidents by adding special "safety" features to some roads so people can drive however they please with impunity, even if they develop habits that will get them killed on any other road. What is spiritually unhealthy overflows into poorer health for the body. People gain more weight eating Splenda, and there are more ways than one that Splenda is unfit for human consumption.
- 23. The ascess of fasting is not intended as an ultimate extreme measure for weight loss. That may follow or may not—but there is something fundamentally deeper going on:

Man does not live by bread alone, and if we let go of certain foods or other pleasures for a time, we are in a better position to grasp what more man lives on than mere food. When we rein in the nourishing food of the body and its delights, we may find ourselves in a better position to take in the nourishing food of the spirit and much deeper spiritual delights.

Fasting pursued wrongly can do us no good, and it is the wisdom of the Orthodox Church

to undergo such ascessi under the direction of one's priest or spiritual father. But the core issue in fasting is one that matters some for the body and much more for the spirit.

- 24. Splenda and contraception are both body-conquering technologies that allow us to conquer part of our embodied nature: that the body takes nourishment from food, and that the greatest natural pleasure has deep fertile potential. And indeed, the technologies we call "space-conquering technologies" might more aptly be titled, "body-conquering technologies," because they are used to conquer our embodied and embedded state as God made it.
- 25. Today, "everybody knows" that the Orthodox Church, not exactly like the Catholic Church allowing contraceptive timing, allows contraception under certain guidelines, and the Orthodox Church has never defined a formal position on contraception above the level of one's spiritual father. This is due, among other factors, to some influential scholarly spin-doctoring, the academic equivalent of the NBC *Dateline* episode that "proved" that a certain truck had a fire hazard in a 20mph collision by filming a 30mph collision (presented as a 20mph collision) and making sure there was a fiery spectacle by also detonating explosives planted above the truck's gas tank (see analysis).
- 26. St. John Chrysostom wrote,

Where is there murder before birth? You do not even let a prostitute remain only a prostitute, but you make her a murderer as well... Do you see that from drunkenness comes fornication,

#### C.J.S. Hayward

from fornication adultery, and from adultery murder? Indeed, it is something worse than murder and do not know what to call it: for she does not kill what is formed but prevents its formation. What then? Do you despise the gift of God, and fight with his laws? What is a curse, do you seek it as though it were a blessing?... Do you teach the woman who is given to you for the procreation of offspring to perpetrate killing? In this indifference of the married men there is greater evil filth; for then poisons are prepared, not against the womb of a prostitute, but against your injured wife.

27. The Blessed Augustine devastatingly condemned Natural Family Banning: if procreation is sliced away from marital relations, Augustine says point blank, then true marriage is forbidden. There is no wife, but only a mistress, and if this is not enough, he holds that those who enjoin contraception fall under the full freight of St. Paul's blistering words about forbidding marriage:

> Now, the Spirit expressly says that in the last days some will renounce the faith by paying attention to deceitful spirits and the teachings of demons, through the hypocrisy of liars whose consciences have been seared with a hot iron: for they forbid marriage and demand avoidance of foods, which God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and know the truth.

Augustine absolutely did not believe that one can enjoy the good of marriage and treat the blessing of marriage's fertility as a burden and a curse. Such an idea is strange, like trying to celebrate the good of medical care while taking measures to prevent it from improving one's health.

- 28.Such condemnations stem from the unanimous position of the Church Fathers on contraception.
- 29. Such words seem strange today, and English Bible translations seem to only refer to contraception once: when God struck Onan dead for "pull and pray." (There are also some condemnations of *pharmakeia* and *pharmakoi*—"medicine men" one would approach for a contraceptive—something that is lost in translation, unfortunately giving the impression that occult sin alone was the issue at stake.)
- 30. Contraception allows a marriage *a la carte*: it offers some control over pursuing a couple's hopes, together, on terms that they choose without relinquishing control altogether. And the root of this is a deeper answer to St. John Chrysostom's admonition to leave other brothers and sisters to their children as their inheritance rather than mere earthly possessions.

(This was under what would today be considered a third world standard of living, not the first world lifestyle of many people who claim today that they "simply cannot afford any more children"—which reflects not only that they cannot afford to have more children and retain their expected (entitled?) standard of living for them and their children, but their priorities once they realize that they may be unable to have both.)

- 31. Contraception is chosen because it serves a certain way of life: it is not an accident in any way, shape, or form that Planned Barrenhood advertises, for both contraception, "Take control of your life!" For whether one plans two children, or four, or none, Planned Barrenhood sings the siren song of having your life under your control, or at least as much under control as you can make it, where you choose the terms where you will deal with your children, if and when you want.
- 32. Marriage and monasticism both help people grow up by helping them to learn being out of control. Marriage may provide the ascesis of minding children and monasticism that of obedience to one's elder, but these different-sounding activities are aimed at building the same kind of spiritual virtue and power.
- 33. Counselors offer people, not the help that many of them seek in controlling those they struggle with, but something that is rarely asked: learning to be at peace with letting go of being in control of others, and the unexpected freedom that that brings. Marriage and monasticism, at their best, do not provide a minor adjustment that one manages and is then on top of, but an arena, a spiritual struggle, a training ground in which people live the grace and beauty of the Sermon on the Mount, and are freed from the prison chamber of seeking control and the dank dungeon of living for themselves.
- 34. "Do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink, nor about your body, what you will wear. Isn't there more to life than food, and the body more than

clothing? Look at the birds of the air. They neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than them? And why do you worry about the lilies of the field: how they grow. They neither toil nor spin;" they have joy and peace. The height of technological progress in having pleasure without losing control—in artificial sweeteners, contraceptives and anything else—utterly pales in comparison.

- 35. Technology is not evil. Many technologies have a right use, but that use is a use to pursue maturity and ascessis, not an aid to living childishly.
- 36. Wine was created by God as good, and it has a right use. But the man who seeks in wine a way to be happy or a way to drive away his problems has already lost.
- 37. One classic attitude to wine was not "We forbid drinking wine," or even "It would be better not to drink wine at all, but a little bit does not do too much damage," but goes beyond saying, "The pleasure of wine was given by God as good" to saying: "Wine is an important training ground to learn the ascesis of moderation, and learn a lesson that cannot be escaped: we are not obligated to learn moderation in wine, but if we do not drink wine, we still need moderation in work, play, eating, and everything else, and many of us would do well to grow up in ascessi in the training arena of enjoying wine and be better prepared for other areas of life where the need for the ascesis of moderation, of saving 'when' and drawing limits, is not only something we should not dodge: it is something we can never escape."

- 38. The ascetical use of technology is like the ascetical use of wine. It is pursued out of maturity, and as a support to maturity. It is not pursued out of childishness, nor as a support to childishness. And it should never be the center of gravity in our lives. (Drinking becomes a problem more or less when it becomes the focus of a person's life and pursuits.)
- 39. The Harvard business study behind Good to Great found that the most effective companies often made pioneering use of technology, but technology was never the center of the picture: however many news stories might be printed about how they used technologies, few of the CEOs mentioned technology at all when they discussed their company's success, and none of them ascribed all that much importance to even their best technology. Transformed companies-companies selected in a study of all publicly traded U.S. companies whose astonishing stock history began to improve and then outperformed the market by something like a factor of three, sustained for fifteen years straight-didn't think technology was all that important, not even technologies their people pioneered. They focused on something more significant.
- 40.*Good to Great* leadership saw their companies' success in terms of people.
- 41. There were other finds, including that the most effective CEOs were not celebrity rockstars in the limelight, but humble servant leaders living for something beyond themselves. In a study about what best achieves what greed wants, not even one of the top executives followed a mercenary creed of ruthless greed and self-advancement.

- 42. If people, not technology, make businesses tremendously profitable, then perhaps people who want more than profit also need something beyond technology in order to reach the spiritual riches and treasures in Heaven that we were made for.
- 43. The right use of technology comes out of ascesis and is therefore according to nature.
- 44. In Robert Heinlein's science fiction classic *Stranger in a Strange Land*, a "man" with human genes who starts with an entirely Martian heritage as his culture and tradition, comes to say, "Happiness is a matter of functioning the way a human being was organized to function... but the words in English are a mere tautology, empty. In Martian they are a complete set of working instructions." The insight is true, but takes shape in a way that completely cuts against the grain of *Stranger in a Strange Land*.
- 45. One most immediate example is that the science fiction vision is of an ideal of a community of "water brothers" who painstakingly root out natural jealousy and modesty, and establish free love within their circle: such, the story would have it, provides optimal human happiness. As compellingly as it may be written into the story, one may bring up studies which sought to find out which of the sexualities they wished to promote provided the greatest pleasure and satisfaction, and found to their astonishment and chagrin that the greatest satisfaction comes, not from any creative quest for the ultimate thrill, but from something they despised as a completely unacceptable *perversion*: a husband and wife, chaste before the wedding and faithful after, working to become one for as long as they both shall live, and perhaps even grateful for the fruitfulness o their love.

Perhaps such an arrangement offers greater satisfaction than trying to "push the envelope" of adventuresome arrangements precisely *because* it is "functioning the way a human being was organized to function."

- 46. People only seek the ultimate exotic thrill when they are unhappy. Gnosticism is a spiritual porn whose sizzle entices people who despair: its "good news" of an escape from the miserable here and now is "good news" as misery would want it. Today's Gnosticism may rarely teach, as did earlier Gnostic honesty, that our world could not be the good creation of the ultimately good God, but holding that we need to escape our miserable world was as deep in ancient Gnostics' bones as an alcoholic experiences that our miserable world needs to be medicated by drunkenness. Baudelaire said, in the nineteenth century: "Keep getting drunk! Whether with wine, or with poetry, or with virtue, as you please, keep getting drunk," in a poem about medicating what might be a miserable existence. Today he might have said, "Keep getting drunk! Whether with New Age, or with the endless virtual realities of SecondWife, or with the ultimate Viagra-powered thrill, as you please, keep getting drunk!"
- 47. What SecondLife—or rather SecondWife—offers is the apparent opportunity to have an alternative to a here and now one is not satisfied with. Presumably there are merits to this alternate reality: some uses are no more a means to escape the here and now than a mainstream business's website, or phoning ahead to make a reservation at a restaurant. But SecondWife draws people with an alternative to the here and now they feel stuck in.

- 48. It is one thing to get drunk to blot out the misery of another's death. It is another altogether to keep getting drunk to blot out the misery of one's own life.
- 49. An old story from African-American lore tells of how a master and one of his slaves would compete by telling dreams they claimed they had. One time, the master said that he had a dream of African-American people's Heaven, and everything was dingy and broken—and there were lots of dirty African-Americans everywhere. His slave answered that he had dreamed of white people's Heaven, and everything was silver and gold, beautiful and in perfect order—but there wasn't a soul in the place!
- 50. Much of what technology seems to offer is to let people of all races enter a Heaven where there are luxuries the witty slave could never dream of, but in the end there is nothing much better than a Heaven full of gold and empty of people.
- 51. "Social networking" is indeed about people, but there is something about social networking's promise that is like an ambitious program to provide a tofu "virtual chicken" in every pot: there is something unambiguously social about social media, but there is also something as different from what "social" has meant for well over 99% of people as a chunk of tofu is from real chicken's meat.
- 52. There is a timeless way of relating to other people, and this timeless way is a large part of ascesis. This is a way of relating to people in which one learns to relate primarily to people one did not choose, in friendship had more permanency than many today now give marriage, in which one was dependent on others (that is, interdependent with others), in which

people did not by choice say goodbye to everyone they knew at once, as one does by moving in America, and a social interaction was largely through giving one's immediate presence.

- 53. "Social networking" is a very different beast. You choose whom to relate to, and you can set the terms; it is both easy and common to block users, nor is this considered a drastic measure. Anonymity is possible and largely encouraged; relationships can be transactional, which is one step beyond disposable, and many people never meet others they communicate with face-to-face, and for that matter arranging such a meeting is special because of its exceptional character.
- 54. Social networking can have a place. Tofu can have a place. However, we would do well to take a cue to attend to cultures that have found a proper traditional place for tofu. Asian cuisines may be unashamed about using tofu, but they consume it in moderation—and *never* use it to replace meat.
- 55. We need traditional social "meat." The members of the youngest generation who have the most tofu in their diet may need meat the most.
- 56. Today the older generation seems to grouse about our younger generation. Some years ago, someoone in the AARP magazine quipped about young people, "Those tight pants! Those frilly hairdos! And you should see what the girls are wearing!" Less witty complaints about the younger generation's immodest style of dress, and their rude disrespect for their elders can just as well be found from the time of Mozart, for instance, or Socrates: and it seems that today's older generation is as apt to criticize the

younger generation as their elders presumably were. But here something really *is* to be said about the younger generation.

- 57. The older generation kvetching about how the younger generation today has it so easy with toys their elders never dreamed of, never seem to connect their sardonic remarks with how they went to school with discipline problems like spitwads and the spoiled younger generation faced easily available street drugs, or how a well-behaved boy with an email address may receive X-rated spam. "The youth these days" have luxuries their parents never even dreamed of—and temptations and dangers their parents never conceived, not in their worst nightmares.
- 58. Elders have traditionally complained about the young people being rude, much of which amounts to mental inattention. Part of politeless is being present in body and mind to others, and when the older generation was young, *their* elders assuredly corrected them from not paying attention in the presence of other people and themselves.
- 59. When they were young, the older generation's ways of being rude included zoning out and daydreaming, making faces when adults turned their back, and in class throwing paper airplanes and passing notes and growing up meant, in part, learning to turn their back on that arsenal of temptations, much like previous generations. And many of the older generation genuinely turned their backs on those temptations, and would genuinely like to help the younger generation learn to honor those around with more of their physical and mental *presence*.

- 60. Consumer electronics like the smartphone, aimed to offer something to youth, often advertise to the younger generation precisely a far better way to avoid a spiritual lesson that was hard enough for previous generations to learn without nearly the same degree of temptation. Few explains to them that a smartphone is not only very useful, but it is designed and sold as an enticing ultra-portable temptation.
- 61. Literature can be used to escape. But the dividing line between great and not-so-great literature is less a matter of theme, talent, or style than the question of whether the story serves to help the reader escape the world, or engage it.
- 62. In technology, the question of the virtuous use of technology is less a matter of how fancy the technology is, or how recent, than whether it is used to escape the world or engage it. Two friends who use cell phones to help them meet face-to-face are using technology to support, in some form, the timeless way of relating to other people. Family members who IM to ask prayer for someone who is sick also incorporate technology into the timeless way of relating to other people. This use of technology is quiet and unobtrusive, and supports a focus on something greater than technology: the life God gave us.
- 63. Was technology made for man, or man for technology?
- 64. Much of the economy holds the premise that a culture should be optimized to produce wealth: man was made for the economy. The discipline of advertising is a discipline of influencing people

without respecting them as people: the customer, apparently, exists for the benefit of the business.

- 65. Advertising encourages us to take shopping as a sacrament, and the best response we can give is not activism as such, but a refusal of consent.
- 66. Shopping is permissible, but not sacramental shopping, because sacramental shopping is an ersatz sacrament and identifying with brands an ersatz spiritual discipline. At best sacramental shopping is a distraction; more likely it is a lure and the bait for a spiritual trap.
- 67. We may buy a product which carries a mystique, but not the mystique itself: and buying a cool product without buying into its "cool" is hard, harder than not buying. But if we buy into the cool, we forfeit great spiritual treasure.
- 68. Love the Lord your God with all of your heart and all of your life and all of your mind and all of your might, love your neighbor as yourself, and use things: do not love things while using people.
- 69. Things can do the greatest good when we stop being infatuated with them and put first things first. The most powerful uses of technology, and the best, come from loving those whom you should love and using what you should use. We do not benefit from being infatuated with technology, nor from acting on such infatuation.
- 70. The Liturgy prays, "Pierce our souls with longing for Thee." Our longing for transcendence is a glory, and the deepest thing that draws us in advertisements for luxury goods, does so because of the glory we were

made to seek.

- 71. But let us attend to living in accordance with nature. Ordinarily when a technology is hailed as "spaceconquering," it is on a deep level *body-conquering*, defeating part of the limitations of our embodied nature—which is to say, defeating part of our embodied nature that is in a particular place in a particular way.
- 72. Technologies to pass great distance quickly, or make it easy to communicate without being near, unravel what from ancient times was an ancient social fabric. They offer something of a line-item veto on the limits of our embodied state: if they do not change our bodies directly, they make our embodied limitations less relevant.
- 73. A technology can conquer how the body takes nourishment from food, for instance, and therefore be body-conquering without being space-conquering. But whether celebrated or taken for granted, spaceconquering technologies are called space-conquering because they make part of the limitations of our embodied nature less relevant.
- 74. There is almost a parody of ascesis in spaceconquering technologies. Ascesis works to transcend the limited body, and space-conquering technologies seem a way to do the same. But they are opposites.
- 75. "The demons always fast:" such people are told to instill that fasting has a place and a genuine use, but anyone who focuses too much on fasting, or fasts too rigidly, is well-advised to remember that every single demon outfasts every single saint. But there is something human about fasting: only a being made

to eat can benefit from refraining from eating. Fasting is useful because, unlike the angels and demons, a man is not created purely a spirit, but created both spirit and body, and they are linked together. Ascessis knows better, and is more deeply attuned to nature, to attempt to work on the spirit with the body detached and ignored.

- 76. Even as ascess subdues the comforts and the body, the work is not only to transfigure the spirit, and transform the body.
- 77. In a saint the transfiguration means that when the person has died, the body is not what horror movies see in dead bodies: it is glorified into relics.
- 78. This is a fundamentally different matter from circumventing the body's limitations. There may be good, ascetical uses for space-conquering technologies: but the good part of it comes from the ascesis shining through the technology.
- 79. The limitations of our embodied existence—aging, bodily aches and pains, betrayal, having doors closed in our face—have been recognized as spiritual stepping stones, and the mature wonder, not whether they have too many spiritual stepping stones, but whether they might need more. Many impoverished saints were concerned, not with whether their life was too hard, but whether it was too easy. Some saints have been tremendously wealthy, but they used their wealth for other purposes than simply pandering to themselves.
- 80.Some might ask today, for instance, whether there might be something symbolic to the burning bush that remained unconsumed which St. Moses the

Lawgiver saw. And there are many layers of spiritual meaning to the miracle—an emblem of the Theotokos's virgin birthgiving—but it is not the proper use of symbolic layers to avoid the literal layer, without which the symbolic layers do not stand. If the question is, "Isn't there something symbolic about the story of the miracle of the burning bush?", the answer is, "Yes, but it is a fundamental error to use the symbolic layers to dodge the difficulty of literally believing the miracle." In like fashion, there are many virtuous uses of technology, but it is a fundamental error to expect those uses to include using technology to avoid the difficult lessons of spiritual ascesis.

- 81. Living according to nature is not a luxury we add once we have taken care of necessities: part of harmony with nature is built into necessities. Our ancestors gathered from the natural world, not to seek harmony with nature, but to meet their basic needs—often with far fewer luxuries than we have and part of living according to nature has usually meant few, if any, luxuries. Perhaps there is more harmony with nature today in driving around a city to run errands for other people, than a luxurious day out in the countryside.
- 82. Some of the promise the Internet seems to offer is the dream a mind-based society: a world of the human spirit where there is no distraction of external appearance because you have no appearance save that of a handle or avatar, for instance, or a world where people need not appear male or female except as they choose. But the important question is not whether technology through the internet can deliver such a dream, but whether the dream is a dream or a nightmare.

- 83. To say that the Internet is much more mind-based than face-to-face interactions is partly true. But to say that a mind-based society is more fit for the human spirit than the timeless way of relating, in old-fashioned meatspace, is to correct the Creator on His mistaken notions regarding His creatures' best interests.
- 84. People still use the internet all the time as an adjunct to the timeless way of relating. Harmony with nature is not disrupted by technology's use as an adjunct nearly so much as when it serves as a replacement. Pushing for a mind-based society, and harmony with nature, may appeal to the same people, especially when they are considered as mystiques. But pushing for a mind-based society is pushing for a greater breach of living according to nature, widening the gulf between modern society and the ancient human of human life. There is a contradiction in pushing for our life to be both more and less according to nature.
- 85. There is an indirect concern for ascesis in companies and bosses that disapprove of clock watching. The concern is not an aversion to technology, or that periodically glancing at one's watch takes away all that much time from real work. The practical concern is of a spiritual state that hinders work: the employee's attention and interest are divided, and a bad spiritual state overflows into bad work.
- 86. In terms of ascesis, the scattered state that cannot enjoy the present is the opposite of a spiritual condition called *nepsis* or, loosely, "watchfulness."
- 87. The problem that manifests itself in needing to keep getting drunk, with New Age and its hopes for, at the moment, 2012 delivering us from a miserable here

and now, or needing a more and more exotic drugged-up sexual thrill, or fleeing to SecondWife, is essentially a lack of nepsis.

- 88. To be delivered by such misery is not a matter of a more radical escape. In a room filled with eyestinging smoke, what is needed is not a more heroic way to push away the smoke, but a way of quenching the fire. Once the fire is quenched, the smoke dissipates, and with it the problem of escaping the smoke.
- 89.Nepsis is a watchfulness over one's heart, including the mind.
- 90.Nepsis is both like and unlike metacognition. It observes oneself, but it is not thinking about one's thinking, or taking analysis to the next level: analysis of normal analysis. It is more like coming to one's senses, getting back on course, and then trying to stay on course. It starts with a mindfulness of how one has not been mindful, which then flows to other areas of life.
- 91. The man who steps back and observes that he is seeking ways to escape the here and now, has an edge. The same goes with worrying or other passions by which the soul is disturbed: for many of the things that trouble our soul, seduce us to answer the wrong question. This is almost invariably more pedestrian than brilliant metacognition, and does not look comfortable.
- 92. Metanoia, or repentance, is both unconditional surrender and waking up and smelling the coffee. It is among the most terrifying of experiences, but afterwards, one realizes, "I was holding on to a piece

of Hell!"

- 93. Once one is past that uncomfortable recognition, one is free to grasp something better.
- 94. That "something better" is ultimately Christ, and a there is a big difference between a mind filled with Christ and a mind filled with material things as one is trying to flee malaise.
- 95. The attempt to escape a miserable here and now is doomed. We cannot escape into Eden. But we can find the joy of Eden, and the joy of Heaven, precisely in the here and now we are seduced to seek to escape.
- 96. Living the divine life in Christ, is a spiritual well out of which many treasures pour forth: harmony with nature, the joy of Eden and all the other things that we are given if we seek first the Kingdom of God and His perfect righteousness.
- 97. It was a real achievement when people pushing the envelope of technology and, with national effort and billions of dollars of resources, NASA succeeded in lifting a man to the moon.
- 98.But, as a monk pointed out, the Orthodox Church has known for aeons how to use no resources beyond a little bread and water, and succeed in lifting a man up to God.
- 99. And we miss the greatest treasures if we think that ascessi or its fruits are only for monks.
- 100. And there is something that lies beyond even ascessis: contemplation of the glory of God.

# Discussion questions for "Technonomicon: Technology, Nature, Ascesis"

- 1. What is your biggest takeaway from this piece?
- 2. Do you think you are living in harmony with nature?
- 3. Do you see any ways from this piece where you could live more in virtue?
- 4. What is the biggest way technology has positively impacted you?
- 5. What is the biggest way technology has negatively impacted you?
- 6. What are you already doing that you'd like to keep doing?
- 7. What are you not doing yet that this piece helped you realize you could do?

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8. Is there anything stopping you from doing it? If so, what?

# Introduction to "Eight-Year-Old Boy Diagnosed with Machiavellian Syndrome by Proxy (MSBP)"

I remember sitting in a doctor's office in England, and seeing a poster forcefully compare "MYTH" vs. "FACT" as regards the MMR vaccine, which is made with embryonic stem cells.

What struck me was odd from a humanities perspective. The words I used then were, "*You're fighting awfully hard for someone who's running unopposed.*"

This imitation *Onion* piece looks at the demographic that seems to get the shortest end of the stick in traditional vaccination.

Also, the main character is not *really* "Uriah Hittite."<sup>27</sup>

<sup>27</sup> See 2 Samuel 11, *Classic Orthodox Bible*,

https://powerbible.info/?passage=II+Samuel+11, as viewed on November 25, 2023.

# Eight-Year-Old Boy Diagnosed With Machiavellian Syndrome By Proxy (MSBP)

Eight-year-old Uriah Hittite is an African-American boy with a disturbing history. He has been found guilty of single-handed, extended, and wasteful manipulations and draining government resources at a scale comparable to a large and coordinated /b/tard trolling attack.

Like a polished con artist, Hittite manipulated others so deftly they never guessed the bomb he was about to drop. He was reported to be outgoing, friendly and vigorous in physical activity. Neither friends, nor family, nor all the regular doctor visits showed the faintest problem.

Then, shortly after he turned five, he was administered a safe and routine second MMR vaccination, and only then did he tip his hand. And wow, did Hittite pull a surprise!

At first it started as a tiny trickle; he feigned such ordinary sickness as most healthy children do; his birth parents gave him a few days' bed rest in the hopes that that would clear things out. Instead, he started acting worse and worse, to his birth parents' complete bewilderment. Besides remaining symptoms of sickness, he drew into a shell, and his speech became much clumsier. While his birth parents were of limited means and not insured, they did what they should have done immediately and took him to the shelter of a local hospital's emergency room.

The emergency room staff far too trustingly fell to Hittite's deceit, and ran usual tests that failed to produce a medical explanation. Psychiatric staff, experienced as they were, were taken in too. His birth parents continued to foolishly request tests and all but appoint themselves as their little Uriah's own doctors when it became evident that none of the MD's was providing any sort of explanation.

When the birth parents failed to improve the matter, one of the doctors suggested that a change of scenery, *without* the birth parents' dubious expenses. The birth parents consented to a brief and provisional custody.

Once inside better custody, external settings were better and he received the benefit of highly skilled cult deprogrammers who helped free him of certain needlessly constricting beliefs. This was done at great expense to the State, as deprogramming is difficult enough with grown adults of adequate intelligence, and he refused to communicate even at the level of a boy of his calendar age. It was decided to extend the custody indefinitely.

Finally a diagnostician was willing to call a spade a spade, and identify a classic case of Machiavellian Syndrome by Proxy (MSBP). There was nothing wrong with Hittite physically; he just had a master plan to squander and drain the states' resources. However, with the laws presently in force, you are not allowed to unplug a useless eater. He remains a ward of state, in bed for twenty-three hours each day, not talking with anyone. The total amount he has drained state coffers is in the millions, not counting the expenses of quieting his former parents' inappropriate efforts to regain contact with their former child.

*There ought to be a law* against demonstrating Machiavellian Symptom by Proxy (MSBP) like this!

# Discussion questions for "Eight-Year-Old Boy Diagnosed with Machiavellian Syndrome by Proxy (MSBP)"

- 1. Is this piece simply out to lunch, or might there be something behind it?
- 2. Which character would you expect to be the main character in this piece?
- 3. Who is the real main character?
- 4. Where is this on the "Ha ha, only serious" scale?
- 5. Should the state be confiscating children whose parents make too much of a big stink, under a diagnosis of MSBP (https://munchausen.com)?
- 6. Did you learn something new that maybe you wished you hadn't learned?

# Introduction to "Grassroots Effort Redefines the Term "Vaccines" to Include Placebos

The kind of people who are concerned about vaccines have pointed out that COVID injection is not a vaccine as the term had hitherto been used, but a form of untested, experimental genetic therapy, spoke about COVID "vaccines" as "injections." The response taken by the crowd with vaccine-shaped ideas about how to combat disease has been to redefine the term "vaccine" to include such genetic therapy.

But two can play at this game, and in as asinine a manner it works just as well, or as poorly, to get a saline placebo injection and say it's a vaccine.

This is the last imitation *Onion* piece in this collection.

#### Grassroots Effort Redefines the Term "Vaccines" to Include Placebos

Anytown, USA (DP). Placebos have a long and welldocumented history of bringing hope and healing, enough so that drug companies making serious medical trials work hard to neutralize the effects that would otherwise contaminate their research findings, possibly by a fair margin.

A passionate homemaker explains.

In Lewis Caroll's children's books, we find a clearly articulated principle that words can do more work as long as they're adequately compensated. 'Vaccine' has been cleverly redefined so that it now includes not only inoculation from a weakened or dead bacterial culture, but also an experimental genetic therapy whose long term effects are not only unknown but scarcely even guessed at. And a placebo is the kind of thing that will work almost for free.

A philosopher of science comments further.

When DDT came out, it stopped an epidemic in its tracks, and equally stopped the lingering menace of malaria that was killing more US soldiers in Vietnam than anything else. After these coups, a pesticide that is highly effective at killing insects and is still not known to cause any serious or direct harm to humans was unimpeachable as something which you could not seriously criticize in any public setting.

Peter Kreeft commented that the prophet sees through a glass, darkly, but the archivist sees through a microscope, sharply. In retrospect there was some serious "philosophical noise," a faint societal and philosophical static, that we should have heeded but didn't. Just a few lone naturalists noticed that the frogs in the creeks weren't singing, and then they noticed fish kill, too, but great DDT was not the sort of thing one could fault for a problem. You could not speak ill of DDT!

Here and now we have philosophical noise at the scale of an out-of-control rock concert. It is, as chivalric literature would say, "passing strange" that FEMA so much wants to cook the books that they're actually offering a \$9,000 bribe if a death certificate says a COVID death. It is also passing illiberal that Americans who need a heart transplant are taken off the wait list entirely if they refuse to be fully injected. Or that diabetics who decline injections once presented as optional are being deprived of treatment that will prevent purely preventable amputation of their feet. Or employers mandatory vaccine requirement for remote employees who never have and never intend to set foot on an employer's campus. Or...



A passerby interjected.

Vaccines are safe, or at least that's what it said on one propaganda sheet meant to quell public hysteria. But why then, not long after being even partially vaccinated, did I have blood clotting that would be fatal if untreated, and why did I have to be put on "the Cadillac of blood thinners" which meant that a bad cut could cause me to bleed to death and left the ER asking of my bleeding what had happened when a four by four inch gauze pad was soaked in less than an hour, with my blood dripping on the floor?

"So," said a grassroots community organizer,

We're beyond rock concert levels of noise. It's a "WTF?" in 15 foot high blinking neon. But there's something else at play. If a word can be redefined after it was taking traction that experimental and untested COVID gene therapy injections simply were not meaningfully *vaccines*, **they decided to redefine "vaccine" to include experimental gene therapy and make** "vaccine" and "vax" the word of the year.

*The precedent* has been set, and now we are redefining "vaccine" at a grass level to the time-tested remedy of a saline placebo: an injection along with the doctor saying "Here is an injection based on a time-tested and powerful principle. *Congratulations!* You are now fully vaccinated!"

An armchair historian mused:

2022, also callable as 2020 Part Deux, looks like quite a year. We've come a long way since *The Medieval Experience: Foundations of Western Cultural Singularity* developed cubism, for instance, within a generation. Now we seem to be in a Kali-yuga, and things which would have been astonishing in a generation are happening within a year, on top of a financial crisis that escapes by the year. We've left the comparably merry "decade from Hell" in the dust... Islamic ascendency, BLM, new installments of demographics that have to be in a politically correct picture, gay marriage, transgender in the limelight, friends forbidden physical affection such as hugs to try and fight COVID, injections, needing booster shots and being told "not to have a false sense of security" just because you're fully vaccinated—we've left cubism in the dust. And in six months to a year, maybe less, people may be able to date my words closely by key new features of the future landscape cannot now even hint at. (Is the Antichrist out yet? Or are we just working on a *Matrixy* realization that we are "already in the Metaverse?")

Today is kind of like you're a little kid and you've been engaged in playing outside in the snow and your parents make you come in, and it stings and you don't want to come in however much you want. You don't realize how frozen and numb you are until you are shocked by the pain.

And all this without a discussion of whether Romans 1 applies today.

A skeptic in the crowd asked, "Do you think a simple change in words will help?" And a monastic aspirant answered:

> The people in power certainly expect as much, and it bothered them that they were losing a debate about whether COVID injections really were in fact vaccines at all. But come, let us dig deeper.

Make peace with yourself, and ten thousand around will be saved.

Save yourself and Heaven and Earth will make peace with you.

Someone I know wrote *The Consolation of Theology* which does include "A Hymn to Arrogance," and it is well worth reading.

And perhaps there are greater concerns than who assigns the definition of "vaccine."

#### Discussion questions for "Grassroots Effort Redefines the Term 'Vaccine' to Include Placebos"

- How does this stack up against the assertion, "Anything can be made impossible by the person who can define his own terms?"
- 2. Is shifting terms an honorable strategy to win a debate?
- 3. Do COVID injections confer a long-term immunity like some of the better vaccines?
- 4. Does a liquid injected into someone thereby constitute a vaccine?
- 5. If it's not right to call a saltwater injection a vaccine, is it crystal kosher to call a genetic therapy injection a vaccine?
- 6. Is it just kooks who are wary of things labeled as vaccines?

#### Introduction to "The Arena"

"The Arena" is a signature contribution among works that are imitations of a particular style that is common in the *Philokalia*.

It provides a healthy perspective on this life, and underscores its signal contribution.

This life may be a preparation to a verdict that is eternal, but it does not thereby become important. What becomes all the more important is the choice that we make here that will shine or fail to shine for all ages.

#### The Arena

- 1. We stand in an arena, the great coliseum. For it is the apostles who were sent forth last, as if men condemned to die, made a spectacle unto the world, to angels and men.
- 2. St. Job was made like unto a champion waging war against Satan, on God's behalf. He lost everything and remained God-fearing, standing as the saint who vindicated God.
- 3. But all the saints vindicate God.
- 4. We are told as we read the trials in the Book of Job that Satan stands slandering God's saints day and night and said God had no saint worthy of temptation. And the Lord God Almighty allowed Satan to tempt St. Job.
- 5. We are told this, but in the end of the Scripture, even when St. Job's losses are repaid double, St. Job never hears. He never knows that he stands in the cosmic coliseum, as a champion on God's behalf. Never on earth does St. Job know the reason for the catastrophes that befell him.
- 6. St. Job, buffeted and bewildered, could see no rhyme

or reason in what befell him. Yet even the plagues of Satan were woven into the plans of the Lord God who never once stopped working all things to good for this saint, and to the saint who remained faithful, the plagues of Satan are woven into the diadem of royal priesthood crowning God's saints.

- 7. Everything that comes to us is either a blessing from God or a temptation which God has allowed for our strengthening. The plagues by which Satan visited St. Job are the very means themselves by which God glorified his faithful saint.
- 8. Do not look for God in some other set of circumstances. Look for him in the very circumstances you are in. If you look at some of your circumstances and say, "God could not have allowed that!", you are not rightly accepting the Lord's work in the circumstances he has chosen to work his glory.
- 9. You are in the arena; God has given you weapons and armor by which to fight. A poor warrior indeed blames the weapons God has armed him with.
- 10. Fight therefore, before angels and men. The circumstances of your life are not inadequate, whether through God lacking authority, or wisdom, or love. The very sword blows of Satan glancing off shield and armor are ordained in God's good providence to burnish tarnishment and banish rust.
- 11. The Almighty laughs Satan to scorn. St. Job, faithful when he was stricken, unmasked the feeble audacity of the demons.
- 12. God gives ordinary providence for easy times, and extraordinary providence for hard times.

- 13. If times turn hard for men, and much harder for God's servants, know that this is ordained by God. Do not suppose God's providence came when you were young but not now.
- 14. What in your life do you wish were gone so you could be where you should be? When you look for God to train you in those very circumstances, that is the beginning of victory. That is already a victory won.
- 15. Look in every circumstance for the Lord to train you. The dressing of wounds after struggle is part of training, and so is live combat.
- 16. The feeble audacity of the demons gives every appearance of power, but the appearance deceives.
- 17. Nothing but your sins can wound you so that you are down. And even our sins are taken into the work of the Almighty if we repent.
- 18. When some trial comes to you, and you thank God, that is itself a victory.
- 19. Look for God's work here and now. If you will not let God work with you here and now, God will not fulfill all of your daydreams and then begin working with you; he will ask you to let him train you in the here and now.
- 20.Do you find yourself in a painfully rough situation? Then what can you do to lighten others' burdens? Instead of asking, "Why me?", ask, "Why not me?"
- 21. An abbot asked a suffering monk if he wanted the abbot to pray that his suffering be taken away. The disciple said, "No," and his master said, "You will outstrip me."

- 22. It is not a contradiction to say that both God has designs for us, and we are under the pressure of trials. Diamonds are only made through pressure.
- 23. No disciple is greater than his master. Should we expect to be above sufferings when the Son of God was made perfect through suffering?
- 24. Anger is a spiritual disease. We choose the path of illness all the more easily when we do not recognize that God seeks to train us in the situation we are in, not the situation we wish we were in.
- 25. It is easier not to be angry when we recognize that God knows what he is doing in the situations he allows us to be in. The situation may be temptation and trial, but was God impotent, unwise, or unloving in how he handled St. Job?
- 26. We do not live in the best of all possible worlds by any means. We live instead in a world governed by the best of all possible Gods. And that is the greater blessing.
- 27. Some very holy men no longer struggle spiritually because spiritual struggle has worked out completely. But for the rest of us, struggle is a normal state. It is a problem for you or I to pass Lent without struggle. If we struggle and stumble and fall, that is good news. All the better if we cannot see how the thrusts and blows of the enemy's sword burnish away a little rust, one imperceptible speck at a time.
- 28.Do you ask, "Did it have to hurt *that* much?" When I have asked that question, I have not found a better answer than, "I do not understand," and furthermore, "Do I understand better than God?"

- 29. We seek happiness on terms that make success and happiness utterly impossible. God destroys our plans so that we might have the true happiness that is blessedness.
- 30. Have a good struggle.
- 31. There is no road to blessedness but the royal road of affliction that befits God's sons. Consider it pure joy when you fall into different trials and temptations. If you have trouble seeing why, read the Book of James.
- 32. Treasures on earth fail. Treasures in Heaven are more practical.
- 33. Rejoice and dance for joy when men slander you and revile you and curse you for what good you do. This is a sign you are on the royal road; this is how the world heralds prophets and sons of God. This earthly dishonor is the seal of Heavenly honor.
- 34. If you have hard memories, they too are a part of the arena. Forgive and learn to thank God for painful memories.
- 35. Remember that you will die, and live in preparation for that moment. There is much more life in mindfully dying each day than in heedlessly banishing from your mind the reality. Live as men condemned to die, made a spectacle before men and angels.
- 36. Live your life out of prayer.
- 37. It takes a lifetime of faith to trust that God always answers prayers: he answers either "Yes, here is what you asked," or "No, here is something better." And to do so honestly can come from the struggle of praying

your heart out and wondering why God seemed to give no answer and make no improvements to your and others' pain.

- 38. In the Bible, David slew Goliath. In our lives, David *sometimes* prevails against Goliath, but often not. Which is from God? Both.
- 39. Struggling for the greater good is a process of at once trying to master, and to get oneself out of the way. Struggle hard enough to cooperate with God when he rips apart your ways of struggling to reach the good.
- 40. Hurting? What can you do to help others?

# Discussion questions for "The Arena"

- 1. How important is this life?
- 2. Has God laid anything on the line with us?
- 3. What awaits us if we handle this life well?
- 4. What awaits us if we handle this life poorly?
- 5. How do our choices affect how God appears to those watching us?
- 6. Is there anything else that you've learned?

# Introduction to " 'Religion and Science' Is Not Just Intelligent Design vs. Evolution"

This work represents an eclectic, nontechnical writeup of what I had hoped would be my PhD thesis at Fordham University.

The central concept is that how we approach "religion and science" today is often very backwards. I do not think this reads as provocative today as when I wrote it; accusing someone of scientism today is almost halfway to "A hit, a very palpable hit!" But when it was written, the framing of "religion and science" consisted largely in demonstrating the compatibility of timeless revealed Truth with the present state of flux in today's scientific speculation.

And so I attempted to write what IT types call a "clue-by-four."

## "Religion and Science" Is Not Just Intelligent Design vs. Evolution

### A rude awakening

Early in one systematic theology PhD course at Fordham, the text assigned as theology opened by saying, "Theologians are scientists, and they are every bit as much scientists as people in the so-called 'hard sciences' like physics." Not content with this striking claim, the author announced that she was going to use "a term from science," thought experiment, which was never used to mean a Gedanken experiment as in physics, but instead meant: if we have an idea for how a society should run, we have to experimentally try out this thought and live with it for a while, because if we don't, we will never know what would have happened. ("Stick your neck out! What have you got to lose?"-"Your head?") The clumsiness in this use of "a term from science" was on par with saying that you are going to use "an expression from American English", namely rabbit food, and subsequently use "rabbit food" as obviously a term meaning food made with rabbit meat.

In this one article were already two things that were fingernails on a chalkboard to my ears. Empirical sciences are today's prestige disciplines, like philosophy / theology / law in bygone eras, and the claim to be a science seems to inevitably be *how to mediate prestige to oneself and one's*  own discipline. When I had earlier run into claims of, "Anthropologists are scientists, and they are every bit as much scientists as people in the so-called 'hard sciences,' like physics," I had winced because the claim struck me as not only annoying and untrue, but self-demeaning. But it simply had not occurred to me that theologians would make such a claim, and when they did, I was not only shocked but embarrassed: why should theology, once acclaimed the queen of scholarly disciplines, now seek prestige by parroting the claim to be every-bit-as-much-a-science-asthe-so-called-"hard-sciences"-like-physics (where "socalled" seemed to always be part of the claim, along with the scare quotes around "hard sciences")? To make my point clearer, I drew what was meant to be a shocking analogy: the claim that theologians are "scientists, and every bit as much as people in the so-called 'hard sciences' like physics" was like trying to defend the dignity of being a woman by saying, "Women are male, and they are just as much male as people who can sire a child."

This "physics envy" looks particularly strange next to the medieval Great Chain of Being as it moved from the highest to the lowest: "God, Angels, Man, Animals, Plants, Rocks, Nothing". Theology is the study of God and Man; no discipline is given a more noble field. And however much other disciplines may have "physics envy", no other discipline looks lower than physics, the science that studies Rocks and Nothing. There may be something pathetic about an anthropologist trying to step up on the pecking order by claiming to be "just as much scientists as people in the socalled 'hard sciences' like physics." Yet on the lips of a theologian, it bears a faint hint of a CEO absurdly saying, "CEOs are janitors, and they are every bit as much janitors as the people responsible for cleaning wastebaskets."

Furthermore, the endemic claim I saw to introduce a "term from science" was, so far as I could remember:

<sup>•</sup> Rarely if ever used in any correct fashion.

The *one* exception I can remember being Wolfhart Pannenberg's illustration of a point by talking about fields such as one finds in the study of electricity and magnetism: the non-scientist theologians in the room said they were having real trouble understanding the illustration conceptually, which would make it seem somewhat dubious as an *illustration* to help get a point across.

• Always reflect an effort to claim some of science's prestige.

I remember the "you're being quaint" smiles I got when I suggested that a point that Pannenberg was trying to make by comparing something to a field as defined in physics, seemed in fact to be a point that could have been much better made by a comparison to the Force from *Star Wars*.

Why the patronizing smiles? The job of the example from physics was to mediate prestige as well as to illustrate a concept that could have been better explained without involving a particularly slippery concept from physics.

## A first response

Examples of this kind of "science" abounded, and I was perhaps not wise enough to realize that my clumsy attempts to clarify various misrepresentations of science were perhaps not well received because I was stepping on the Dark and Shameful Secret of Not Being Scientific Enough, and reminding them of an inferiority they were trying hard to dodge. And my attempts to explain "Not being a scientist does not make you inferior" seemed to have no soil in which to grow. In an attempt to start an online discussion, I wrote a piece called "Rumor Science":

I really wish the theology students I knew

would either know a lot more about science, or a lot less, and I really wouldn't consider "a lot less" to be disappointing.

Let me explain why. When I was working on my master's in math, there was one passage in particular that struck me from Ann Wilson Schaef's *Women's Reality: An Emerging Female System*. Perhaps predictably given my being a mathematician in training, it was a remark about numbers, or rather about how people interact with numbers.

The author broke people down into more or less three groups of people. The first—she mentioned artists—was people that can't count to twenty without taking off their shoes. She didn't quite say **that**, but she emphasized artists and other people where math and numbers simply aren't part of their consciousness. They don't buy into the mystique. And they can say, and sincerely mean, that numbers don't measure everything. They aren't seriously tempted to believe otherwise.

The second group—she mentioned business people—consists of people for whom math works. Even if they're not mathematicians, math works for them and does useful things, and they may say that numbers don't measure anything, but it is well nigh impossible to believe—saying and meaning that numbers don't measure everything is like saying that cars are nice but they can't get you places.

And the third group in the progression? She

mentioned scientists, but what she said was that they know math in and out and know it so well that they know its limitations and therefore they can say and mean that numbers don't measure everything. And in the end, even though the "scientist" and the "artist" represent opposite extremes of mathematical competence, they both know there are things numbers can't measure while the second, middle group for mathematical competence are in a position where they expect numbers to do things that numbers can't do.

I was flattered, but I really think it stuck with me for more reasons than just the fact that she included me in one of the "good" groups. There is a sort of Karate Kid observation— "Karate is like a road. Know karate, safe. Don't know karate, safe. In the middle, squash, like a grape!"-that is relevant to theology and science. It has to do with, among other things, Gödel's Incompleteness Theorem, the question of evolution, and the like (perhaps I should mention the second law of thermodynamics). My point in this is not that there is an obligation to "know karate", that theologians need to earn degrees in the sciences before they are qualified to work as theologians, but that there is something perfectly respectable about "don't know karate."

I'd like to start by talking about Gödel's Incompleteness Theorem. Now a lot of people have heard about Gödel's Incompleteness Theorem. Not many major mathematical theorems have had a Pulitzer prize-winning book written around them (and by the way, *Gödel, Escher, Bach* has been one of my favorite books). Nor do many theorems get summarized in Newsweek as an important theorem which demonstrates that mathematical "proofs" are not certain, but mathematical knowledge is as relative as any other knowledge.

Which is a crass error. The theological equivalent would be to say that Karl Barth's unflattering remarks about "religion" are anti-Christian, or that liberation theology's preferential option for the poor means that special concern for the poor is optional and to be dealt with according to personal preference. And saying that about liberation theology is a theological "squash like a grape," because it is better to not know liberation theology and know you don't know than believe that you understand liberation theology and "know" that the word "option" implies "optional." It's not what you don't know that hurts you, but what you know that ain't so.

For the record, what Gödel's Incompleteness Theorem means is that for a certain branch of mathematics, there are things that can be neither proven nor disproven—which made his theorem a shocker when there was a Tower of Babel effort to prove or disprove pretty much anything. It proves that some things can never be proven within certain systems. And it has other implications. But it does *not* mean that things that are proven in mathematics are uncertain, or that mathematical knowledge is relative. It says you can't prove everything a mathematician would want to prove. But there are still lots and lots and lots of interesting things that can be proven, and Gödel's Incompleteness Theorem does not touch these proofs, nor does it mean that mathematical knowledge is merely relative in humanities fashion.

And I'd like to mention what happens when I mention Gödel's **Completeness** Theorem:

### Dead silence.

The same great mathematical logician proved another theorem, which does not have a Pulitzer prize winning book, which says that in one other branch of mathematics, besides the branch that Gödel's Incompleteness Theorem speaks to, you can have pretty much what Gödel's Incompleteness Theorem says you can't have in the other branch. In other words, you can—mechanically, for that matter, which is a big mathematical achievement either prove or disprove every single statement. I'm not sure it's as important as Gödel's Incompleteness Theorem, but it's a major theorem from the same mathematician and no one's heard of it.

There would seem to be obvious nonmathematical reasons for why people would want to be informed about the first theorem and not want to mention the second. I consider it telling (about non-mathematical culture). I know it may be considered a mark of sophistication to mention Gödel's Incompleteness Theorem and share how it's informed your epistemology. But it hasn't informed my epistemology and I really can't tell how my theology would be different if I hadn't heard of it. And my understanding is that other mathematicians tend not to have the highest view of people who are trying to take account of scientific discoveries that an educated person "should" know. There are other reasons for this, including goofy apologetics that make the famous theorem a proof for God. But I at least would rather talk with someone who simply hadn't heard of the theorem than a theologian who had tried to make a "responsible" effort to learn from the discovery.

And my main example is one I'm less sure how to comment on, and not only because I know less biology than math. There was one almost flippant moment in England when the curate asked if anybody had questions about the upcoming Student Evolution conference that everybody was being urged to attend. I asked, "Is this 'Student Evolution' more of a gradual process, or more a matter of 'punk eek'?" (That question brought down the house.)

Punctuated equilibrium, irreverently abbreviated 'punk eek', is a very interesting modification of Darwinian theory. Darwinian *evolution* in its early forms posits and implies a gradual process of very slow changes almost constant over very long ("geological") time frames. And that is a beautiful theory that flatly contracts almost all known data. As explained by my Illinois Mathematics and Science Academy biology teacher, "Evolution is like baseball. It has long stretches of boring time interrupted by brief periods of intense excitement." That's punk eek in a nutshell, and what interests me most is that it's the mirror image of saying "God created the world—through evolution!" It says, "Evolution occurred—through punctuated equilibrium!"

That's not the only problem; evolution appears to be, in Kuhnian terms (Structure of Scientific Revolutions), a theory "in crisis", which is the Kuhnian term for when a scientific theory is having serious difficulties accounting for currently given data and may well be on its way out the door. There are several ways people are trying to cope with this-preserving some semblance of a materialist explanation; there was the same kind of resistance going on before science acknowledged the Big Bang, because scientists who want a universe without cause and without beginning or creator heard something that sounded too much like "Let there be light!" They're very interesting, and intellectually dishonest.

Now I need to clarify; people seem to think you have to either be a young earth creationist or else admit evolution of some stripe. I believe in 14 billion years as the rough age of the universe, not six thousand years; I also believe in natural selection and something called "micro-evolution." (By the way, JPII's "more than a hypothesis" was in the original French "*plus qu'un hypothèse*", alternately translatable as "more than one hypothesis", and the official Vatican translation takes this reading. One can say that micro-evolution is one of the hypothesis gathered under the heading of evolution.)

I wince when I see theologians trying their dutiful best to work out an obligation to take evolution into account as a proven fact: squash, like a grape. It's not just that science doesn't trade in proof and evolution is being treated like a revelation, as if a Pope had consulted the Pontifical Academy of the Sciences and canonized The Origin of the Species as a book of the Bible. Or maybe that's putting it too strongly. It would also be strong language to say that many theologians are adopting a carefully critical attitude to classic Church claims and part of their being critical means placing an embarrassingly blind faith in evolution. But that's truer than I'd want to admit.

What about the second law of thermodynamics?

I don't know what the first and third laws of thermodynamics say, and I can't say that I'm missing anything. I don't feel obligated to make the second law, which I am familiar with, a feature of my theology, but if I did, I would try to understand the first and third laws of thermodynamics, and treat it as physics in which those three laws and presumably other things fit into a system that needs to be treated as a whole. I don't know how I would incorporate that in my theology, but I'm supposing for the sake of argument that I would. I would rather avoid treating it the way people usually seem to treat it when they treat that as one of the things that educated people "should" know.

I guess that my point in all of this is that some people think there's a duty to know science and be scientific in theology, but this is a duty better shirked. My theology is—or I would like it to be—closer to that of someone who doesn't understand science, period, than that of people who try to improve their theology by incorporating what they can grasp of difficult scientific concepts that the scientists themselves learned with difficulty.

Rumor science is worse than no science, and an ascientific theology is not a handicap. When I say that I would rather see theologians know either much more or much less science, I'm not hoping that theologians will therefore get scientific degrees. The chief merit for a theologian to know science is that it can be a source of liberation that frees people from thinking "We live in a scientific age so it would be better for theology to be scientific." I'm not sure I would be able to question that assumption if I knew much less science. But what I believe that buys me is not a better theology than someone scientifically innocent but freedom from the perceived need to "take science into account" in my theology so I can do the same kind of theology as someone scientifically innocent.

I'm not as sure what to say about ecological theology; I wrote "Hymn to the Creator of Heaven and Earth" without scientific reference that I remember, and I believe there are other human ways of knowing Creation besides science. But an ecological theologian who draws on scientific studies is not trying to honor a duty to understand things an educated person should know, but pursuing something materially relevant. Science has some place; religion and science boundary issues are legitimate, and I don't know I can dissuade people who think it's progressive to try to make a scientific theology-although I really wish people with that interest would get letters after their name from a science discipline, or some other form of genuinely proper scientific credentials appropriate to a genuinely scientific theology.

There are probably other exceptions, and science is interesting. But there is no obligation to go from safely on one side of the road to a position in the middle because it is "closer" to a proper understanding of science. Perhaps liberation theologians want people to understand their cause, but it is better not to pretend to know liberation theology than to approach it in a way that leaves you "knowing" that the preferential option is optional. It isn't what you know that hurts you, but what you know that ain't so—and rumor science, with its accepted list of important scientific knowledge that scholars need to take into account, is one way to learn from what ain't so.

Science is the prestige discipline(s) today; you see psychology wishing for its Newton to lead it into the promised land of being a science in the fullest sense of the term. You don't see psychology pining for a Shakespeare to lead it into the promised land of being a humanity in the fullest sense of the term. And the social disciplines-I intentionally do not say social sciences because they are legitimate academic disciplines but not sciences-are constantly insisting that their members are scientists, but the claim that theologians are scientists annoys me as a scientist and almost offends me as a theologian. It should be offensive for much the same reason that it should be offensive to insist on female dignity by claiming that women are really male, and that they are just as much male as people who can sire a child.

It would be an interesting theological work to analyze today's cultural assumptions surrounding science, which are quite important and not dictated by scientific knowledge itself, and then come to almost the same freedom as someone innocent of science.

"My theology," *ewwww*. (While I was at it, why didn't I discuss plans for my own private sun and moon? I'm *not* proud of proudly discussing "my theology".) I know the text has a wart or two.

But the piece contains a suggestion: "rumor science" may be a red flag to a real problem in the place we give science.

## Pondering Einstein, or at least

### dropping his name

That work left out the crowning jewel of scientific theories to ponder in "rumor science": Einstein's "theory of relativity." Some time later, in my science fiction short story / Socratic dialogue, "Within the Steel Orb", I wrote in fiction something that picked up what I had left out:

> Art sat back. "I'd be surprised if you're not a real scientist. I imagine that in your world you know things that our scientists will not know for centuries."

Oinos sat back and sat still for a time, closing his eyes. Then he opened his eyes and said, "What have you learned from science?"

"I've spent a lot of time lately, wondering what Einstein's theory of relativity means for us today: even the 'hard' sciences are relative, and what 'reality' is, depends greatly on your own perspective. Even in the hardest sciences, it is fundamentally mistaken to be looking for absolute truth."

Oinos leaned forward, paused, and then tapped the table four different places. In front of Art appeared a gridlike object which Art recognized with a start as a scientific calculator like his son's. "Very well. Let me ask you a question. Relative to your frame of reference, an object of one kilogram rest mass is moving away from you at a speed of one tenth the speed of light. What, from your present frame of reference, is its effective mass?" Art hesitated, and began to sit up.

Oinos said, "If you'd prefer, the table can be set to function as any major brand of calculator you're familiar with. Or would you prefer a computer with Matlab or Mathematica? The remainder of the table's surface can be used to browse the appropriate manuals."

Art shrunk slightly towards his chair.

Oinos said, "I'll give you hints. In the theory of relativity, objects can have an effective mass of above their rest mass, but never below it. Furthermore, most calculations of this type tend to have anything that changes, change by a factor of the inverse of the square root of the quantity: one minus the square of the object's speed divided by the square of the speed of light. Do you need me to explain the buttons on the calculator?"

Art shrunk into his chair. "I don't know all of those technical details, but I have spent a lot of time thinking about relativity."

Oinos said, "If you are unable to answer that question before I started dropping hints, let alone after I gave hints, you should not pose as having contemplated what relativity means for us today. I'm not trying to humiliate you. But the first question I asked is the kind of question a teacher would put on a quiz to see if students were awake and not playing video games for most of the first lecture. I know it's fashionable in your world to drop Einstein's name as someone you have deeply pondered. It is also extraordinarily silly. I have noticed that scientists who have a good understanding of relativity often work without presenting themselves as having these deep ponderings about what Einstein means for them today. Trying to deeply ponder Einstein without learning even the basics of relativistic physics is like trying to write the next Nobel prizewinning German novel without being bothered to learn even them most rudimentary German vocabulary and grammar."

"But don't you think that relativity makes a big difference?"

"On a poetic level, I think it is an interesting development in your world's history for a breakthrough in science, Einstein's theory of relativity, to say that what is absolute is not time, but light. Space and time bend before light. There is a poetic beauty to Einstein making an unprecedented absolute out of light. But let us leave poetic appreciation of Einstein's theory aside.

"You might be interested to know that the differences predicted by Einstein's theory of relativity are so minute that decades passed between Einstein making the theory of relativity and people being able to use a sensitive enough clock to measure the microscopically small difference of the socalled 'twins paradox' by bringing an atomic clock on an airplane. The answer to the problem I gave you is that for a tenth the speed of light—which is faster than you can imagine, and well over a thousand times the top speed of the fastest supersonic vehicle your world will ever make—is one half of one percent. It's a disappointingly small increase for a rather astounding speed. If the supersonic Skylon is ever built, would you care to guess the increase in effective mass as it travels at an astounding Mach 5.5?"

"Um, I don't know..."

"Can you guess? Half its mass? The mass of a car? Or just the mass of a normal-sized adult?"

"Is this a trick question? Fifty pounds?"

"The effective mass increases above the rest mass, for that massive vehicle running at about five times the speed of sound and almost twice the top speed of the SR-71 Blackbird, is something like the mass of a mosquito."

"A mosquito? You're joking, right?"

"No. It's an underwhelming, *microscopic* difference for what relativity says when the rumor mill has it that Einstein taught us that hard sciences are as fuzzy as anything else... or that perhaps, in Star Wars terms, 'Luke, you're going to find that many of the truths we cling to depend greatly on your own point of view.' Under Einstein, you will in fact **not** find that many of the observations that we cling to, depend greatly on your own frame of reference. You have to be doing something pretty exotic to have relativity make any measurable difference from the older physics at all."

# "Rumor science": The tip of an iceberg?

But I would like to get on to something that is of far greater concern than "rumor science" as it treats GÖdel's Incompleteness Theorem, the second law of thermodynamics, relativity, evolution, and so on. If the only problem was making a bit of a hash of some scientific theories, that would be one thing. But "rumor science" may be the tip of an iceberg, a telling clue that something may be seriously amiss in how theology has been relating to science. There is another, far more serious boundary issue.

There is something about the nature of academic theology today that may become clearer if we ask questions about the nature of knowledge and line up academic theology with Orthodoxy on the one hand and modern science on the other. The table below lists a few questions connected with knowledge, and then a comparison between Orthodox Christianity, academic theology, and modern science in their own columns:

Question	Orthodox	Academic	Modern
	Christianity	Theology	Science
What is knowledg e like?	"Adam knew Eve" The primary word in the Old and New Testaments for sexual union is in	Knowledge is <i>critical</i> , meaning <i>detached</i> : the privileged position is of the outsider	You can't know how stars age or the limitations of the ideal gas law from direct

Academic

Orthodox

Question

with?

Question	Christianity	Theology	Science
	fact 'know', and this is a significant clue about the intimate nature of knowledge. Knowledge is, at its core, the knowledge that drinks. It connects at a deepest level, and is cognate to how Orthodox say of the Holy Mysteries, "We have seen the true Light!": to receive the Eucharist is to know.	who stands clear of a situation and looks into a window. The devout believer enjoys no real advantage in grasping his religion compared to the methodical observer who remains detached— and the ordinary believer may be at a marked <i>dis</i> advantag e.	personal experience. Science stems from a rationalism cognate to the Enlightenme nt, and even if one rebels against the Enlightenme nt, it's awfully hard to know quarks and leptons solely by the intimacy of personal experience.
What aspect of yourself do you know	This may not be part of the standard Western picture, but	Good scholarship comes from putting all other	We have a slightly more rigorous use of primarily logical

the Orthodox,

aspects of

Modern

reasoning

Question Orthodox Christianity

### Academic Theology

### Modern Science

nonmaterialist understandin g of mind holds that there is a sort of "spiritual eye" which knows and which grasps spiritual realities as overflow to its central purpose of worshiping God. The center of gravity for knowing is this spiritual eye, and it is the center of a whole and integrated person. Logical and other "discursive" reasoning may have a place, but the seat of this

the person in their place and enthroning the part of us that reasons logically and almost putting the logic bit on steroids. Continental philosophy may rebel against this, but it rebels after starting from this point.

and a subject domain that allows this reasoning to shine.

Question	Orthodox	Acad
	Christianity	The

Academic Modern Theology Science

kind of reasoning is a moon next to the light of the sun which is the spiritual eye, the *nous*.

What should teachers cultivate in their students? Teachers should induce students into *discipleship* and should be exemplary disciples themselves.

What is tradition, and how does your tradition relate to knowing? One may be not so much *under T*radition as *in* Tradition: Tradition is like one's culture or language, if a culture and language breathed on students who will not be content with their teachers' interpretatio ns but push past to their own takes on the matter.

They should

train

train students to develop experiments and theories to carefully challenge the "present working picture" in their field.

They should

Something of the attitude is captured in what followed the telling of an anecdote about a New Testament Greek class where the As Nobel prizewinning physicist Richard Feynman observed, "You get to be part of the establishmen t by blowing up part of the

Question	Orthodox	
	Christianity	

#### Academic Theology

Modern Science

t."

establishmen

by the Holy Spirit of God. Though the matrix of Tradition need not be viewed with legalistic fundamentalis m, it is missing something important to fail to love and revere Tradition as something of a mother.

professor had difficulties telling how to read a short text, until a classics student looked and suggested that the difficulty would evaporate if the text were read with a different set of accents from what scholars traditionally assigned it. The Greek professor's response ("Accents are not inspired!") was presented by the academic

Question	Orthodox Christianity	Academic Theology	Modern Science
		theologian retelling this story as full warrant to suggest that scholars should not view themselves as bound by <i>t</i> radition with its blind spots.	
How much emphasis do you place on creativity ?	It reflects some degree of fundamental confusion to measure the value of what someone says by how original it is. That which is true is not original, and that which is original is not true. Perhaps people may uncover new layers of	Publish something <i>original</i> , or perish. Better to say something original but not true than not have any ideas to claim as "mine." If need be, rehabilitate Arius or Nestorius. (Or, if you are	Continue to push the envelope. Are you an experimental physicist? If you cannot observe anything new by the layman's means of observation, pioneer new equipment or a clever experiment to push the envelope of

Question	Orthodox Christianity	Academic Theology	Modern Science
	meaning, but to measure someone by how many ideas he can claim as "mine" is a strange measure.	Orthodox, meet current fashions halfway and show that St. Augustine need not be a whipping boy.)	what can be observed. Publish something <i>original</i> or perish.
Where does your discipline place its empiricis m?	There is a very real sense of empiricism, albeit a sense that has very little directly to do with empirical science. Knowledge is what you know through the "spiritual eye" and it is a knowledge that can only be realized through direct participation. An "idle word" may be a word	Theologians are just as empirical as physicists, whether or not they know basic statistics. We have such quasi- scientific empiricism as can be had for the human and divine domain we cover; there is a great deal of diversity,	As much as theology's empiricism is the empiricism of a knowledge of the "spiritual eye" and the whole person, our empiricism is an empiricism is an of detached, careful, methodical, reasoned investigation —the investigation

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#### Question Orthodox Christianity

of that which vou do not have this knowledge of, and this sin would appear to be foundational to the empiricism of science. We really do have an empiricism, but it might be better not to engender pointless confusion by claiming to be empirical when the empiricism known to the academy is pre-eminently that of empirical science, whether it is either actual or aspiring science.

### Academic Modern Theology Science

and some of us do not place much emphasis on the empiricism of science, but some of us have enough of scientific empiricism to do history work that stands its ground when judged by secular history's standards.

of the reasoning faculty on steroids. Our science exhibits professionali sm and a particular vision of intellectual virtue. Our empiricism corresponds to this vision. and no one has pushed this empiricism of the reasoning faculty further, and the unique technology founded on science is a testament to how far we have pushed this kind of empiricism.

When they are lined up, academic theology appears to have a great many continuities with science and a real disconnect with Orthodox Christianity. Could academic theologians feel an inferiority complex about Not Being Scientific Enough? Absolutely. But the actual problem may be that they are entirely *too* scientific. I am less concerned that their theology is not sufficiently scientific than that it is not sufficiently *theological*.

# Origins questions: can we dig deeper?

It is along those lines that I have taken something of the track of "join the enemy's camp to show its weaknesses from within" in exposing the blind spots of Darwinism, for instance. In the theologically driven short story "The Commentary," the issue is not really whether Darwinism is correct at all. The question is not whether we should be content with Darwinian answers, but whether we should be content with Darwinian *questions*.

> Martin stepped into his house and decided to have no more distractions. He wanted to begin reading commentary, now. He opened the book on the table and sat erect in his chair:

### Genesis

1:1 In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.1:2 The earth was without form and void, and darkness was upon the face of the deep; and the Spirit of God was moving over the face of the

waters. 1:3 And God said, "Let there be light"; and there was light.

The reader is now thinking about evolution. He is wondering whether Genesis 1 is right, and evolution is simply wrong, or whether evolution is right, and Genesis 1 is a myth that may be inspiring enough but does not actually tell how the world was created.

All of this is because of a culture phenomenally influenced by scientism and science. The theory of evolution is an attempt to map out, in terms appropriate to scientific dialogue, just what organisms occurred, when, and what mechanism led there to be new kinds of organisms that did not exist before. Therefore, nearly all Evangelicals assumed, Genesis 1 must be the Christian substitute for evolution. Its purpose must also be to map out what occurred when, to provide the same sort of mechanism. In short, if Genesis 1 is true, then it must be trying to answer the same question as evolution, only answering it differently.

Darwinian evolution is not a true

answer to the question, "Why is there life as we know it?" Evolution is on philosophical grounds *not* a true answer to that question, because it is not an answer to that question at all. Even if it is true, evolution is only an answer to the question, "How is there life as we know it?" If someone asks, "Why is there this life that we see?" and someone answers, "Evolution," it is like someone saying, "Why is the kitchen light on?" and someone else answering, "Because the switch is in the on position, thereby closing the electrical circuit and allowing current to flow through the bulb, which grows hot and produces light."

Where the reader only sees one question, an ancient reader saw at least two other questions that are invisible to the present reader. As well as the question of "How?" that evolution addresses, there is the question of "Why?" and "What function does it serve?" These two questions are very important, and are not even considered when people are only trying to work out the antagonism between creationism and evolutionism. Martin took a deep breath. Was the text advocating a six-day creationism? That was hard to tell. He felt uncomfortable, in a much deeper way than if Bible-thumpers were preaching to him that evolutionists would burn in Hell.

There is a hint here of why some people who do not believe in a young earth are no less concerned about young earth creationism: the concern is not exactly that it is junk science, but precisely that it is *too* scientific, assuming many of evolutionary theory's blindnesses even as it asserts the full literal truth of the Bible in answering questions on the terms of what science asks of an origins theory.

There is a Dilbert strip which goes as follows:

**Pointy-haired boss:** I'm sending you to Elbonia to teach a class on Cobol on Thursday.

**Dilbert:** But I don't know Cobol. Can't you ask Wally? He knows Cobol!

**Pointy-haired boss:** I already checked, and he's busy on Thursday.

Dilbert: Can't you reschedule?

**Pointy-haired boss:** Ok, are you free on Tuesday?

**Dilbert:** You're answering the wrong question!

Dilbert's mortified, "You're answering the wrong question!" has some slight relevance the issues of religion

and science: in my homily, "Two Decisive Moments" I tried to ask people to look, and aim, *higher*:

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

There is a classic Monty Python "game show": the moderator asks one of the contestants the second question: "In what year did Coventry City last win the English Cup?" The contestant looks at him with a blank stare, and then he opens the question up to the other contestants: "Anyone? In what year did Coventry City last win the English Cup?" And there is dead silence, until the moderator says, "Now, I'm not surprised that none of you got that. It is in fact a trick question. Coventry City has *never* won the English Cup."

I'd like to dig into another trick question: "When was the world created: 13.7 billion years ago, or about six thousand years ago?" The answer in fact is "Neither," but it takes some explaining to get to the point of realizing that the world was created 3:00 PM, March 25, 28 AD.

Adam fell and dragged down the whole realm of nature. God had and has every authority to repudiate Adam, to destroy him, but in fact God did something different. He called Noah, Abraham, Moses, and Elijah, and in the fullness of time he didn't just call a prophet; he sent his Son to become a prophet and more.

It's possible to say something that means

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more than you realize. Caiaphas, the high priest, did this when he said, "It is better that one man be killed than that the whole nation perish." (John 11:50) This also happened when Pilate sent Christ out, flogged, clothed in a purple robe, and said, "*Behold the man!*"

What does this mean? It means more than Pilate could have possibly dreamed of, and "Adam" means "man": *Behold the man! Behold Adam, but not the Adam who sinned against God and dragged down the Creation in his rebellion, but the second Adam, the new Adam, the last Adam, who obeyed God and exalted the whole Creation in his rising. Behold the man, Adam as he was meant to be. Behold the New Adam who is even now transforming the Old Adam's failure into glory!* 

Behold the man! Behold the first-born of the dead. Behold, as in the icon of the Resurrection, the man who descends to reach Adam and Eve and raise them up in his ascent. Behold the man who will enter the realm of the dead and forever crush death's power to keep people down.

Behold the man and behold the firstborn of many brothers! You may know the great chapter on faith, chapter 11 of the book of Hebrews, and it is with good reason one of the most-loved chapters in the Bible, but it is not the only thing in Hebrews. The book of Hebrews looks at things people were caught up in, from the glory of angels to sacrifices and the Mosaic Law, and underscores how

much more the Son excels above them. A little before the passage we read above, we see, "To which of the angels did he ever say, 'You are my son; today I have begotten you'?" (Hebrews 1:5) And yet in John's prologue we read, "To those who received him and believed in his name, he gave the authority to become the children of God." (John 1:9) We also read today, "To which of the angels did he ever say, 'Sit at my right hand until I have made your enemies a footstool under your feet?" (Hebrews 1:13) And yet Paul encourages us: "The God of peace will shortly crush Satan under your feet," (Romans 16:20) and elsewhere asks bickering Christians, "Do you not know that we will judge angels?" (I Corinthians 6:3) Behold the man! Behold the firstborn of many brothers, the Son of God who became a man so that men might become the Sons of God. Behold the One who became what we are that we might by grace become what he is. Behold the supreme exemplar of what it means to be Christian.

Behold the man and behold the first-born of all Creation, through whom and by whom all things were made! Behold the Uncreated Son of God who has entered the Creation and forever transformed what it means to be a creature! Behold the Saviour of the whole Creation, the Victor who will return to Heaven bearing as trophies not merely his transfigured saints but the whole Creation! Behold the One by whom and through whom all things were created! Behold the man!

Pontius Pilate spoke words that were deeper

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than he could have **possibly** imagined. And Christ continued walking the fateful journey before him, continued walking to the place of the Skull, Golgotha, and finally struggled to breathe, his arms stretched out as far as love would go, and barely gasped out, "It is finished."

Then and there, the entire work of Creation, which we read about from Genesis onwards, was *complete*. There and no other place the world was created, at 3:00 PM, March 25, 28 AD. *Then* the world was created.

I wince at the idea that for theologians "boundary issues" are mostly about demonstrating the compatibility of timeless revealed truths to the day's state of flux in scientific speculation. I wince that theologians so often assume that the biggest contribution they can give to the dialogue between theology and science is the rubber stamp of perennially agreeing with science. I would decisively prefer that when theologians "approach religion and science boundary issues," we do so as boundaries are understood in pop psychology-and more specifically bad pop psychology-which is all about you cannot meaningfully say "Yes" until it is your practice to say "No" when you should say "No": what theology needs in its boundaries with science is not primarily a question of what else we should seek to embrace, but of where theology has ingested things toxic to its constitution.

What gets lost when theology loses track (by which I do not mean primarily rumor science, but the three columns where theology seemed a colony of science that had lost touch with Orthodox faith) is that when theology assumes the character of science, it loses the character of theology.

The research for my diploma thesis at Cambridge

had me read a lot of historical-critical commentary on a relevant passage; I read everything I could find on the topic in Tyndale House's specialized library, and something became painfully obvious. When a good Protestant sermon uses historical or cultural context to illuminate a passage from Scripture, the preacher has sifted through pearls amidst sand, and the impression that cultural context offers a motherlode of gold to enrich our understanding of the Bible is quite contrary to the historical-critical commentaries I read, which read almost like phone books in their records of details I'd have to stretch to use to illuminate the passage. The pastor's discussion of context in a sermon is something like an archivist who goes into a scholar's office, pulls an unexpected book, shows that it is surprisingly careworn and dog-eared, and discusses how the three longest underlined passage illuminate the scholar's output. But the historical-critical commentary itself is like an archivist who describes in excruciating detail the furniture and ornaments in the author's office and the statistics about the size and weight among books the scholar owned in reams of (largely uninterpreted) detail.

And what is lost in this careful scholarship? Perhaps what is lost is why we have Bible scholarship in the first place: it is a divinely given book and a support to life in Christ. If historical-critical scholarship is your (quasiscientific) approach to theology, you won't seek in your scholarship what I sought in writing my (non-scientific) "Doxology:"

> How shall I praise thee, O Lord? For naught that I might say, Nor aught that I may do, Compareth to thy worth. Thou art the Father for whom every fatherhood in Heaven and on earth is named, The Glory for whom all glory is named, The Treasure for whom treasures are named,

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The Light for whom all light is named, The Love for whom all love is named, The Eternal by whom all may glimpse eternity. The Being by whom all beings exist, יהוה,  $0 \Omega N.$ The King of Kings and Lord of Lords, Who art eternally praised, Who art all that thou canst be, Greater than aught else that may be thought, Greater than can be thought. In thee is light, In thee is honour, In thee is mercy, In thee is wisdom, and praise, and every good thing. For good itself is named after thee, God immeasurable, immortal, eternal, ever glorious, and humble. What mighteth compare to thee? What praise equalleth thee? If I be fearfully and wonderfully made, Only can it be, Wherewith thou art fearful and wonderful, And ten thousand things besides, Thou who art One, Eternally beyond time, So wholly One, That thou mayest be called infinite, Timeless beyond time thou art, The One who is greater than infinity art thou. Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, The Three who are One, No more bound by numbers than by word, And yet the Son is called O  $\Lambda O \Gamma O \Sigma$ , The Word,

Divine ordering Reason, Eternal Light and Cosmic Word, Way pre-eminent of all things, Beyond all, and infinitesimally close, Thou transcendest transcendence itself. The Creator entered into his Creation, Sharing with us humble glory, Lowered by love, Raised to the highest, The Suffering Servant known, The King of Glory, 0.0NWhat tongue mighteth sing of thee? What noetic heart mighteth know thee, With the knowledge that drinketh, The drinking that knoweth, Of the vouc, The loving, enlightened spiritual eye, By which we may share the knowing, Of divinised men joining rank on rank of angel. Thou art, The Hidden Transcendent God who transcendest transcendence itself. The One God who transfigurest Creation, The Son of God became a Man that men might become the sons of God, The divine became man that man mighteth become divine.

# Monty Python and Christian theology

I would like to start winding down with a less uplifting note. A few years back, I visited a friend who was a Christian and a big Monty Python fan and played for me a Monty Python clip:

**God:** Arthur! Arthur, King of the Britons! Oh, don't grovel! If there's one thing I can't stand, it's people groveling.

#### Arthur: Sorry-

**God:** And don't apologize. Every time I try to talk to someone it's 'sorry this' and 'forgive me that' and 'I'm not worthy'. What are you doing now!?

Arthur: I'm averting my eyes, O Lord.

**God:** Well, don't. It's like those miserable Psalms—they're so depressing. Now knock it off!

This is blasphemous, and I tried to keep my mouth shut about what my host had presented to me, I thought, for my rollicking laughter. But subsequent conversation showed I had misjudged his intent: he had not intended it to be shockingly funny.

He had, in fact, played the clip because it was something that he worried about: did God, in fact, want to give grumbling complaints about moments when my friend cried out to him in prayer? Does prayer annoy our Lord as an unwelcome intrusion from people who should have a little dignity and leave him alone or at least quit sniveling?

This is much more disturbing than merely playing the clip because you find it funny to imagine God bitterly kvetching when King Arthur tries to show him some respect. If it is actually taken as theology, Monty Python is really sad.

And it is not the best thing to be involved in Monty Python as theology.

One can whimsically imagine an interlocutor encountering some of the theology I have seen and trying to generously receive it in the best of humor: "A book that promises scientific theology in its title and goes on for a thousand pages of trajectories for other people to follow before a conclusion that apologizes for not actually getting on to any theology? You have a real sense of humor! Try to avoid imposing Christianity on others and start from the common ground of what all traditions across the world have in common, that non-sectarian common ground being the Western tradition of analytic philosophy? Roaringly funny! Run a theological anthropology course that tells how liberationists, feminists, queer theorists, post-colonialists, and so on have to say to the Christian tradition and does not begin to investigate what the Christian tradition has to say to them? You should have been a comedian! Yoke St. Gregory of Nyssa together with a lesbian deconstructionist like Judith Butler to advance the feminist agenda of gender fluidity? You're really giving Monty Python a run for their money!"... until it gradually dawns on our interlocutor that the lewd discussion of sexual theology is not in any sense meant as an attempt to eclipse Monty Python. (Would our interlocutor spend the night weeping for lost sheep without a shepherd?)

There are many more benign examples of academic theology; many of even the problems may be slightly less striking. But theology that gives the impression that it could be from Monty Python is a bit of a dead (coal miner's) canary.

Scientific theology does not appear to be blame for all of these, but it is not irrelevant. Problems that are not directly tied to (oxymoronic) scientific theology are usually a complication of (oxymoronic) secular theology, and scientific theology and secular theology are deeply enough intertwined.

The question of evolution is important, and it is no error that a figure like Philip Johnson gives neo-Darwinian evolution pride of place in assessing materialist attacks on religion. But it is not an adequate remedy to merely study intelligent design. Not enough by half.

If theology could, like bad pop psychology, conceive of its "boundary issues" not just in terms of saying "Yes" but of learning to stop saying "Yes" when it should say "No", this would be a great gain. So far as I have seen, the questions about boundaries with science are primarily not scientific ideas theology needs to assimilate, but ways theology has assimilated some very deep characteristics of science that are *not* to its advantage. The question is less about what more could be added, than what more could be taken away. And the best way to do this is less the Western cottage industry of worldview construction than a journey of repentance such as one still finds preached in Eastern Christianity and a good deal of Christianity in the West.

### A journey of repentance

Repentance is Heaven's best-kept secret. Repentance has been called unconditional surrender, and it has been called the ultimate experience to fear. But when you surrender what you thought was your ornament and joy, you realize, "I was holding on to a piece of Hell!" And with letting go comes hands that are free to grasp joy you never thought to ask. Forgiveness is letting go of the other person and finding it is yourself you have set free; repentance is being terrified of letting go and then finding you have let go of needless pain. Repentance is indeed Heaven's best-kept secret; it opens doors.

I have doubt whether academic theology will open the door of repentance; it is a beginner's error to be the student who rushes in to single-handedly sort out what a number of devout Christian theologians see no way to fix. But as for theologians, the door of repentance is ever ready to open, and with it everything that the discipline of theology seeks in vain here using theories from the humanities, there trying to mediate prestige to itself science. Academic theologians who are, or who become, theologians in a more ancient sense find tremendous doors of beauty and joy open to them. The wondrous poetry of St. Ephrem the Syrian is ever open; the liturgy of the Church is open: the deifying rays of divine grace shine ever down upon those open to receiving them and upon those not yet open. The Western understanding is that the door to the Middle Ages has long since been closed and the age of the Church Fathers was closed much earlier; but Orthodox will let vou become a Church Father, here now. Faithful people today submit as best they are able to the Fathers before them, as St. Maximus Confessor did ages ago. There may be problems with academic theology today, but the door to theology in the classic sense is never closed, as in the maxim that has rumbled through the ages, "A theologian is one who prays, and one who prays is a theologian." Perhaps academic theology is not the best place to be equipped to be a giant like the saintly theologians of ages past. But that does not mean that one cannot become a saintly theologian as in ages past. God can still work with us, here now.

To quote St. Dionysius (pseudo-Dionysius) in *The Mystical Theology*,

Trinity! Higher than any being, any divinity, any goodness! Guide of Christians in the wisdom of Heaven! Lead us up beyond unknowing light, up to the farthest, highest peak of mystic scripture, where the mysteries of God's Word lie simple, absolute and unchangeable in the brilliant darkness of a hidden silence. Amid the deepest shadow They pour overwhelming light on what is most manifest. Amid the wholly unsensed and unseen They completely fill our sightless minds with treasures beyond all beauty. Let us ever seek the theology of living faith!

## Discussion questions for "Religion and Science Is Not Just Intelligent Design vs. Evolution"

- 1. Is there anything deficient in standard discussions of "religion and science?"
- 2. Does the Physics Envy Declaration make theology look more respectable?
- 3. Does the Physics Envy Declaration make anthropology or psychology look more respectable?
- 4. Does religion have something to contribute to dialogue with science besides just a rubber stamp?
- 5. What is the most interesting contribution offered by theology that science would not reach on its own?
- 6. Can you see how this perspective might not have helped the author's experience trying to work at Fordham?

### Introduction to "A Note to the Reader"

On a more light-hearted note, this is another note originally made available from my website.

I might comment that I am perfectly willing to draw in something from mathematics, engineering, technology, or science when it adds something of genuine value to the picture.

I just balk a bit when the science is there to mediate prestige, or a misguided sense of duty to be scientific.

### A Note to the Reader

Dear Reader;

How do I love thee? Let me count the ways: integer overflow error<sup>28</sup>

<sup>28</sup> In the C programming language as compiled under gcc, a standard "int" whole number can count up to 2,147,483,647, but if you count that high and add one more, an "integer overflow error" occurs and the messed-up number is changed to a negative number: -2,147,483,648.

## **Discussion questions for** "A Note to the Reader"

- 1. Does the author have a sense of humor?
- 2. Can we draw on mathematics, engineering, science, and technology where it is helpful?
- 3. Are there others in your life whom you love in more ways than you can count?

### Introduction to "The Angelic Letters"

C.S. Lewis's most famous work, *The Screwtape Letters*, contains mentoring advice from a senior devil to a more junior devil about how to tempt a man. He envisioned an inversion of this work about angelic guidance in guiding a man, but he was not able to write this.

This is an effort to pick up that cord.

I might suggest that C.S. Lewis is known most for *The Screwtape Letters* for the same reason Dante is known as the poet of Hell: Hell is real to us and Heaven isn't, and we find evil more fascinating than good. This is backwards, and I judge C.S. Lewis's works with a heavenly bent, such as *The Great Divorce*, as greater than *The Screwtape Letters* which attempts a smaller and more constricting task.

On to the letters!

### **The Angelic Letters**

#### My dearly beloved son Eukairos;

I am writing to you concerning the inestimable responsibility and priceless charge who has been entrusted to you. You have been appointed guardian angel to one Mark.

Who is Mark, whose patron is St. Mark of Ephesus? A man. What then is man? Microcosm and mediator, the midpoint of Creation, and the fulcrum for its sanctification. Created in the image of God; created to be prophet, priest, and king. It is toxic for man to know too much of his beauty at once, but it is also toxic for man to know too much of his sin at once. For he is mired in sin and passion, and in prayer and deed offer what help you can for the snares all about him. Keep a watchful eve out for his physical situation, urge great persistence in the liturgical and the sacramental life of the Church that he gives such godly participation, and watch for his ascesis with every eve you have. Rightly, when we understand what injures a man, nothing can injure the man who does not injure himself: but it is treacherously easy for a man to injure himself. Do watch over him and offer what help you can.

With Eternal Light and Love,

Your Fellow-Servant and Angel

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#### My dear son Eukairos;

I would see it fitting to offer a word about medicating experience and medicating existence.

When one of the race of men medicates experience by means of wine, that is called drunkenness. When by means of the pleasures of the palate, that is called gluttony. When by means of other pleasures, it is called lust. When by means of possessions and getting things, it is called avarice. Escapism is an ancient vice and a root of all manner of evils: ancient Christians were warned strongly against attempting to escape this world by medicating experience.

Not that pleasure is the only way; medicating experience by mental gymnastics is called metaphysics in the occult sense, and medicating experience by means of technology is a serious danger.

Not all technologies, and perhaps not any technology, is automatically a problem to use. But when technologies become a drone they are a problem. Turning on a radio for traffic and weather news, and then turning it off, is not a drone. Listening to the radio at a particular time to devote your attention to a concert is not a drone. Turning on a radio in the background while you work is a drone; even Zen and the Art of the Motorcycle Maintenance discusses what is wrong with mechanics having the radio on in the background. And texting to get specific information or coordinate with someone is not a drone, but a stream of text messages that is always on is a drone. Technology has its uses, but when technology is a drone, noise in the background that prevents silence from getting too uncomfortable, then it is a spiritual problem, a tool to medicate experience. And there are some technologies, like video games, that *exist* to medicate experience.

(Of course, technologies are not the only drone; when Mark buckles down to prayer he discovers that his mind is a drone with a stream of thoughts that are a life's work to quiet.) More could be said about technologies, but my point here is to point out one of the dangers Mark faces. Not the only one, by any means, but he has at his disposal some very powerful tools for doing things that are detrimental. It's not just a steady stream of X-rated spam that puts temptation at his fingertips. He has all the old ways to medicate experience, and quite a few powerful technologies that can help him medicate his experience as well. And for that he needs prayer.

But what is to be done? The *ways* of medicating experience may be in some measure than many saints have contended with; the *answer* is the same. Don't find another way to medicate experience, or escape the conditions God has placed you in, trying to escape to Paradise. Don't ask for an easier load, but tougher muscles. Instead of escaping the silence, engage it. *Prayerfully* engage it. If your dear Mark does this, after repenting and despairing of finding a way to escape and create Paradise, he will find that escape is not needed, and Paradise, like the absent-minded Professor's lost spectacles, were not in any of the strange places he looked but on his nose the whole time.

A man does not usually wean himself of drones in one fell swoop, but pray and draw your precious charge to cut back, to let go of another way of medicating experience even if it is very small, and to seek not a lighter load but a stronger back. If he weans himself of noise that medicates uncomfortable silence, he might find that silence is not what he fears.

Watch after Mark, and hold him in prayer.

Your Dearly Loving Elder, Your Fellow-Servant, But a Wind and a Flame of Fire

#### My dear, dear Eukairos;

When fingers that are numb from icy cold come into a warm, warm house, it stings.

You say that the precious treasure entrusted to you prayed, in an uncomfortable silence, not for a lighter load but for a stronger back, and that he was fearful and almost despairing in his prayer. And you wonder why he looks down on himself for that. Do not deprive him of his treasure by showing him how much good he is done.

He has awakened a little, and I would have you do all in your power to show him the silence of Heaven, however little he can receive it yet. You know some theologians speak of a river of fire, where in one image among others, the Light of Heaven and the fire of Hell are the same thing: not because good and evil are one, but because God can only give himself, the uncreated Light, in love to his creatures, and those in Hell are twisted through the rejection of Christ so that the Light of Heaven is to them the fire of Hell. The silence of Heaven is something like this; silence is of Heaven and there is nothing to replace it, but to those not yet able to bear joy, the silence is an uncomfortable silence. It is a bit like the Light of Heaven as it is experienced by those who reject it.

Help Mark in any way you can to taste the silence of Heaven as joy. Help him to hear the silence that is echoed in the Church's chanting: when he seeks a stronger back to bear silence, strengthen his back, and help him to taste the silence not as bitter but sweet. Where noise and drones would anaesthetize his pain, pull him *through* his pain to health, wholeness, and joy.

The Physician is at work!

With Eternal Light and Love, Your Fellow-Servant and Angel

#### Dear blessed Eukairos;

Your charge has had a fall. Do your best that this not be the last word: help him get up. Right now he believes the things of God are not for those like him.

The details of the fall I will not treat here, but suffice it to say that when someone begins to wake up, the devils are furious. They are often given permission to test the awakening man, and often he falls. And you know how the devils are: before a fall, they say that God is easy-going and forgiving, and after a fall, that God is inexorable. Do your best to aid a person being seduced with the lie that God is inexorable.

Mark believes himself unfit for the service of the Kingdom. Very well, and in fact he *is*, but it is the special delight of the King to work in and through men who have made themselves unfit for his service. Don't brush away a mite of his humility as one fallen, but show him what he cannot believe, that God wishes to work through him now as much as *ever* And that God wishes for him prayer, liturgy, sacrament.

And open his eyes now, a hint here, a moment of joy there: open them that eternity is now: eternal life is not something that begins after he dies, but that takes root now, and takes root even (or rather, *especially*) in those who repent. He considers himself unworthy of both Heaven and earth, and he *is*; therefore, in God's grace, give him both Heaven and earth. Open up earth as an icon, a window to Heaven, and draw him to share in the uncreated Light and Life.

Open up his repentance; it is a window to Heaven.

In Light and Life and Love, Your Brother Angel

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#### *My dear fellow-ministering angel;*

I would make a few remarks on those windows of Heaven called icons.

To Mark, depending on the sense of the word 'window', a 'window' is an opening in a wall with a glass divider, or alternately the 'window' *is* the glass divider separating inside from outside. But this is not the exact understanding when Orthodox say an icon is a window of Heaven; it is more like what he would understand by an open window, where wind blows, and inside and outside meet. (In most of human history, a window fitted with glass was the exception, not the rule.) If an icon is a window of Heaven, it is an opening to Heaven, or an opening between Heaven and earth.

Now Mark does not understand this, and while you may draw him to begin to sense this, that is not the point. In The Way of the Pilgrim, a man speaks who was given the sacred Gospels in an old, hard-to-understand book, and was told by the priest, "Never mind if you do not understand what you are reading. The devils will understand it." Perhaps, to Mark, icons are still somewhat odd pictures with strange postures and proportions. You may, if you want, help him see that there is perspective in the icons, but instead of the usual perspective of people in their own world, it is reverse perspective whose vanishing point lies behind him because Mark is in the picture. But instead of focusing on correcting his understanding, and certainly correcting his understanding all at once, draw him to venerate and look at these openings of Heaven. Never mind if he does not fully grasp the icons he venerates. *The devils* will understand.

And that is true of a great many things in life; draw Mark to participate in faith and obedience. He expects to understand first and participate second, but he needs to come to a point of participating first and understanding second. Many things need to start on the outside and work inwards.

Serving Christ, Whose Incarnation Unfurls in Holy Icons, Your Fellow

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#### Dear cherished, luminous son;

Your charge is reading a good many books. Most of them are good, but I urge you to spur him to higher things.

It is a seemingly natural expression of love to try to know as much about possible about Orthodoxy. But mature Orthodox usually spend less time trying to understand Orthodoxy through books. And this is *not* because they have learned everything there is to learn. (That would be impossible.) Rather, it is because they've found a deeper place to dig.

God does not want Mark to be educated and have an educated mind. He wants him to have an enlightened mind. The Orthodox man is not supposed to have good thoughts in prayer, but to have no thoughts. The Orthodox settled on the path have a clear mind that is enlightened in hesychastic silence. And it is better to sit in the silence of Heaven than read the Gospel as something to analyze.

Books have a place. Homilies have a place. But they are one shadow of the silence of Heaven. And there are more important things in the faith, such as fasting and almsgiving, repentance and confession, and prayer, the crowning jewel of all ascesis. Give Mark all of these gems.

With Deep Affection, Your Brother Angel

#### My dearly beloved, cherished fellow angel Eukairos;

Your charge Mark has been robbed.

Your priceless charge Mark has been robbed, and I am concerned.

He is also concerned about a great many things: his fear now, which is understandable, and his concerns about where money may come from, and his loss of an expensive smartphone and a beautiful pocketwatch with sentimental as well as financial value to him, and his inconvenience while waiting on new credit cards.

There are more concerns where those came from, but I am concerned because he is concerned about the wrong things. He has well over a week's food in his fridge and he believes that God failed to provide. Mark does not understand that *everything that happens to a man is either a temptation God allowed for his strengthening, or a blessing from God.* I am concerned that after God has allowed this, among other reasons so Mark can get his priorities straight, he is doing everything but seeking in this an opportunity for spiritual growth to greater maturity.

If you were a human employee, this would be the time for you to be punching in *lots* of overtime. Never mind that he thinks unconsciously that you and God have both deserted him; your strengthening hand has been invisible to him. I do not condemn you for any of this, but this time has been appointed for him to have opportunities for growth and for you to be working with him, and the fact that he does not seek growth in this trial is only reason for you to work all the harder. That he is seeking to get things back the way they were, and suffering anger and fear, is only reason for you to exercise more diligent care. God is working with him now as much as ever, and I would advise you for now to work to the point of him seeking his spiritual good in this situation, however short he falls of right use of adversity for now.

Your name, "Eukairos," comes from "eu", meaning

"good", and "kairos", an almost inexhaustible word which means, among other things, "appointed time" and "decisive moment." You and Mark are alike called to dance the great dance, and though Mark may not see it now, you are God's agent and son supporting him in a great and ordered dance where everything is arranged in God's providence. Right now Mark sees none of this, but as his guardian angel you are charged to work with him in the dance, a dance where God incorporates his being robbed and will incorporate his spiritual struggles and, yes, provide when Mark fails to see that the righteous will never be forsaken.

A good goal would be for Mark to pray for those that robbed him, and through those prayers honestly desire their good, or come to that point. But a more immediate goal is his understanding of the struggle he faces. Right now he sees his struggle in terms of money, inconveniences, and the like. Raise his eyes higher so he can see that it is a spiritual struggle, that God's providence is not overrulled by this tribulation, and that if he seeks first the Kingdom of God, God himself knows Mark's material needs and will show deepest care for him.

Your Fellow-Servant in Prayer,

But an Angel Who Cannot Struggle Mark's Struggle on his Behalf

#### My dear, esteemed son and fellow-angel Eukairos;

That was a deft move on your part, and I thank you for what you have helped foster in Mark's thoughts.

Mark began to console himself with the deep pit of porn, that poison that is so easily found in his time and place. And he began to pray, on his priest's advice, "Holy Father John, pray to God for me," and "Holy Mother Mary, pray to God for me," Saint John the Much-Suffering and Saint Mary of Egypt being saints to remember when fighting that poison. And you helped him for a moment to see how he was turned in on himself and away from others, and he prayed for help caring about others.

At 10:30 PM that night on the dot, one of his friends was walking in the dark, in torrential rains, and fell in the street, and a car ran over his legs. This friend was someone with tremendous love for others, the kind of person you cannot help but appreciate, and now that he had two broken legs, the flow of love reversed. And Mark unwittingly found himself in an excellent situation to care about something other than himself. He quite forgot about his money worries; and he barely noticed a windfall from an unexpected source. He kept company and ran errands for his friend.

What was once only a smouldering ember is now a fire burning brightly. Work as you can to billow it into a blaze.

With an Eternal Love, Your Respectful Brother Angel

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#### My dear, scintillating son Eukairos;

I would recall to you the chief end of mankind. "To glorify God and enjoy him forever" is not a bad answer; the chief end of mankind is to contemplate God. No matter what you do, Mark will never reach the strictest sense of contemplation such as monastic saints enjoy in their prayer, but that is neither here nor there. He can have a life ordered to contemplation even if he will never reach the spiritual quiet from which strict contemplation is rightly approached. He may never reach beyond the struggle of ascessis, but his purpose, on earth as well as in Heaven, is to contemplate God, and to be deified. The point of human life is to become by grace what Christ is by nature.

Mark is right in one way and wrong in another to realize that he has only seen the beginning of deification. He *has* started, and only started, the chief end of human life, and he is right to pray, go to confession, and see himself as a beginner. But what he is *wrong* about is imagining that the proof of his fledgling status is that his wishes are not fulfilled in the circumstances of his life: his unconscious and unstated assumption is that if he had real faith like saints who worked miracles, his wishes would be fulfilled and his life would be easier. Those saints had *less* wishes fulfilled, not more, and much harder lives than him.

(And this is beside the point that Mark is not called to perform miracles; he is called to something greater, the most excellent way: **love**.)

Mark imagines you, as his guardian angel, to be sent by God to see that at least some of his wishes happen, but the truth is closer to saying that you are sent by God to see that some of his wishes *do not* happen so that in the cutting off of self-will he may grow in ways that would be impossible if he always had his wishes. There is a French saying, *«On trouve souvent sa destiné par les chemins que l'on prend pour l'éviter.»*: "One often finds his destiny on the paths one takes to avoid it." Destiny is not an especially Christian idea, but there is a grain of truth here: *Men often find God's providence in the situations they hoped his providence would keep them out of.* 

This cutting off of self-will is part of the selftranscendence that makes deification; it is foundational to monks and the office of spiritual father, but it is not a "monks-only" treasure. Not by half. God answers "No" to prayers to say "Yes" to something greater. But the "Yes" only comes *through* the "No."

As Mark has heard, "We pray because we want God to change our circumstances. God wants to use our circumstances to change us."

Mark has had losses, and he will have more to come, but what he does not understand is that the path of God's sanctification is precisely through the loss of what Mark thinks he needs. God is at work allowing Mark to be robbed. God is at work allowing Mark to use "his" "free" time to serve his friend. And God is at work in the latest challenge you wrote to me about.

Mark has lost his car. A drunk and uninsured driver slammed into it when it was parked; the driver was saved by his airbag, but Mark's car was destroyed, and Mark has no resources to get another car, not even a beater for now. And Mark imagines this as something that pushes him outside of the Lord's providence, not understanding that it is by God's good will that he is now being transported by friendship and generosity, that he is less independent now.

Right now Mark is not ready either to thank God for his circumstances or to forgive the driver. But do open his eyes to the good of friendship and generosity that now transports him. Even if he sees the loss of his car as an example of God failing to provide for him, help him to see the good of his being transported by the love and generosity of his friends. Help him to see God's providence in circumstances he would not choose. Your Fellow-Servant in the Service of Man, A Brother Angel

My dear son Eukairos;

Your precious charge, in perfectly good faith, believes strongly in bringing into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ. His devotion in trying to bring into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ is really quite impressive, but he is fundamentally confused about what that means, and he is not the only one.

Mark would never say that you can reason your way into Heaven, but he is trying to straighten out his worldview, and he thinks that straightening out one's ideas is what this verse is talking about. And he holds an assumption that if you're reasoning things out, or trying to reason things out, you're probably on the right path.

Trying to reason things out does not really help as much as one might think. Arius, the father of all heretics, was one of many to try to reason things out; people who devise heresies often try harder to reason things out than the Orthodox. And Mark has inherited a greatly overstated emphasis on how important or helpful logical reasoning is.

Mark would be surprised to hear this; his natural question might be, "If bringing into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ is not what you do when you straighten out your worldview, then what on earth is?

A little bit more of the text discusses unseen warfare and inner purity: (For the weapons of our warfare are not carnal, but mighty through God to the pulling down of strong holds;) Casting down imaginations, and every high thing that exalteth itself against the knowledge of God, and bringing into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ; and having in a readiness to revenge all disobedience, when your obedience is fulfilled.

Men's thoughts are not just abstract reasoning; they are all sorts of things, some entangled with sinful desire, that are around all the time to a mind that has not learned hesychastic silence. Thoughts that need to be taken captive include thoughts of money entangled with greed, thoughts of imagined success entangled with pride, thoughts of wrongs suffered entangled with anger, thoughts of food compounded with gluttony, thoughts of desired persons compounded with lust, thoughts of imagined future difficulties entangled with worry and doubt about the Lord's good providence. Such thoughts as these need to be addressed, and not by tinkering with one's worldview: these thoughts remain a battleground in spiritual warfare even if one's worldview condemns greed, pride, anger, gluttony, lust, worry, and doubt.

Work with Mark. Guide him and strengthen him in the unseen warfare that includes learning to cut off such thoughts as soon as possible: a fire that is spreading through a house is hard to put out, and what Mark needs to learn is to notice the smoke that goes before fire and extinguish the smouldering that is beginning and not waiting for leaping flames to make doomed efforts to fight it. Help him to see that his thoughts are not only abstract ideas, and help him to be watchful, aware of his inner state. Unseen warfare in thoughts is of inestimable importance, and do what you can to help him see a smouldering smoke when it has not become a raging fire, and to be watchful.

Do what you can to draw him to repeat the Jesus Prayer, to let it grow to a rhythm in him. If the question is, "What should I start thinking when I catch myself?", the answer is, "The Jesus prayer."

Keep working with Mark, and offer what support you can. And keep him in your prayers.

With Deepest Affection, Another Member of the Angel Choirs

#### Dear fellow-warrior, defender, and son Eukairos;

I wish to write to you concerning devils.

Mark has the wrong picture with a scientific worldview in which temptations are more or less random events that occur as a side effect of how the world works. Temptations are intelligently coordinated attacks by devils. They are part of unseen warfare such as Mark faces, part of an evil attack, but none the less on a leash. No man could be saved if the devils could give trials and temptations as much as they wished, but the devils are allowed to bring trials and temptations as much as God allows for the strengthening, and the discipleship, of his servants.

Some street drugs are gateway drugs, and some temptations are temptations to gateway sins. Gluttony, greed, and vanity are among the "gateway sins", although it is the nature of a sin to give way to other sins as well. Gluttony, for instance, opens the door to lust, and it is harder by far to fight lust for a man whose belly is stuffed overfull. (A man who would fare better fighting against lust would do well to eat less and fast more.) In sin, and also in virtue, he who is faithful in little is faithful in much, and he who is unfaithful in little is also unfaithful in much. You do not need to give Mark what he expects now, help in some great, heroic act of virtue. He needs your help in little, humble, everyday virtues, obedience when obedience doesn't seem worth the bother.

The liturgy speaks of "the feeble audacity of the demons", and Mark needs to know that that is true, and true specifically in his case. What trials God allows are up to God, and the demons are an instrument in the hand of a God who would use even the devils' rebellion to strengthen his sons. The only way Mark can fall into the demons' hands is by yielding to temptation: nothing can injure the man who does not injure himself. The trials Mark faces are intended for his glory, and more basically for God's glory in him—but God chooses glory for himself that glorifies his saints. Doubtless this will conflict with Mark's plans and perceptions of what he needs, but God knows better, and *loves* Mark better than to give Mark everything he thinks he needs.

Do your best to strengthen Mark, especially as regards forgiveness to those who have wronged him and in the whole science of unseen warfare. Where he cannot see himself that events are led by an invisible hand, help him to at least have faith, a faith that may someday be able to discern.

And do help him to see that he is in the hands of God, that the words in the Sermon on the Mount about providence are not for the inhabitants of another, perfect world, but intended for him personally as well as others. He has rough things he will have to deal with; help him to trust that he receives providence at the hands of a merciful God who is ever working all things to good for his children.

With Love as Your Fellow-Warrior and Mark's, Your Fellow-Warrior in the War Unseen

#### My dear, watchful son Eukairos;

Mark has lost his job, and though he has food before him and a roof over his head, he thinks God's providence has run short.

Yet in all of this, he is showing a sign of growth: even though he does not believe God has provided, there is a deep peace, interrupted at times by worry, and his practice of the virtues allows such peace to enter even though he assumes that God can only provide through paychecks.

Work on him in this peace. Work on him in the joy of friendship. Even if he does not realize that he has food for today and clothing for today, and that this is the providence he is set to ask for, help him to enjoy what he has, and give thanks to God for everything he has been given.

And hold him in your prayers.

As One Who Possesses Nothing, One Who Receives All He Needs From God

#### My prayerful, prayerful Eukairos;

Prayer is what Mark needs now more than ever.

Prayer is the silent life of angels, and it is a feast men are bidden to join. At the beginning it is words; in the middle it is desire; at the end it is silence and love. For men it is the outflow of sacrament, and its full depths are in the sacraments. There are said to be seven sacraments, but what men of Mark's day do not grasp is that seven is the number of perfection, and it would do as well to say that there are ten thousand sacraments, all bearing God's grace.

Help Mark to pray. Pray to forgive others, pray for the well-being of others, pray by being in silence before God. Help him to pray when he is attacked by passion; help him to pray when he is tempted and when he confesses in his heart that he has sinned: *O Lord, forgive me for doing this and help me to do better next time, for the glory of thy holy name and for the salvation of my soul.* 

Work with Mark so that his life is a prayer, not only with the act-prayer of receiving a sacrament, but so that looking at his neighbor with chaste eyes he may pray out of the Lord's love. Work with Mark so that ordinary activity and work are not an interruption to a life of prayer, but simply a part of it. And where there is noise, help him to be straightened out in silence through his prayer.

And if this is a journey of a thousand miles that Mark will never reach on earth, bid him to take a step, and then a step more. For a man to take one step into this journey is still something: the Thief crucified with Christ could only take on step, and he took that one step, and now stands before God in Paradise.

Ever draw Mark into deeper prayer.

With You Before God's Heart that Hears Prayers, A Praying Angel

My dearly beloved, cherished, esteemed son; My holy angel who sees the face of Christ God; My dear chorister who sings before the eteral throne of God; My angel divine; My fellow-minister;

Your charge has passed through his apprenticeship successfully.

He went to church, and several gunmen entered. One of them pointed a gun at a visitor, and Mark stepped in front of her. He was ordered to move, and he stood firm. He wasn't thinking of being heroic; he wasn't even thinking of showing due respect to a woman. He only thought vaguely of appropriate treatment of a visitor and fear never deterred him from this vague sense of appropriate care for a visitor.

And so death claimed him to its defeat. O Death, where is your sting? O grave, where is your victory? Death claimed claimed saintly Mark to its defeat.

Mark is no longer your charge.

It is my solemn, profound, and grave pleasure to now introduce you to Mark, no longer as the charge under your care, but as a fellow-chorister with angels who will eternally stand with you before the throne of God in Heaven.

Go in peace.

Your Fellow-Minister, • MIXAHA • MICHAEL • Who Is Like God?

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### Conclusion

In classic Arthurian legend, one king complains that if one of his knights had a suit of silver armor, and saw one of gold, he would be forever unsatisfied with his silver armor.

C.S. Lewis, in "Screwtape Proposes a Toast," has the devil Screwtape say,

The feeling is of course that which prompts a man to say, *I'm as good as you*.

The first and most obvious advantage is that vou thus induce him to enthrone at the center of his life a good, solid, resounding lie. I don't mean merely that his statement is in fact false, that he is no more equal to everyone he meets in kindness, honesty, and good sense than in height or waist measurement. I mean that he does not believe it himself. No man who says I'm as good as you believes it. The St. Bernard never says it to the toy dog, nor the scholar to the dunce, nor the employable to the bum, nor the pretty one to the plain. The claim to equality, outside the political field, is made only by those who feel themselves in some way to be inferior. What it expresses is precisely the itching, smarting, writhing

awareness of inferiority which the patient refuses to accept.

The reason I was mystified and offended when as a high school student and aspiring mathematician and read the Physics Envy Declaration in a psychology text (psychologists-are-scientists-and-they-are-every-bit-asmuch-scientists-as-people-in-the-so-called-"hardsciences"-like-physics), was that the author was pointlessly self-demeaning. I do not mean that a psychologist was getting uppity and encroaching on prestige only belonging to hard science; I mean that everything C.S. Lewis has Screwtape see in *I'm as good as you*. In the lie placed as an opening comment in the social disciplines (I refrain from saying "social sciences"), I found disciplines equal to the sciences. And I found the Physics Envy Declaration to be needlessly self-demeaning.

Needless to say, I found it not only self-demeaning but embarrassing when, as a student at Fordham, I first encountered a liberal theologian assert, theologians-arescientists-and-they-are-just-as-much-scientists-as-peoplein-the-so-called-"hard-sciences"-like-physics. I had not encountered it in my master's in theology and religious studies at Cambridge. Did theology, once acclaimed the queen of the sciences, need to demean itself with the Physics Envy Declaration? By then my thought on the hard sciences was closer to "Been there, wrecked that." And as a former math grad student, I found the comparison with physics to be insulting.

However, I am not innocent of the syndrome. When I read generic liberal scholarship in theology, I read medieval versions of Arthurian legends at length, partly for choosing a distinctive way to mediate prestige to myself, and partly because whatever else was wrong with the legends, reading them was more like theology than the texts I was forced to read. I engaged in the same toxic sin, only on differing

#### terms.

I have long coveted the ancient idol of nobility or royalty and been unsatisfied with my singular giftedness, about which I have been told by a psychologist, "...the average Harvard Ph.D. has *never met* someone as talented as you." Whatever talents I have, I have shared the basic vice of all who coveted my talents.

In C.S. Lewis's favorite old book and an old favorite of many a European noble in ages past, *The Consolation of Philosophy* in which Lady Philosophy visits and consoles a distraught philosopher, the idol of fame is exploded, and shortly after the idol of nobility is exploded too as the fame of our ancestors, a distraction twice over from what will make us happy. That is one sense in which my coveting nobility is absurd.

But the second one is that it is the St. Bernard wanting to say *I'm as good as you* to the toy dog. I have been invited to an installment of the path of monasticism, a 1% nobility within the Orthodox Church, and my abbot has raised the question of my serving pastorally down the road, which would be a further nobility even if it is one that sensible monks seek to avoid. Furthermore, St. Constantine, great among princes, appeared to a monastic and said that if he had seen how monks were honored in Heaven, he would have traded his royal purple for monastic black as quickly as possible. The story was a bit like how I had a Swiss Army Knife over an inch thick and the biggest one made for real use, the SwissChamp XLT, and coveted far inferior Swiss Army Knives I saw on the shelves.

It is usually preferred practice to avoid discussion of dreams, but I have one dream I'll ask a blessing to share. In that dream, I received the title of knight, and my immediate reaction was a dismayed, "*This isn't going to make me happy!*"

I have wanted to be addressed by something like Your Majesty, and a job which no one in his right mind would likely seek does potentially declare a title of "Your Grace" or "Your Eminence." However, to those who have that job, such addressing is mostly limited to formal contexts. When someone with such a job in my neck of the woods is elevated to such status, over 90% of the time he is simply and rightly addressed as "Vladyka." Meaning that even with the most exalted eccleastical title, no one is addressed as "Your Something-or-Other" most of the time.

(And I know that even if I had it, it wouldn't satisfy me as in past fantasies. That is a lesser detail than being told, "You are the most brilliant person I have ever met." That became uninteresting after half a dozen or a dozen times, if even that; the novelty of such things is very shortlived.)

I know the experience and the vice of covetousness, and my talents and my privileges have not in my case translated to an exemption from the basic struggle. I do not want great wealth or physical beauty, and I no longer wish to be far smarter, assuming my own degree of intelligence to be too paltry.

And the desire for a status of nobility is one I believe is hardly unique to myself. I have seen ads on the web selling "real English titles of nobility" for something like 200 GBP. It is the same accursed wishing that has people spending thousands to receive a diploma mill doctorate from "prestigious non-accredited colleges." (And it was bitter to me to realize I would never succeed in earning a doctorate, but neither the masters' degrees I received nor the doctorate I failed to earn *matter* in monasticism.)

My conscience has left me with a clear blessing to accept a knighthood of the British state order if such is offered, or an honorary doctorate if such is offered, and I would welcome an honorary doctorate from the Institute for Orthodox Studies at my alma mater. However, that is on the periphery of things at best.

What is not on the periphery is the real nobility of seeking monasticism, and that is not something I am tempted to covet; it is something I am attempting to soberly seek. It's been said that a doctorate is a piece of paper that comes along when you're doing something you love, and monastic tonsure, if I am so honored to receive it, comes along with seeking to repent of my sins for the rest of my life. That is really not as bad as it sounds, but it would be a mark of failure if what it does is go to my head. It is in the character of real things that one seeks but does not covet.

I expose such of my failings because I believe others have been tempted as I have been, and I want to make an assertion made in *Ostrov*: "I know the demon personally."

But there is another note besides telling people who covet my gifts that I know the misery of covetousness and the failure of being called a genius to make for happiness. *The happiness that we might seek in coveting riches, or intelligence, or beauty, or doctorates, or titles of nobility, is hiding like in the story of the old woman who just couldn't find her glasses... because they were hiding on top of her nose.* 

For me my dreams of happiness were for a long time connected with Europe, and I would for a long time have rather been unhappy in Europe than happy in my country. When I went to the Holy Mountain, believing I would be able to stay, I was happy but was surprised I didn't feel happier than I did... after I learned how to be happy, not in exalted places in Europe, but in America. I had true happiness, not the counterfeit that would be mine if I got my way to be in some exalted condition in Europe. And to people in may other places in the world, I say that going to America and being rich is no guarantee of happiness, either.

Who is rich? He who is content. Happiness is a matter of virtue, a door that is open to all of us. I invite the reader to read Boethius, *The Consolation of Philosophy*, and perhaps my tribute in *The Consolation of Theology*. And the happiness we imagine we might receive if we had some privilege or some social success is in fact available without such an elevation in privilege. Happiness is a choice, and some pointers to it are contained in *The Consolation of Philosophy* and also *The Consolation of Theology*.

That is the best I can offer to people who wonder what life would be like if they had the talent at play in some of my writing. It is really not something to covet, and the happiness is an open door where you are now.

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