

ALETHEIA

A JOURNAL OF CHRISTIAN THOUGHT



CHRIST-HAUNTED

“No more blood needs to be shed to gain God’s favor because Jesus’ blood was already shed for all of humanity’s sin”

WE NEED DEATH

We need death. We stop being human without it.

HUMILITY

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Issue I

An aerial photograph of a vast, teal-colored ocean. A large wave is breaking from the right side, creating a thick, white foam that cascades down. In the lower right foreground, a dark, jagged rock protrudes from the water, surrounded by white, churning foam. The water's surface is textured with small ripples and waves, and the overall color palette is dominated by various shades of green and blue, with the white of the foam providing a sharp contrast.

MISSION STATEMENT:

Aletheia seeks to explore the implications of Christian thought
within the interdisciplinary space of Cal Poly.

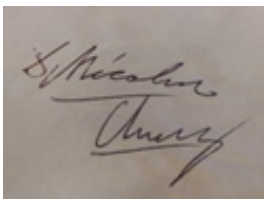
DEAR READERS

As humans, we make plans for the future, in an attempt to create a sense of control. In humility, we become aware of how little control we have. Through a global pandemic and social-political turmoil, we were reminded of how truly fragile everything is, of how quickly life can not only be changed, but also be taken away. And yet, the fragility of life somehow makes it all the more precious and special. We now humbly approach the future, keeping in mind that truly nothing is certain, as we have seen greater unrest, turmoil, and change than many of us ever expected to see.

This spirit of humility is an essential aspect of what Aletheia at Cal Poly is. Often translated as “truth” or “uncovering”, the concept aletheia is best described as the act of uncovering truth. As a journal of Christian thought, we do not claim to have a monopoly on truth; rather, we seek to humbly be a part of the process of uncovering it. Our society has gone through much uncovering in the past year and a half. As we put masks on, we took many other masks off, revealing many uncomfortable truths surrounding the shortcomings of our systems and institutions. The uncovering of truth is often a messy and uncomfortable process, but it is a necessary one. Cancers cannot be treated if they are not first discovered in someone’s body, for how else can corruption be routed out? How else can justice be administered, except by injustice being revealed? Can we depend on structures that seem to fail us time and again?

Perhaps an eternal perspective is necessary. When all else around fails, it makes sense to look for hope beyond this life. When every facade has crumbled, when all is stripped away, it becomes apparent that our hope cannot be placed in earthly things, “where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal” (Matthew 16:19, ESV). Our hope is found in a place that cannot be touched by either. Our hope is found in wisdom and truth that can only come from God, who transcends our circumstances and our reality.

As we undertake this process of uncovering truth, we recognize our own limitations. In the field of mathematics, a limit is the concept that a line can continually approach a value but never quite reach it. In the same manner, we reach towards the truth an infinite God, aiming to get as close as possible in this life with the understanding that we will never quite reach a perfect understanding. If you are looking for definitive answers, you have come to the wrong place. But if you seek to uncover truth with us in a spirit of humility, we invite you to come with an open heart and open mind as we start a conversation with you, the reader. Have a seat at our table, and as Jesus said to his disciples, “Come and dine” (John 21:12, KJV).

A photograph of a handwritten signature in dark ink on a light-colored background. The signature is written in a cursive style and appears to read "Nicolas Chaney".

Nicolas Chaney
Editor-in-Chief, 2020-2021



Aletheia is a Christian thought journal which strives to write about and discuss the way Christianity interacts with every aspect of our lives, specifically in the context of Cal Poly. We are a part of the Augustine Collective, a group of journals on college campuses primarily across the United States, which strives to do the same.

Contribute!

If you are interested in submitting articles, short stories, poetry, photography, or art, or want to join the Aletheia team, email us at aletheia.augustinecollective@gmail.com. Aletheia is a team of students at Cal Poly. Everything we do – from writing, editing and design, to social media, outreach and business – is done by students. All majors are welcome, whether you have writing experience or not.

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THE ESSENCE OF JUSTICE

BY TIM RETTBERG

San Luis Obispo has many defining characteristics, known to those who have lived or even vacationed here. The golden hills that turn a vivid green in the winter, Bishop Peak, and the Cal Poly ag fields combine with its proximity to popular beaches to reflect its central coast identity. Renowned tri-tip, farmers' markets, line dancing, and rivalry soccer games create the college town atmosphere that distinguishes it from the surrounding region. One cannot start school here without frequently hearing about its proud identity as the 'Happiest City in America.' But for those of us who know the area, the California Men's Colony – a state prison north of the Cal Poly campus that imprisons around 4,000 inmates – is an unspoken characteristic of the region. Its deep orange glow seeps over the city at night and is distinct on sunset hikes up Bishop Peak. The drive to Morro Bay cuts across its entrance. It's unavoidable. In my experience, though, it is largely ignored by students and residents, unmentioned outside of rare off-hand comments.

The past decade in American politics has seen a newfound growth in demands for criminal justice reform, or more radically, prison and police abolition. Books, Netflix documentaries, and podcasts have broken ground for raising public awareness surrounding the ongoing injustice in the prison and policing systems.

Simultaneously, viral examples of police brutality have shed light on the abuses of policing and imprisonment in America. The past year has brought these abuses – and American racism as a whole – back to the forefront of public discourse with the murders of Ahmaud Arbery, George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and others by the police or people who see themselves as such. Months of protests, and violent retaliation from police, have followed.

These injustices and abuses, historically dismissed in dominant American culture, have once again been unearthed in front of white Americans. Popular frustrations with the system often include the use of private prisons, mandatory minimums, and imprisonment for minor, non-violent crimes. Critics also point to ineffective and racist movements such as the 'War on Drugs,' in addition to the coded language that has accompanied them – 'tough on crime' or 'law and order,' for example¹ – as major contributors to mass incarceration. However, this popular story only targets part of the problem. Although these practices are certainly harmful and must be addressed, the larger reality is that mass incarceration is not primarily driven by private prisons or the criminalization of drugs. Instead, it is driven on a local level by a host of factors, and prison populations are primarily filled with those convicted of violent crimes. To truly

grapple with mass incarceration, then, we cannot simply acknowledge the injustices experienced by those wrongly imprisoned. We must also fundamentally rethink the way we deal with crime as a whole.

DEFINING JUSTICE IN AMERICA

Discussions of justice in American society can become blurred when key terms, even justice itself, are not defined. Broadly, justice is characterized by what is right, fair, and reasonable. However, conversations surrounding politics and particularly the prison system can include inter-human justice (concern for the welfare of the other), distributive justice (concern for the right distribution of possessions and resources), and corrective justice (concern for how to identify and deal with crime) (Patte 2010). Chris Marshall (2012) points out, for example, that if we took social justice – a mix of inter-human and distributive justice – more seriously, "we would have less cause to employ criminal sanctions against those on the margins of the community who feel they have no stake in society" (13). While it is important, then, to recognize the different aspects of justice, they cannot be isolated.

Additionally, two major philosophies exist on how to implement corrective justice. Punitive justice, which has dominated American culture and penal

¹ Rhetoric of 'law and order' and being 'tough on crime' developed in opposition to the Civil Rights Movement and desegregation, characterizing the former as causing crime. For more information see The New Jim Crow (Alexander 2010).

“American Christianity, particularly in white Evangelical communities, [has] been intertwined with the construction and affirmation of punitive justice both culturally and institutionally in the United States”

institutions for centuries, seeks to punish offenders and right the wrong as soon as possible, under the notion that justice is achieved when the offender pays the price for their actions. On the other hand, restorative justice frameworks seek to restore the harm done by crime – for the victim, community, and offender – and rehabilitate offenders. As Brittany Krippner explained in an earlier issue of *Aletheia*, models of punitive justice center the offender and what the state deems they deserve, whereas restorative justice centers the victim and the community, asking what is needed for them to heal. Punitive justice views crime deterministically; restorative justice views it under a framework of redemption and healing (Krippner 2018).

The Christian Church has not been quiet in discussions of how to shape corrective institutions. In *Rethinking Incarceration*, Dominique Du Bois Gilliard (2018) demonstrates the ways in which Christians have encouraged punitive models of justice in the United States, particularly through the concept of atonement. Atonement is one subset of Christian soteriology – theories relating Jesus’ death and resurrection to humanity’s salvation from sin. Penal substitutionary atonement, common in western conservative Christianity, frames salvation in legal terms. In short, it argues humanity is sinful, separated from God, and deserving of punishment,

but Jesus’ death satisfied God’s wrath, taking humanity’s place. Gilliard explains how penal substitution upholds punishment in seeking justice:

“penal substitution [atonement] theologically substantiates the notion that justice is served when someone suffers and pays the penalty for a relational violation. Within a penal substitutionary framework, punishment is not only necessary, it is seen as a virtue because it breeds reform, transformation, and restoration” (156).

He goes on to explain penal substitution became intertwined with western legal systems by emphasizing the need for retribution to achieve justice and by failing to see a distinction between sin and crime (156-157).

Christian theologians, such as St. Augustine, St. Aquinas, and C.S. Lewis, have promoted the link between penal substitution and criminal justice. Gilliard quotes Lewis disagreeing with the ‘Humanitarian Theory’ of criminal justice, which would promote healing of offenders, and instead arguing that punishment and what an offender deserves cannot be neglected in achieving justice. In this view, then, punishment is “the key to justice, accountability, and transformation” (158).

The result of this theological foundation is an American Christianity, particularly in white Evangelical communities, that has been intertwined with the construction and affirmation of punitive justice both culturally and institutionally in the United States. For example, Gilliard points out that dehumanizing and hateful views toward ‘criminals’ in the U.S. are more common among Christians than in the general population (148). Christians, he says, have embraced the idea that people get what they deserve, leading them to not only support overzealous punishment for crime, but to also see it as an offense against the state rather than harm to individuals and communities (169). Evangelical leaders “have zealously aided the Christian right in its effort to reclaim law and order,” by endorsing harsh punishment as biblical, mobilizing Christians to advocate for it, and by supporting politicians financially, through their platforms, and even through holding rallies (51). This support has enabled the growth of often discriminatory legislation that has heavily criminalized drug use, incentivized incarceration, and advocated for harsh punishments (184).

While penal substitution atonement resonates with some of Christian scripture, the exact mechanics of salvation are widely recognized as a mystery. Common theology regarding salvation all tend to combine

multiple functions of Jesus' death and resurrection to explain how humans are saved. For example, the satisfaction theory of atonement – also common in western Christianity – sees Jesus' death as payment of the obedience and honor that humanity has failed to give to God rather than punishment satisfying God's wrath. Additionally, victory over death, apart from restitution or punishment, is another aspect of how western Christians view the cross and is central to Eastern Christian theology regarding salvation (Gilliard 2018).

Even though corrective justice in Christian scripture often falls into what can be seen as retributive or punitive justice, it is evidently more complicated than American conceptions of retribution. Marshall points out that “there can be little doubt that biblical teaching on justice includes a definite theme of retribution” (13). However, he argues that this does not necessarily affirm the “highly retributive penal system” seen in the United States. Describing how justice is achieved throughout Christian scripture, he explains that

“biblical law often prescribes punitive countermeasures that are intended to denounce the wrong, arrest its power, and rectify its damage ... But the goal of the punishment is not to maintain some abstract cosmic balance, but to put right what has gone wrong, to protect the community, and to restore the integrity of its life and its relationship with God. Justice is satisfied by the restoration of peace to relationships, not by the pain of the punishment per se” (15-16).

Furthermore, he points out the large overlap in meaning and usage of righteousness and justice biblically.

According to Gilliard, retribution can be a component of accountability in scripture, but “justice is ultimately manifested in the restoration of righteousness within relationships, not in the pain inflicted or the time served behind bars” (Gilliard 2018, 159). The American reliance on incarceration and increasingly harsh punishment, conditions, and abuse fails to effectively approach this vision of justice. Punitive justice does not aim to restore relationships, and furthermore fails to even protect communities.

MAINSTREAM REFORM EFFORTS

As criminal justice reform has become popular and increasingly bipartisan over the past decade, focus on addressing non-violent crimes, wrongful arrests or imprisonment, and egregious abuse has gone mainstream. And this makes sense. Alexander points out that the stigma around drug use is steadily decreasing given the visibility of opioid addiction in white communities and cites the 2.2 million in prisons or jails, 4.5 million on probation or parole, and 70 million with criminal records as just one window into the damage done by the drug war. Although important, Alexander calls this focus on non-violent crime ‘low-hanging fruit.’ These popular reform movements largely fail to address the issue of violence, which accounts for the majority of those held in state prisons, which in turn hold the majority of inmates in the U.S. (Alexander 2019, Gopnik 2017). Alexander and Pfaff conclude that only addressing the over-criminalization of drug use, unjust sentencing, and use of private prisons will not end mass incarceration. We must ask ourselves, then, what we want the legal system to accomplish, whether it is achieving those goals, and whether it can realistically achieve them without fundamental changes in how we address crime. Is

ending mass incarceration a necessary step towards real justice, or is the U.S. legal system a cracked version of an otherwise just system?

Practically speaking, the U.S. legal system fails to adequately prevent, solve, or address violent crime. U.S. public safety is invested primarily in jails, prisons, and police. We spend around \$100 billion each year on policing alone (John Jay College 2020, 22). These measures aim to prevent crime through deterrence; however, the effectiveness of deterring crime through the threat of police or prison is unconvincing. Common studies neither prove that police are a necessary component for deterrence nor that they are the most effective method (Pfaff 2020). Additionally, a recent report by John Jay College explains that “if deterrence were entirely sufficient to prevent violence and ensure public safety, the United States would undoubtedly enjoy one of the lowest rates of community violence in the world” and recommends “strategies beyond deterrence” to achieve effective violence prevention (John Jay College 2020, 3). It is well known that American prisons have extreme rates of recidivism², but the report also points out that the use of juvenile detention not only fails to reduce a child's likelihood of reoffending as an adult – it can actually increase it (16). Punitive justice not only fails to rehabilitate offenders, it often makes reintegration into society more difficult.

Even if arresting and incarcerating offenders were effective, clearance rates on violent crime are very low. In one study, 54 percent of homicides over a ten-year period led to an arrest. In New Orleans, 35 percent of homicides and 2 percent of rape cases were cleared in 2018. According to some estimates, “75

² Recidivism refers to the rate of returning to prison within three years of release. One study found that out of over 400,000 state prisoners released in 2005, 68% were arrested within 3 years, 79% within 6 years, and 83% within 9. See the following article for more information: “Recidivism is a Core Criminal Justice Concern” (National Institute of Justice).

“Too often, Americans who push for criminal justice reform do not fundamentally challenge, but actually affirm, punitive justice”

percent of sexual assaults go unreported, and 99 percent go unpunished” (Rice 2018). Achieving justice and public safety does not require the system we have, where “solitary confinement, assault, sickness, torture, and rape are par for the course” (Rice 2018).

Too often, Americans who push for criminal justice reform do not fundamentally challenge, but actually affirm, punitive justice. Alex S. Vitale notes that both political parties see “all social problems as police problems” (Vitale 2017). The same appears to be true with incarceration. Too often, we believe the only way to hold individuals accountable for harm, especially violence, is through incarceration and the worst punishment justifiable.

To reformers who unwittingly affirm the U.S. legal system, its abuses are not immoral in and of themselves. Instead, they are deserved by truly violent criminals rather than the drug dealers, drug addicts, or others who have been wrongly caught up in a broken but otherwise just system. In other words, those who commit truly violent crimes deserve the conditions and punishment of our prisons. Of course, this is more palatable for the public. Violent crime is real, everyone wants justice for victims of any crime, and harsh punishment convinces us something has been done to achieve it. However, accountability is central to restorative justice frameworks,

and justice does not require harm to be done to the offender. Without more significant reform, we will be left with a system that is still not only inadequate, but counterproductive, and which “leaves communities worse off” (Alexander 2019). Since the punitive foundation of the existing legal system does little to prevent, solve, or address violence or crime in general, we must look beyond retribution as a means of achieving justice.

ACHIEVING REAL JUSTICE

The Christian Church’s frequent emphasis on atonement and retributive justice is certainly not an exhaustive picture of what Christianity can offer in discussions regarding the U.S. legal system. Jesus’ association and friendship with sinners and the outcast is in stark contrast to the dominant American worldviews regarding ‘criminals’ and their place in society (Krippner 2018). In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus famously opposes the simple retributive justice in ‘an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth,’ suggesting a Christian ethic is more complicated³. The Christian doctrine of the image of God – asserting that all humans have inherent worth and dignity – falls in tension with the determinism we hold towards crime and those in prison. In just one example, Krippner recalls an officer telling her “there’s just nothing more we can do for these people” in a prison she visited (26).

Furthermore, Marshall (2012) argues that themes of justice found in Christian scripture, while retributive in many ways, are ultimately restorative. Like Gilliard, Marshall says the key to God’s justice is not purely punishment of offenders, but “the restoration of right relationship” (15). Marshall goes on to explain the following four obligations required of offenders in the Christian Old Testament⁴ to receive forgiveness and for justice to be achieved for the community:

1. Recognition and acknowledgment of the offense
2. Repentance – determination to make amends and make things right
3. Restitution to the victim, plus additional compensation
4. Reconciliation with the victim

Although capital punishment was used for some serious crimes, it was not always carried out, and for most offenses, justice was achieved through these four obligations in order “to repair relationships and restore community” (18).

This emphasis on reparation of harm and restoration of relationship is also found throughout the rest of Christian scripture. Marshall argues that “the biblical metanarrative can be read as one large story of God’s restorative justice at work” (16) and is echoed through the apostle Paul’s letters to the Galatians and Corinthians⁵. John the Baptist urges his followers to “bear fruit worthy of repentance”⁶ and Zacharias repents by giving half of his possessions to the poor and repaying anyone he wronged four times over.⁷ Jesus’ willingness to associate with and humanize Zacharias through a framework of reparation and reconciliation, rather than of ‘paying the price for your actions,’ held him

3 Matthew 5:38-40

4 Numbers 5:5-7; Leviticus 6:1-7; Ezekiel 33:10-20

5 Galatians 6:1; 2 Corinthians 2:6-11

6 Matthew 3:8, NRSV

7 Luke 19:8

accountable while helping the victims and avoiding further harm (Gilliard 2018, 183).

In the same way, restorative justice frameworks seek to address the issue of violence so often neglected in mainstream reform efforts. Restorative justice is generally defined by practical efforts to restore harm, address conflict, and promote rehabilitation. It seeks to center victims, the communities around them, and offenders, in order to restore harm (Gavrielides 2014). It also sees re-humanizing offenders and recognizing the violence most have experienced as a key component of providing public safety (Bandarkar 2017). In other words, Vitale argues “real justice would look to restore people and communities, to rebuild trust and social cohesion, to offer people a way forward, to reduce social forces that drive crime, and to treat both victims and perpetrators as full human beings” (Vitale 2017). Notably, this vision of justice parallels that found throughout Christian scripture. The U.S. legal system relies on the dehumanization of offenders to justify their incarceration and abuse by features such as solitary confinement.⁸ It is unreasonable to expect this to promote reintegration into society, low rates of recidivism, and healing of communities. And it evidently does not.

Whereas punitive justice and incarceration fail to effectively address violence, restorative justice can actually benefit victims, their communities, and offenders. 90% of survivors of violence in New York City chose restorative justice programs over incarceration,

when given the option. In other words, victims “who have been shot, stabbed, or robbed... [decided] they would prefer to get answers from the person who harmed them, be heard in a restorative justice circle, help to devise an accountability plan, and receive comprehensive victim services ... rather than send the person who harmed them to prison” (Alexander 2019). The only tool we have offered victims to achieve justice is incarceration. The desire to imprison and punish offenders, Alexander points out, is a desire to do something rather than nothing. When given the choice, then, most victims would prefer options other than incarceration (Alexander 2019).

Lewis and other Christian theologians feared restorative justice would fail to hold offenders accountable, but accountability does not necessitate retribution. Justice in Christian scripture evidently maintained accountability without the requirement of punishment. In Ezekiel, God says “I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from their ways and live”⁹, and is described in Exodus as “forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, yet by no means clearing the guilty”.¹⁰ At its core, restorative justice pursues restoration not solely for rehabilitation of offenders and reduction of crime, but to center victims, affected communities, and what they require to heal. It is clear that retribution alone cannot achieve that.

•••

During my time at Cal Poly, San Luis Obispo’s proud title of ‘Happiest City

in America’ increasingly rang hollow when thousands were imprisoned just miles north of the campus. How much can this title mean when homelessness is common¹¹, racism is prevalent¹², and when Cal Poly and the surrounding community notoriously lack diversity? And how much of this facade of happiness relies on numbing ourselves to the physical manifestations of abuse and dehumanization in the fences, walls, and floodlights of the state prison?

Less conservative wings of American Evangelicalism have been rightly placing more emphasis on the importance of bringing shalom – a peace, harmony, wholeness, or way things ought to be – to individuals and communities. This would include restoring relationships, supporting the marginalized, and working to heal the effects of injustice. Where they are inspired to bring shalom, however, is revealing. Locally, these Christians evangelize to students. Abroad, they go on short-term mission trips, working with students and occasionally those harmed by specific forms of injustice. At the same time, the California central coast is fractured and lacks shalom in tangible ways beyond the grasp of Evangelical theology – in the suffering of those in and outside of church walls or campus property lines. Reducing this restorative work to conversion neglects the reality that these scars, particularly those of survivors of sexual assault or racism, were created, ignored, and trivialized by Christians inside and outside of the walls of the Church. Faith without works is dead¹³, and conversion means little apart from the ethic of reparation Christ models. What would

8 Solitary confinement is increasingly recognized as torture and a cause of significant psychological damage. See the following for additional information: Mark Bowers et al. “Solitary Confinement as Torture,” Immigration/Human Rights Clinic, University of North Carolina School of Law (2014).

9 Ezekiel 33:11, NRSV

10 Exodus 34:7, NRSV

11 David Lightman. “SLO’s homeless crisis is getting worse – even as federal spending rises.” The Tribune, December 2019.

12 The Tribune Editorial Board. “A man went on a racist rant in SLO County. It was no ‘isolated incident’.” The Tribune, June 2020.

13 James 2:14-26

communities look like if Christians noticed the lack of shalom here, amongst the imprisoned, the survivors of violence, and the marginalized?

Once again, we must ask ourselves what punitive justice aims to accomplish, whether it is achieving those goals, and whether it can realistically achieve them. Punitive models of corrective justice are neither practically effective nor morally justifiable. Embodying the ethic and life of Jesus in the context of crime and violence means rejecting the belief that justice is achieved through vengeance. To protect victims and their communities, to humanize offenders, and to truly address the root causes of crime, we must move beyond retribution as a means of achieving justice.



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BLESSED IS HE...

BY EMMA JOY BENIS

Does the hand which holds my breath
lead me to sound or staled waters?

Atop my head the bird does see
a passing, a fleeting, a fettering gait.

Why this chess,
with rage and no aim?

Does the crow see
my constant faint and wake
or just this symmetry of hurry?

White, black, white again.

The Queen
Takes one bishop
And takes again.

White, black, white again.

No more does her enemy
Have council from he.
The bishop sunk softly,

he smiles at me.

We tire and tire against this board,
the boundary it makes.
Yet we seize our pin.
We play her game.

We detest each turn,
so what is our aim?

Is my mind on victory
or avoiding royalty?
Regardless, my form
resides on this board.

White, black, white again.

My feet on the edge,
of black, of white.

I wince and think
What it means to succeed.
Why does the bishop smile
In sweet relief?

Instead of the caw,
what doth stream
but a blinding voice
by God, it screams!

Though black is the square
on which I stand,
I look to the sky
and see a fair hand.

It does not move me to victory's square,
but off of the board and into the air!

Blessed is He,
who rushes to me.

The Queen in one hand,
and I in the other.
So small becomes the board
once so dark in color.

The Queen draws ever smaller,
Her fortress fall'n away;
And I am left to see
That it was I who chose to stay.



Emma Joy Benis is a recent biomedical engineering alumna from Cal Poly. She is now working in Southern California for Johnson & Johnson, and enjoys beach volleyball and concert-going in her free time.

MACHISMO HURTS MEN, TOO

BY LYDIA ANDERSON

It's better for a person not to get everything they want

Deluded, we want unmatched prowess and power, as Achilles had
He reacted to his own mortality and weakness but did not accept it
He raged furiously against the tides of Xanthos Scamander (and everything
else) But his anger could not save him from death
So as gods, we can look down on his story and see him
One without rest, living in an illusion
A true portrait of ourselves

How many ancients moulded themselves after Alexander?
They broke themselves chasing wind
Trying to achieve an ideal of perfection and power
Foolish hobbit pity and smallness inspires contempt
Until their humility conquered where greatness could not

Accepting and admitting our weakness, we can be known by others
And learn to accept and then to love them
Real vulnerability is the soil for cultivating connection
Communitas is born from accepting death, sickness, lack of control
We may find it's what we were looking for all along

An ancient wisdom that is still unnatural to us
Each generation, each person must learn again and again

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WE NEED DEATH

BY NINA CASSIDY

*What man can live and never see death?
Who can save himself from the grasp of the
grave? (Psalm 89:48)*

Us. Soon.

The year is 2033. Self-driving cars are commonplace, and dinner is 3D printed. Advances in computer science and neuroscience now make it possible to “upload” your consciousness right before death and live forever in a blissful and realistic world—if you have the money. This is the world presented in Amazon’s new show Upload. The premise of the story is about cheating death. And technological advances make it possible and commonplace.

But this is just a fictional world, right? Maybe it is. Or maybe it’s not as far-fetched as you would like it to be. Maybe science really will be able to give us the tools to conquer our own mortality.

For decades, federal funding for research has been on the decline. Since the 70’s, an increasingly greater share of R&D expenditures has been from industry. And since 2007, research funding at universities has dramatically fallen as a result of smaller and smaller federal and state budget allocations. Academic researchers now fight for increasingly

scarce grant money. And while industry may be doing just fine—technology brings in profits—the new knowledge that makes technological development possible primarily comes from basic research.

20th century research into the fundamental natures of matter and energy amassed the body of knowledge that has evolved into endless modern technology that we mostly take for granted. Our understanding of magnetism made MRI possible. The same discovery of nuclear magnetic resonance used in MRI is also used by scientists to identify substances and determine molecular structures, which is used in almost limitless applications. The understanding of x-rays gave us CT scans and x-ray crystallography—the tool used to determine the structure of DNA. The discovery and understanding of the photon have given us lasers which are important for modern telecommunication technology, bar scanners, manufacturing systems, non-invasive surgical procedures, and much more. I could go on and on, but the point is simple: basic science is necessary for furthering technology. Maybe one more example worth mentioning is the 2005 discoveries of CRISPR and Cas9 that came from studying the adaptive immune

system in bacteria. What is now generally termed CRISPR-Cas9 has revolutionized biology and medicine and brought about the birth of genetic engineering as we know it today.

But the pandemic just might be a turning point. All the sudden, the necessity of research seems unquestionably obvious. COVID-19 has made the public acutely aware that we have not yet mastered the natural world. Despite the great scientific and medical advances of late, we don’t know everything and are unnervingly vulnerable. The newly proposed \$100 billion Endless Frontiers Act may provide concrete evidence of such a conversion. The bipartisan bill seeks to radically reinvest in scientific research by completely rebooting the National Science Foundation.

The pandemic may also have another significant consequence for the future of scientific research. Over the years, the world of academic science has become slow and bureaucratic. But the frenzy to understand the novel coronavirus broke down barriers. New research is being rapidly shared and published at incredible rates. Scientists from across the world are collaborating like never before. Preliminary data is published and shared—something previously unheard



of. Peer review is taking days rather than months. Assuredly, the current rate of research is not sustainable, but it just might be the much-needed reset button for scientific academia.

Combine this with new invigoration for research funding and 2020 may be the dawn of a new era of science, technology, and medicine—maybe even an era where we defeat death.

In the US, life expectancy has been hovering around 78. The leading causes of death are heart disease, cancer, accidents, chronic lower respiratory diseases, stroke, Alzheimer's, diabetes, and influenza. Soon, many of these could become overwhelmingly treatable, and as these diseases are tackled, life expectancy will climb—perhaps quite rapidly. The next hurdle to tackle is aging; more basic research into the molecular processes that cause aging combined with the refinement of genetic engineering technologies may make this a reasonable prospect.

This is certainly the goal of so-called “transhumanists”, who hope to cure death with the help of advances in technology. Their primary obstacle is the lack of support for this feat. Most people see death as an important part of being

human, primarily because of religious beliefs. But as disbelief or disregard for the existence of a god continues, and the fear of death and suffering remain, resistance to defeat death may significantly subside. This might even be true for some who do think there is a god. A line from the pilot episode of *Upload* says it well: “If there’s God, he’s amazing because he gave us life and the gratitude and creativity to keep it going as long as we possibly can.”

So if science gets us to a place where disease and aging are no more, what does life without death look like? Bleak, I think. The writers of NBC’s hit comedy *The Good Place*, seem to agree.

(Spoilers.)

In the controversial series finale, the main character and her friends finally find themselves in the Good Place—a sort of secular heaven. And everyone there is miserable, despite living in a blissful world with anything you could desire available at a moment’s wish. They discover that life loses meaning and becomes boring and miserable when it has no end. Once again, the group is tasked with fixing the system. Their solution? Give people the option of self-annihilation whenever they decide their (after)life has been satisfactory. A

majestic archway now sits at the edge of a wood. No one really knows what happens when you walk through. Maybe you simply cease to exist, maybe not. But the point is that, at least to the show writers, human life—well technically afterlife that is simply portrayed as earthly life sans suffering—loses meaning and the possibility of happiness without death.

“We need death. We stop being human without it.”

We need death. We stop being human without it. Even with God and religion aside, death is still key to giving life meaning.

But let’s take a few steps back. You might still be thinking that this proposal of conquering death is just outlandish sci-fi inspired conjecture. Maybe it is. But even if we can’t defeat death once and for all, I’m still confident that we’re going to be able to delay it quite significantly. And soon. I think a major jump in life expectancy over the next few decades is a quite reasonable and modest proposal. But with the horrific revelation of the current state of nursing homes, the increase in quality of life probably isn’t going to keep up with this increase in

span of life.

To me, the obvious result here is a massive increase in assisted suicide. There's already decent support for it. For years, physician assisted suicide has been on the rise, in the US and abroad from 2007 to 2017, physician assisted suicides have increased three-fold in Oregon where it has been legal since 1997, and a 2015 Pew Research survey revealed that 68% of Californians supported assisted suicide and 56% of Americans said it was morally acceptable.

Ultimately, I see the desire to defeat death and the desire for assisted suicide as two sides of the same coin. Both are motivated by the same fears of death and suffering, and both are ways of playing

god—a concept we seem to have gotten very comfortable with in recent years. Fortunately, this means the way to fight them is the same.

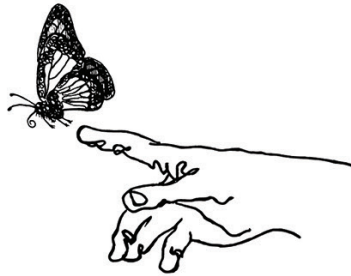
So what is the antidote to “death with dignity”?

Give death dignity.

This starts with facing death up close and personal. Throughout most of human history, death was a visible daily reality. It was common to witness the death of family and loved ones. Death was a normal part of life. But with our modern hospital and nursing home system, death is no longer something the average person regularly sees. Now, only 25% of people die at home in the United States. This lack of confrontation with

death has led to our ability to generally ignore that we will one day die. The inevitable end of our life is certainly not something fun to think about. It makes us uncomfortable, maybe even causing us to evaluate the kind of life we are leading. But we need to think about it. We need to talk about it. One of the most obvious indications of our widespread fear of death is our reluctance to even name it. We use whatever euphemisms we can to speak about dying. Talk about death. Make people uncomfortable. And most importantly, live your life in a way that gives witness to the beauty and dignity of death and suffering.

So remember your death. Remind your friends and families of theirs too. Maybe, then, our future relationship with death won't be so bleak.



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CHRIST-HAUNTED

BY NICOLAS CHANEY



“I think it is safe to say that while the South is hardly Christ-centered, it is most certainly Christ-haunted”

– Flannery O’Connor

Flannery O’Connor was an American novelist who was a pioneer in the genre of the Southern Gothic. Much of her work revolved around characters who were seen as “freaks”, and on the subject, she commented how writers from the American South have a habit of writing about such characters because there is a sense of religiosity permeating the culture. This religiosity gives Southern writers a sense of what the ideal person looks like; thus, they are fascinated by and fear any deviations from this ideal. Perhaps the Southern writer fears seeing those deviations in themselves the most. Against this backdrop of cultural Christianity, one can understand being “Christ-haunted” as having a vague understanding of Christianity, believing to be on the expected path in life, and proceeding to not follow that path. The result of this ends up being a generation of people who have what I like to call a Prodigal Son Complex. A person with

a Prodigal Son Complex often feels estranged from their family on the basis of living a lifestyle which their family does not approve of much like in Jesus’ parable of the Prodigal Son². Being Christ-haunted and identifying with the Prodigal Son are not phenomena specific to the American South, but arguably, they impact most of rural America.

One example of a Christ-haunted person is someone who may have attended church growing up, and they may have even come from a religious family. For whatever reason though, they stopped attending as they became an adult. It is difficult for them to forget about their religious upbringing though. Part of this may be the result of religious or spiritual trauma inflicted on the person from a young age. It could also be the result of a family member who is constantly hounding them about going to church, long after they have lost interest in attending. All these factors combine to engrain within the Christ-haunted individual that society (or at the very least their family) perceives religious

involvement as a net good, leading to subtle feelings of guilt for not living up to this expectation that others have placed upon them. This culminates into having a Prodigal Son Complex.

O’Connor makes the case that these factors are most characteristic of the American South and for good reason. Most of the Bible Belt is situated in the South, and weekly church attendance in many Southern states is above 40% as of 2014, with these numbers being even higher when O’Connor made this observation. A highly religious environment leads to individuals feel like outcasts if they do not participate in the same capacity as those around them. It should also be noted that active church attendance does not necessarily mean that someone is Christ-centered. Being Christ-centered means placing the person of Jesus Christ at the center of one’s life, basing major decisions off of Biblical principles, and living a life dedicated to following the example that Jesus gave us. A Christ-haunted person may still regularly attend church, but



they do so out of pressure from societal or familial expectation. They are living the life that they are expected to live, not necessarily the life they want to live.

While these conditions are particularly prominent in the American South, these features are often present in many parts of rural America. Rural areas tend to be more religious as a whole, so it stands to reason that they have a greater capacity to be Christ-haunted. Many people in rural America have an idea of God in their mind, and the culture favors those who are actively involved in a church since churches have more cultural significance in these communities. On such rural area is the Central Valley of California, but it is important to understand the history of this region to understand its culture. One of earliest population booms in the area was during the Great Depression. Dustbowl refugees came from Kansas, Oklahoma, and Texas by the hundreds of thousands, and they brought their culture with them. This is cultural transplant from nearly a century ago had such lasting effects that the region is referred

to by some as the Bible Belt of California. Compounding onto this already religious, agrarian culture, the Central Valley has also seen a large influx of immigrants in the past several decades, many of whom are devout Catholics. Together, these factors combine to form a recipe for a Christ-haunted culture who believes in a God it does not always understand.

“For all that I do, I cannot escape the fact that I am a product of this culture”

For all that I do, I cannot escape the fact that I am a product of this culture. Half white, half Hispanic, with religious agricultural workers on both sides of my family, I did not fully understand my culture until I read that Flannery O’Connor quote. Much of my high school faculty was heavily involved in their faith. The principal played guitar for his church on Sundays, and the vice principal became a pastor shortly after I graduated. Pastors have a great

deal of influence in the community. A recent issue in the town was whether or not the city council meetings should open in prayer, the main proponents for doing so being several local pastors who reminded everyone what happened to America when they “took prayer out of the schools”. Not everyone in the community regularly attends church, but most people profess to believe in God. When faced with hardships, people are quick to turn to pastors and priests for counseling, food, or financial support, solidifying the role of religion in the community. Some professing Christians are good, Christ-centered people, but many are Christ-haunted.

As O’Connor said, “Ghosts can be very fierce and instructive. They cast strange shadows”. I have seen people tremble as pastors preach hellfire and brimstone, warning them of corrupting, secular influences in their lives. I have seen women and children collapse under the weight of God, or emotionalism, not always knowing the differences. I have seen men profess to be prophets, claiming

to cast out devils and heal the sick. And still, I have seen racist bigotry preached as gospel to a closed-minded crowd. I have seen people condemned to hell for being a part of different denomination. I have seen teenagers scorned and shamed for holding hands with someone deemed an outsider by church leadership. These experiences are integral to my childhood and youth, and I cannot imagine my life without them.

Ever since I learned what it meant to be Christ-haunted, I have seen this phenomenon in the most unexpected places, one of them being *The Devil All The Time*, a recent film starring Tom Holland and Robert Pattinson. The film is set in post-World War II West Virginia, and it deals with rural American misconceptions about the nature of God, like when a sensationalist preacher professes to have been divinely cured of his intense fear of spiders and proves it by dumping a bucket of spiders on himself during his sermon. This same preacher later kills his wife, believing that he must do so in order for God to give him the power to resurrect the dead. Belief in the miraculous and promotion of the sensational are common facets of Christ-haunted culture. Real world examples of this can be found in many fundamentalist churches across the country. They may not kill people in order to raise them from the dead, but a crux of belief for many in these congregations is seeing miraculous works of God.

In another scene, a man crucifies his family's dog in an attempt gain God's favor to save his wife who is dying of cancer. This brings up another aspect of Christ-haunted culture: there is usually a greater emphasis on the Old Testament of the Bible than the New Testament of the Bible. Making sacrifices to gain God's favor is very reminiscent of Levitical law which required the nation of Israel to make all sorts of sacrifices

for a variety of reasons. Having only vague knowledge of who God is leads to a misunderstanding of God's character. It leads to not recognizing Jesus as the ultimate sacrifice. No more blood needs to be shed to gain God's favor because Jesus' blood was already shed for all of humanity's sin. Whether they fully realize it or not, people who are Christ-haunted often view God solely as a god of judgment, wrath, and anger who needs to be appeased in one way or another. Such a view can lead to feelings of guilt from not living the life they are expected to

“No more blood needs to be shed to gain God's favor because Jesus' blood was already shed for all of humanity's sin”

live, or even a complete rejection of the idea of God. If a Christ-haunted person continues to be involved in religious community, they often fall into the trap of presenting God to others in the way that God was presented to them.

Matt Maeson is a musical artist whose music reveals feelings of guilt for not living the life he is expected to live, betraying a Christ-haunted Prodigal Son Complex. One of his songs, “Mr. Rattlebone”, is about struggling with a cocaine addiction, but an in-depth analysis of the lyrics reveal Maeson had a religious upbringing which he is haunted by. One lyric even refers to a “Holy Ghost who haunts your home”. The use of “Holy Ghost” instead of “Holy Spirit” indicates familiarity with the King James Version of the Bible, a version commonly used in fundamentalist churches. Word play is used to show how Maeson is saying that he is haunted by his drug addicted self, as well as to subtly include how he

is haunted by the personification of his religious upbringing. He furthers this theme by including two parallel phrases: “I am the way and the life in the best looking truth” and “I am the driver, I am the shadow, and I am the hearse”. Both are references to John 14:6 where Jesus describes himself as the way, the truth, and the life. In each line, the speaker is Maeson's self-destructive side, at first presenting itself as a replacement for Christ in his life, before revealing its true nature to him at the end of the song. Rather than being his salvation, his drug addiction acts as the mechanism for his demise. One sign that Maeson is Christ-haunted is that he cannot help but conceptualize his struggles in religious terms. Two other songs by Maeson reveal a Prodigal Son complex. Lines from his song “Grave Digger” point to a strained relationship with his parents since he “can't run to [his] father”, and he “can't talk to [his] mother” because her “sweet, sinless sensation is not [his] style”. In a later song entitled “Hallucinogenics”, he laments how he “carried on like the wayward son, and now through and through [he has] come undone”. These two songs combine to form the first half of the story of the Prodigal Son: a young man leaves home to live a lifestyle that his family doesn't approve of, and after spending time living in this manner, he hits rock bottom and laments his position in life.

Flannery O'Connor's commentary holds within it the key to understanding much of rural American culture which is most certainly Christ-haunted. Christ-haunted culture has the potential to produce many people with Prodigal Son complexes. The rejection of religion may be adamant, but it is often difficult to escape the ghosts of one's past.

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THE NICENE CREED

We believe in one God,
the Father, the Almighty,
maker of heaven and earth,
of all that is, seen and unseen.

We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ,
the only Son of God,
eternally begotten of the Father,
God from God, Light from Light,
true God from true God,
begotten, not made,
of one Being with the Father.
Through him all things were made.

For us and for our salvation
he came down from heaven:
by the power of the Holy Spirit
he became incarnate from the Virgin Mary,
and was made man.

For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate;
he suffered death and was buried.
On the third day he rose again
in accordance with the Scriptures;
he ascended into heaven
and is seated at the right hand of the Father.

He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead,
and his kingdom will have no end.

We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life,
who proceeds from the Father and the Son.
With the Father and the Son he is worshiped and glorified.
He has spoken through the Prophets.
We believe in one holy catholic and apostolic Church.
We acknowledge one baptism for the forgiveness of sins.
We look for the resurrection of the dead,
and the life of the world to come.

Amen.

A PRAYER FOR CAL POLY

How can we love our neighbor
Without coming to You, oh Lord
And raising a face to truth
Not our truth, but Yours, oh Lord.

We proclaim science, success
And progress. But what is progress
Without reason for such?
It is trial and error and error again.

What is this all for
A 4 point gain?
Why do we tire again and again,
Faces white with anxiety?

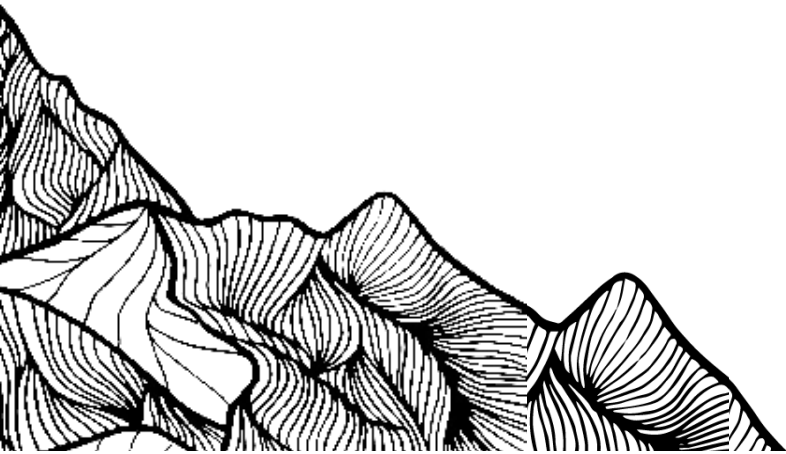
By our own power we have none.
By our own wisdom we come undone.

But with Your Word, oh Lord,
We find our purpose-- a glow
Of grace and hope
Between grey, booked walls

All clarity, all sun: You
Are the reason, oh Lord.
You give us the opportunity
To glean and give, oh Lord.

Let us run towards the truth
Not a feigned mission, no!
Through the stumbling let us seek
You, in robes of reality.





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