

# ALETHEIA

A JOURNAL OF CHRISTIAN THOUGHT

## REEVALUATING PATRIOTISM

...Whenever patriotism is questioned, it is assumed to be generally positive and good for the world, but corruptible if applied incorrectly. But is patriotism actually virtuous at its core?

## A WELCOME REFORMATION: IN PRAISE OF TERRENCE MALICK'S THE TREE OF LIFE

...Underneath all the clamor and competition of the world, something else is stirring: something quiet, mysterious, gentle, motherly, wise.

Also Featuring:

## WHATEVER GRACE POSSIBLE:

An analysis of Salvador Dali pieces

Winter 2019

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Issue I





## **MISSION STATEMENT:**

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

The opinions expressed in the articles in Aletheia are those of the author(s),  
and do not necessarily reflect the views of the journal, its editors, or California  
Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo.

## DEAR READERS

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I am often asked what “Aletheia” means. Where does this word come from, and what relevance does it have to Cal Poly? Frequently translated as “truth,” *aletheia* is an ancient Greek word that has also been defined as “unconcealment” or “disclosure.”

Whether we consciously recognize it or not, this process of uncovering truth is engrained in our campus culture. On an individual level, many of us entered college hoping to one day graduate with a better awareness of truth than when we started. We study material and analyze phenomena to gain a deeper understanding of what is true in our chosen fields. We join clubs and student organizations in a quest for true, authentic relationships. Our personal desires for truth extend to our broader communities: in an era of “fake news,” echo chambers, and what often feels like political and social turbulence, truth might seem like an ideal unifier. Our embedded need to uncover truth may feel more acute than ever before.

At Aletheia, we believe that our individual and collective quests to uncover truth are answered by the Christian Gospel. We also believe that the Christian faith is relevant to all aspects of our lives, including our academics and intellect. Maybe you disagree. Maybe you think Christianity is antiquated in the face of a technologically advanced and culturally complex world. Or perhaps you feel that Christianity is an ineffective framework to deal with hardship and pain. Regardless of your perception of Christianity—regardless of whether your process of disclosing truth has led you to the same conclusions—it is the journey itself that unifies us, and asking these questions is an essential part of a healthy campus community.

In this publication, our third issue of Aletheia, I am excited to see the exploration of truth expand into a variety of mediums. This issue features poetry—a first for our journal—as well as examinations of films and artwork. In the spirit of *aletheia*, we recognize that truth is an ongoing process of uncovering that which was previously hidden. We do not pretend to have all the answers at Aletheia; rather, we seek to create a space at Cal Poly to explore questions of truth together through the lens of Christianity. We hope you will join us in this adventure.



Marta Galambos  
Editor-in-Chief, 2018-2019



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# RENEWAL

BY EMMA JOY BENIS

To bathe in light will not impress,  
for who on this earth desires  
a bounded being to stoke their fires  
who becomes, in pride, a baroness?  
The stench of self from one's own dress  
bears a glow that will expire,  
the threat of death for mere attire  
lest the child begins to confess.

There are those, yet, unwasted in intent.  
Blessed are those who sweat to crawl,  
those who step though bleary and bent.  
Not unlike the grey plate of Paul's  
cracked, dried, fated, and sent  
perhaps to inspire the everyday Sauls.

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**Emma Joy Benis** is a second-year biomedical engineering student from Orange County, California interested in tissue engineering, travel, and music. In her free time she enjoys hiking with friends and playing beach volleyball.



# TRUTH AS THE WAY TO LIFE

BY BRANDON BARTLETT



“I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.”<sup>1</sup> Known by most of my Christian peers by the age of seven, the second part of this oft’ quoted verse is cited as a proof-text for the singular salvific force of the Christian faith. But the golden usefulness of the latter half often gleams too bright for us to see the many questions that the first half must pose. Specifically, what is meant by “I am the truth”? In what sense can a person, or even a god, be “the truth”? It is my contention that, to answer these questions, we must reject the way most of us have been taught to think about truth, the way that most of Western Culture has thought about truth, and, instead, seek asylum within a more ancient, Hebraic, concept. To do so, this article will begin by posing two theories about what makes a claim true, the Correspondence Theory (which is the predominant view in the West) and



what I will call the Teleological Theory (which most closely matches the Hebraic belief). Then the article will attempt to show that, to understand the above verse, one must adopt a theory of truth closer to the Teleological Theory.

The Correspondence Theory of Truth states the following: What makes a belief true is how it relates to, or corresponds with, the real world. This is the theory of truth from which Descartes, as well as your stoned roommate, was working when he wondered if all his experiences might simply have been a dream.<sup>2</sup> Descartes' concern was that his beliefs, while perfectly matching his experiences, did not match, did not correspond with, the way the world actually was; that he might be "living in a dreamworld."<sup>3</sup>

The Teleological Theory, however, does not so much care about what a belief claims, but what a belief does; it asserts that "a belief is true if and only if it aids the believer's purpose". Of course, one would then need to know what this purpose is, and who or what decides how it should be lived out. And while this is certainly crucial to applying the Teleological Theory (and will be explored below), the Theory itself is agnostic on the issue.

There are few clearer instances of this theory than in *Beyond Good and Evil* (1886) by Friedrich Nietzsche. After questioning the very value of truth (truth as understood by the Correspondence Theory), he writes "the falseness of an opinion is not for us any objection to it [...]. The question is, how far an opinion is life-furthering, life-preserving."<sup>4</sup> For Nietzsche, our "purpose" is preserving life (it should be noted that this is not simply the "continuation of biological life," but something closer to "the flourishing of that which lives," but a detailed analysis of what this means is beyond the scope of this article), and, therefore, any belief that does so, even if it does not match the actual world, at least within Nietzsche's framework, should be believed. This is repeated again when he doubts whether mathematics, and other seemingly self-evident beliefs, are anything more than fictions we have created for ourselves, and yet he says "we should understand that such judgments must be believed to be true, for the sake of the preservation of creatures like ourselves."<sup>5</sup> So, if our "purpose" is, as Nietzsche claims, "the preservation of life," then beliefs that cause one to do so are true. Fundamentally,

therefore, belief becomes a tool, much like any other tool, one that either does or does not aid us in persevering life.

Therefore, we now do not merely have two definitions of truth, but two conceptions of it: Viewing truth as "that which matches the world" sets up truth to be a series of propositions, whereas viewing truth as "that which allows one to properly live in the world" views truth, instead, as a tool, as a mechanism by which to do things.

So what is the problem with believing that Christ was using the former definition in his claim of being "the truth"? Well, let us notice the following facet of the Correspondence Theory: In order to evaluate whether a thing is true or false, first such a matching (correspondence) must be asserted (this is why we do not call fiction "false," for, within the context, "In a hole in the ground there lived a hobbit"<sup>6</sup> does not assert that such a hole nor such a creature ever existed); therefore, something that cannot make an assertion, such as an object, cannot be said to be "true" or "false." It is for this reason that, for example, a miniaturized Statue of Liberty cannot be said to be "true," even though it seems to "match" the actual Statue of Liberty; for one would not call that miniature "false" if it were painted orange or had a grotesque bobble-head. The miniature itself does not and cannot assert any such matching, only claims made about the miniature (such as "this is an exact replica of the Statue of Liberty,") can be said to do so. And this is because, in the relevant sense, only claims in the mind, and not things in the world, can correspond to the way things actually are.

Hence, while one might be tempted to say that Jesus is "true" as he, being God made flesh, "corresponds" with God, this would be incorrect. For it is not Jesus' person, but claims made about Jesus' person, that assert a matching; and, therefore, it is only these claims that can be said to be "true" or "false." Thus, from the standpoint of the Correspondence Theory, the claim "I am the truth" can have no literal meaning.

However, let us notice that this facet does not exist within the Teleological Theory; that, because we we apply the labels "true" and "false" to those things that help or hinder towards a purpose (i.e. our purpose), then when a tool, even a tool that is not a claim, helps us in living out our "purpose," then that tool can be said to be true. This has, admittedly, the strange implication of classifying the keyboard on which I am currently typing, at least as it relates to me, as "true" (assuming that my writing is, in fact, according to my "purpose"); and, likewise, in the event of a nuclear holocaust, it could be said that the bombs, at least as they relate to us, were "false." Of course,

6. J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Hobbit* (HarperCollins, 1996).

1. John 14:6, *ESV*.

2. René Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy* (1641).

3. Lilly Wachowski et al. *The Matrix* (1999: Warner Bros). Film.

4. Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil: Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future* (1886).

5. *Ibid*.



this language will seem very strange! And yet, is it not in these terms that Christ spoke?

Therefore, “I am the truth,” assuming Christ was talking through a teleological lens, could be understood to mean “It is through me that one can act according to one’s real, created, purpose.” Or, that when we act properly, “[i]t is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me.”<sup>7</sup>

So, up till now, we have seen how, through the Teleological Theory of truth, one could make sense of Christ’s claim to be “the truth,” and how one cannot do so with the Correspondence Theory. However, explanatory power, while useful, certainly does not warrant the claim “Christ was using a Teleological Theory of truth.” Thus, for the remainder of this article, let us briefly turn towards something that some might find “more definite”.

A common trouble with translation is the difficulty of transmitting connotations that the target language is not set up to hold. And, according to some scholars, this is the position that one runs into with the Hebrew word “emet,” which is translated as “truth” (for while the Gospels were written in Greek, Jesus, who was raised as a Jew, would see the world through the lens of Hebrew concepts and, thus, the Hebrew word is the relevant one in this context).<sup>8</sup> In the words of John Parson, who has both taught collegiate philosophy and written extensively about the Hebrew language,

*“The Hebraic conception of truth, while not denying the importance of correspondence, seems to have a different focus. [The Hebrew mind seems] focused on the dynamic, the changing, and the idea that truth involved the formation of the character of the person--and the restoration of the world. Especially in relation to God, to Whom the Jew must give account, the nature of truth becomes grounded in the moments of decision encountered in one’s life.”<sup>9</sup>*

The Hebraic conception of “truth,” the linguistic prism that Jesus would have assumed his audience was looking through, sets up truth primarily as a tool, as a step with definite direction. It is, therefore, hardly a stretch to presume that what Christ meant by “truth,” while not necessarily limited to, certainly includes, and may even primarily include, the Teleological Theory of truth.

And so, what is this ultimate direction towards which Christ helps us move? Well, he clearly tell us his purpose, in John 10:10, “I came that they may have life and have it abundantly” (though, of course, what “abundantly” is to mean is a topic for another day).

What, then, shall we finally take “I am the truth” to mean? Simply this: Jesus is the Way (the tool) that leads to Life (the goal). And, because of this, no one can come to the Father except through him.

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**Brandon Bartlett** is a recent graduate of Cal Poly, with a degree in philosophy, from Santa Rosa, California. He is particularly interested in the implications of the intersection of epistemology and ethics, and continues to pursue these subjects while working at a funeral home in New York City.

7. Galatians, 2:20, *ESV*.

8. John J. Parsons, “Did Jesus Speak Hebrew? - Disputing Aramaic Priority.” *Hebrew For Christians*, Accessed May 14, 2018, [https://www.hebrew4christians.com/Articles/Jesus\\_Hebrew/jesus\\_hebrew.html](https://www.hebrew4christians.com/Articles/Jesus_Hebrew/jesus_hebrew.html).

9. John J. Parsons “Emet - Truth.” *Hebrew For Christians*, Accessed May 16, 2018, [https://www.hebrew4christians.com/Glossary/Word\\_of\\_the\\_Week/Archived/Emet/emet.html](https://www.hebrew4christians.com/Glossary/Word_of_the_Week/Archived/Emet/emet.html).

10. John 10:10, *ESV*.





# WHATEVER GRACE POSSIBLE

BY ROBBIE TAAS

Whether intentionally or unwittingly, Salvador Dalí crafted two paintings in the early 1930s that depict the human need for God’s shepherding, configuring corporeal disability in a way that illustrates the beauty of divine restoration in one painting yet the horror of wayward atrophy in the other. *Japanese Mannequin* (1934) reveals the distorted, depraved descent of a person outside God’s grace, while *Memory of the Child Woman* (1931) depicts the dangers yet possibilities available in a blessed child’s future. God promises His afflicted people that “the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the dumb sing.”<sup>1</sup> These paintings both confirm God’s promise—one directly and one inversely—through their artistic elements, interpretations, and narratives.

In Dalí’s *Japanese Mannequin*, the straight lines comprising the central figure’s bones, legs, and jutting arms suggest inescapable rigidity, as if the person were bound. Contrarily, the curves making up the figure’s ribcage and spine suggest motion, as if the torso were writhing in pain and unable to stand erect. The figure is neither wholeheartedly trying to stand nor struggling to escape; its prison of disability—indicated by its missing appendages and empty torso—and its actual prison—suggested by the light shining through

cage bars—have forced it to suffer in submission. The lack of struggle also evinces a deeper ambivalence toward God, as if refusing God’s offer of healing.

The sole chromas comprising the Mannequin are a depleted brown and a scrutinizing yellow, evoking a person defeated yet still under attack. Some blood lies near the amputated feet, but otherwise the rest of the painting is a bleak, despairing black with much low-key lighting, negative space, and a cool, somber white balance. This prison is devoid and dismal, and the high-key lighting that spotlights the Mannequin dramatizes its plight and descent into isolation.

In the painting *Memory of the Child Woman*, the shapes that construct the characters and objects are simple, geometric, and smooth. The rectangle of the safe in the bottom right foreground and the circle of the face recall similarly shaped toys of one’s youth, giving the painting an air of playful curiosity. All chromas are lively, bright, and saturated, capturing the wonder of growing up. There is high-key lighting throughout, signaling the exuberance of the world with its limitless possibilities, even for a child who is—as will later be discussed—fragile and protected. The painting in almost its entirety contains considerable positive space, reinforcing the unlimited interests in the Child’s mind. Finally, the Child’s

1. Isaiah 35:6. New King James Bible





*Memory of the Child-Woman*, Oil and collage on canvas, 1931, 39 x 47 ¼ in, Collection of The Dalí Museum, St. Petersburg, FL (USA) 2018  
 Worldwide : ©Salvador Dalí, Fundació Gala-Salvador Dalí, (Artists Rights Society), 2018  
 In the USA: © Salvador Dalí Museum, Inc., St. Petersburg, FL, 2018

enormous scale dominates the painting, pervading the entire world and proclaiming a prodigy's forthcoming eminence. A general radial balance centered on the Child's brain indicates the world's function as a teacher. Clearly, this Child has been blessed with a liberty, hope, and curiosity that the Javanese Mannequin lacks, although the similarities between these two disabled subjects must now be considered.

The Javanese Mannequin has lost its humanity, becoming a disembodied skeleton. It has faced the slings and arrows of life and come out disabled, damaged, and ravaged beyond recognition. The Mannequin cannot function as a typical human and is further trapped inside its own body, needing

to balance on a crutch. As with a bedridden hospice patient, where can the mind within an inert body turn but upon itself? The Mannequin's spine leads to a limp organ: the brain has completely deteriorated, indicating a mental or spiritual disability afflicting the Mannequin.

The Child is functionally a quadriplegic, which renders it as immobile as the Javanese Mannequin. Its large head looks to be formed from dough, as if the mind within is equally pliable. Its size hints at much space to store knowledge, and the painting's title cements the Child's cognizance of memory and active cognitive processes. However, the hollow orifices including the mouth and eyes seem to function as empty



passages; the mountains in the background pass through the Child's eye unseen, unprocessed. The key beside the brain suggests that some entity besides the Child has unlocked its mind, regulating what stimuli the brain is receptive toward. In fact, the top of the head is rended open, suggesting brainwashing, conditioning, or mental impairment. And what is the Child's expression? Not one of innocence alone, but of hazy simplicity.

It is unclear who brought about the Javanese Mannequin's debilitated state, but the one responsible for the Child's is clearly evidenced. The entity inhabiting the Child's head lends the painting's title its final word and is likely the Child's mother. Only her upper torso, her head, and a tree are present. Her manifestation in the painting is not as another disabled personage but as a poignant memory. The tree she rests on and the budding roses evoke her role as the progenitor of the Child's body and source of the Child's earliest teachings. These and other memories of the mother's roles persist in the Child's mind: naked breasts represent original sustenance, facial hair connotes a dual purpose as father and mother, and even the title *Child Woman points* to the mother-child conjunction.

The opposite narratives intimated by these two paintings may now be considered. In one painting, a person grew up well enough but lost touch with their roots, their beliefs, and their parents. Their decisions led them to physical disability, imprisonment, and mental and spiritual ruin. God offered grace, but at the moment captured in the painting it has been ignored or rejected.

In the other painting, a beloved child was born disabled, but their parent(s) loved them even so. The mother necessarily had to monitor what worldly influences her child was exposed to, and this worsened the child's already deficient mental framework. But at the moment of the painting, when the child is apart from their mother, they treasure the memory of her impact, love, and teachings. They approach the world in wonder as to how much it offers. God's grace, beginning with the provision of a patient mother, flows into the child's life like a river, allowing them to transcend their disabilities.

Whether a cautionary tale against isolating oneself or an imperfect example of receiving whatever grace possible, both of Dalí's paintings reveal the urgency of accepting God's grace. Only then, under the most desperate of circumstances—when undeserved grace has been gladly accepted—will a lame mannequin leap and a dumb child sing.



*The Javanese Mannequin*, Oil on canvas, 1934, 25 ½ x 21 ¼ in, Collection of The Dalí Museum, St. Petersburg, FL (USA) 2018

Worldwide : ©Salvador Dalí, Fundació Gala-Salvador Dalí, (Artists Rights Society), 2018

In the USA: © Salvador Dalí Museum, Inc., St. Petersburg, FL, 2018

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# REEVALUATING PATRIOTISM

BY TIM RETTBERG

*“The world is just as concrete, ornery, vile, and sublimely wonderful as before, only now I better understand my relation to it and it to me. I’ve come a long way from those days when, full of illusion, I lived a public life and attempted to function under the assumption that the world was solid and all the relationships therein.”<sup>1</sup>*

In Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* (1952), the narrator – an unnamed, young African-American man in mid-20th century America – struggles as he places his trust and identity in people and institutions that continually fail him. By the epilogue, he has lost his idealism, disillusioned and literally stuck underground, invisible to the power company he is siphoning electricity from. Although I have not, and will never experience the systemic racism plaguing both his story and America, I cannot help but relate to his loss of idealism: that nothing has changed – the world is just as it was before – he is simply no longer blind to it.

Growing up white in suburban America, you implicitly learn that your country is deserving of love and loyalty because of its greatness, because it can do no wrong – or at least can’t anymore – and because enthusiastic patriotism is central to being a good American. Dominant American culture promotes a view of patriotism devoid of criticism, where love of country is shown through enthusiastic celebration and what can often feel like civil religion – i.e. fixation on national symbols and ideals. For example, protecting the literal, physical American flag, rather than the freedoms and rights it represents. Or

over-emphasizing patriotic rituals and covering everything in red, white, and blue – from clothing, to faces, to decorations, to football fields. Patriotism then becomes a religion we ritualize, and America a god we worship – instead of a place we seek to better. At what point does allegiance to America become idolatrous?

More often than not, Evangelical churches, if not also the American Church more broadly, have reinforced these notions and blended them with partisan politics, rather than seriously addressing American history. Explicitly, churches fly American flags, hold services for national holidays, and pledge allegiance to the flag.<sup>2</sup> Implicitly, evangelicals too often conflate conservative politics and conservative culture with the Gospel, and America’s will with God’s will.<sup>3</sup> Learning a more complete view of American history over the past few years has, more often than not, pushed me towards viewing this blind patriotism, and as a result much of Evangelical Christianity, with cynicism.

Patriotism is rarely fundamentally questioned at its core. Whenever it is questioned, it is assumed to be generally positive and good for the world, but corruptible if applied incorrectly.<sup>4</sup> But is patriotism actually virtuous at its core?

1. Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (New York: Random House, 1952), 576.

2. A common experience of this is explained here: Brandon O’Brien. “Is Patriotism Christian?” *Christianity Today* (2011).

3. The connection between political conservatism and American Evangelicalism is frequently discussed; one example can be found here: Lance Lewis, *Aliens in the Promised Land*, ed. Anthony Bradley (2013).

4. Most, if not all, criticisms of patriotism I have read include this assumption. O’Brien (see footnote 2) is one example.



Could love for one's country breed hate towards another? Is patriotism not inherently tribal? I believe Christianity can provide all Americans with a framework outside of patriotism for loving, critically engaging, and seeking to improve their country.

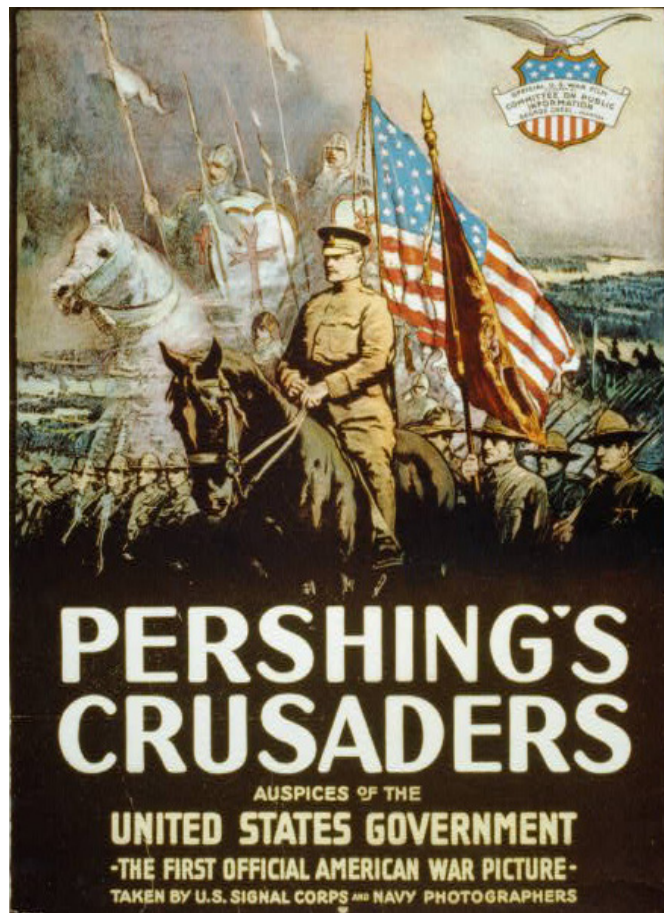
Many Christians cite the concept of submission to authority as an ethic of how to view the government, often in ways discouraging protest.<sup>5</sup> However, absolutely submitting to the government would surely be problematic if laws were passed that directly conflicted with Christian belief. Commonly this tension is reconciled by claiming submission is only necessary when obedience doesn't contradict the Church's primary moral obligation to God.<sup>6</sup> Certainly this makes sense in light of the lives of Jesus, Daniel, the apostle Paul, or other biblical figures who continuously pushed back against the laws of the time. However, this understanding is inferred from their lives and never seems to be clearly laid out by the authors themselves.

Perhaps instead, the authors intended submission to authority to follow Jesus' model of servant leadership – for Christians to respect and serve authority, but not blindly. Or perhaps they intended it as a practical necessity and not a moral command. Rejecting Roman authority unnecessarily would burden the safety of the early Church. The common Evangelical explanation today seems more consistent with trying to fit our modern understanding of submission into the cultural context of that time than with what the authors actually intended. It seems simplistic to hold Paul's commands separate from his multiple arrests and years of imprisonment, separate from Jesus' crucifixion and subversion of political and religious authority, and separate from countless other biblical examples of civil disobedience.

If these common frameworks for patriotism and viewing the government don't fit well into the lives of these biblical figures, and aren't sufficient to avoid – let alone condemn – idolatry, nationalism, and racism, then what is the right response? Should Americans simply isolate themselves and not engage with society? Should they result to cynicism, like I often have? And are these issues fundamental to patriotism? Jesus, Paul, Daniel, and Christians throughout history provide a framework for this response for all Americans, not just the Church. Maintaining their convictions and belief in God prevented them from conforming to a posture of blind obedience, praise, or tribalism, but it did not lead to cynicism

5. Common scriptural evidence for submission to authority include Romans 13:1-7, Titus 3:1-2, 1 Peter 2:13.

6. This understanding of this concept is common, but is clearly explained here: Charles F. Stanley. "Called to Order," *InTouch Magazine* (2018).



or isolation. Instead, it encouraged them to engage with their country, seeking justice and its improvement, neither passively accepting nor completely disregarding it.

Most significantly, Jesus' example is one of subverting political and religious authority and aligning his followers' allegiance away from Rome and towards God. The biblical authors' use of the word "gospel" – a term pronouncing the birth or the crowning of a king – references Jesus as a king. He told religious authorities that they should give Caesar what bears his image – i.e. to pay taxes – but dedicate themselves to God, since they bear God's image.<sup>7</sup> He drove merchants out of the temple using a whip and by flipping tables.<sup>8</sup> He broke religious law by interacting with and healing lepers, and frequently broke with cultural norms.<sup>9</sup> His example is not one of blind submission to the way the world is, or only waiting to disobey direct challenges to right belief. However, it certainly is an example of not disregarding or ignoring politics, society, people, and what affects them.

7. Luke 20:25.

8. John 2, Mark 11, Luke 19, Matthew 21.

9. Leviticus 13.

Furthermore, Tertullian, a Christian writer during the late 2nd century, held a more hesitant posture towards the government and patriotism. He particularly saw the actions of a soldier – such as torture, imprisonment, and carrying a banner other than Christ’s – as being at odds with his faith.<sup>10</sup> He also separated Christianity from the idea of loyalty to the state, instead claiming world citizenship.<sup>11</sup> He saw identifying with one country at the cost of others, or with the powerful at the cost of the powerless, as contradictory to Christianity.

Since the mid-20th century, Latin American, Coptic, African-American, and many other Christians have sought justice as a result of their faith, not despite it. Liberation Theology has encouraged Christians globally to see God as a God who loves and identifies with the powerless. The Civil Rights Movement, Tahrir Square,<sup>12</sup> and justice movements across the world would not look the same without the influence of Christian dissent towards authority. This dissent rarely disregards its country, but rather is a desire to better it. Nevertheless, American Evangelical culture often rejects similar dissent, calling for order instead of justice.

During a period of heightened patriotism in Japan preceding World War II, some Christians redefined patriotism. Yanaihara Tadao, an economist studying colonial policy, emphasized a prophetic patriotism characterized by public dissent and criticism of the state stemming from love of God and belief in divine justice.<sup>13</sup> G.K. Chesterton similarly describes patriotism as a primary loyalty to one’s country stemming from an irrational optimism that precedes and is in fact the reason for seeking its improvement.<sup>14</sup> Patriotism, according to Tadao, Chesterton, and others who redefine it, should therefore not be an excuse to disregard a country’s evil, but rather the perfect reason to criticize it.

God commanded the ancient Israelites to seek the welfare of the city they were exiled in.<sup>15</sup> White Christians and white Americans are not in exile; however, any view of one’s country or government that disregards seeking their welfare is bankrupt. We cannot disregard nor prioritize the welfare of the country we live in. Christianity instead provides all Americans a framework for uncomfortable, and frequently divisive, but effective love for the world, and therefore our

10. Tertullian, *The Military Chaplet*.

11. Tertullian, *Apology*.

12. Gaétan Du Roy. “Copts and the Egyptian Revolution: Christian Identity in the Public Sphere,” *Egypt’s Revolution* (2016).

13. Takashi Shogimen. “Another Patriotism in Early Showa Japan,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* (2010).

14. G.K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* (1908).

15. Jeremiah 29:7

country. The question is whether this can be achieved through patriotism. Redefining patriotism is a common approach, but is it enough? Is it worthwhile to cling onto a loyalty that naturally and frequently prioritizes the flourishing of some people over others?

Whether we reject patriotism or not, a worldview that looks forward to the Kingdom of God can provide insight into how we can better our communities, public policy, and the world around us. Scripture indicates that all tribes, tongues, and nations will praise God together, an image which celebrates the existence of national identity, and the coexistence of unity with cultural, national, and linguistic variation.<sup>16</sup> National identity, which is not fundamentally partial and is more closely analogous to one’s culture, is therefore distinct from patriotism. Although we seek to remove the harm done in the name of patriotism and to better all people and all nations, rejecting national identity altogether is not necessary.



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16. Revelation 7:9.

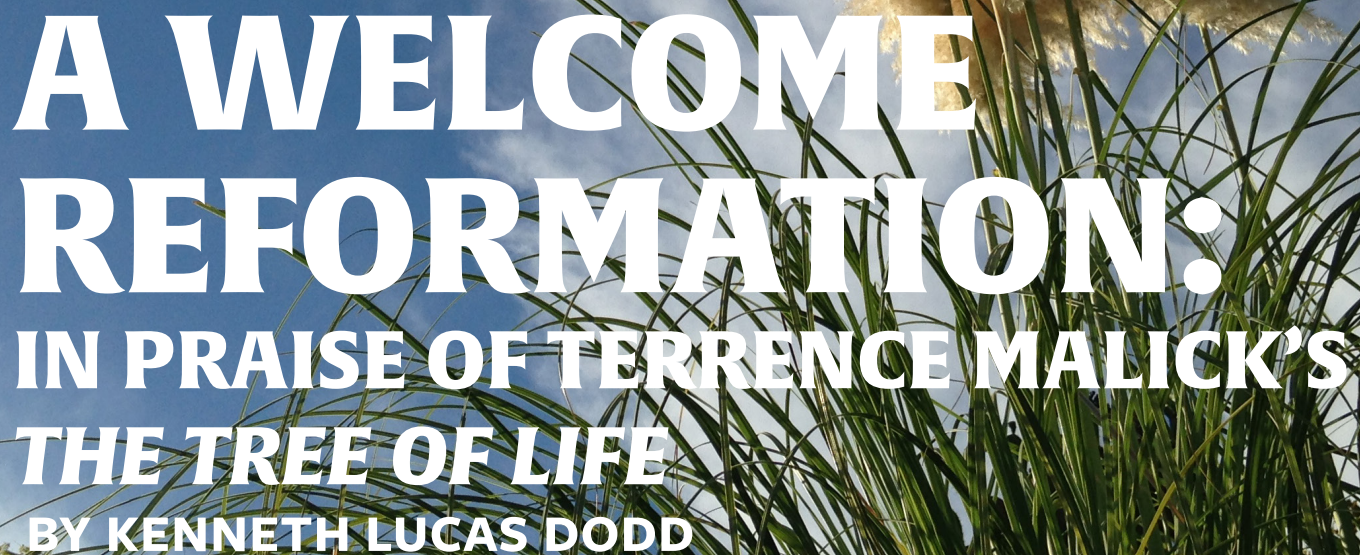
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# A WELCOME REFORMATION: IN PRAISE OF TERRENCE MALICK'S *THE TREE OF LIFE* BY KENNETH LUCAS DODD

An ongoing exodus from perfectionism has defined my time at Cal Poly.

*A whistle cracks, lashing the air. Forty young statues burst forward. Pound hard, arms pumping. Feet in burning black rubber punch into burning black rubber. "GO GO GO GO GO!" Pound hard, arms pumping. (Elbows at right angles! Loose hands!) Helmet squeezing, aching crown: heavy sauna and shadelessness. White line closer, white line closer, white line closer: "Faster Dodd!" Horse breath, touch the line, taste of sweat—turn! "GO GO GO!" Pound hard, arms pumping. White line closer, white line closer—"Come on Yates! You can do better than that!" "Dammit: touch the line!" Horse breath, touch the line, taste of sweat—turn! [Repeat nine times] Crossing—lungs like stretched fabric, horse breath: froth. Crossing. Crossing. Crossing—Big Mike peels off his helmet and stoops to vomit. Clapping for the kid in last place. A whistle cracks.*

I spent my high school summers at football practice under the oppressive San Diego sun. For three and a half years, I—the guy they called “Four Point-O” because of my GPA—worked my tail off balancing academic and athletic excellence. During the fall of my junior year, I slept three to six hours a night while burning upwards of 4,000 Calories a day juggling homework, football, and leisure. It was not fun. So what drove me to work so hard?

When I look back on my football days, despite the great camaraderie my teammates and I shared, I cannot forget the shadows that loomed over us: lifting 365 lbs in the weight room because I was afraid to seem weak; coaches screaming at us for the mistakes we made; watching the ambulance carry my friend away; the pervasive social pressure that led many of us, myself included, to continue playing after suffering a concussion. Experiences like these are commonplace for many American football players. Though they often meant well, my coaches created a garden of performance-based fear and pride, planting seeds of unspoken shame deep in our minds. They aggravated my fear of failure, and taught me to obey it with all my strength.

When I became a Christian during the eleventh grade, I assumed God’s moral expectations spoke with the voice of my coaches: exacting, astringent, and narrow-minded. As I became immersed in Christian culture, the words and attitudes of inconsiderate radio preachers, overzealous Christian music, presumptuous church culture, and strict biblical commands reinforced my bondage. I struggled to understand how Jesus Christ could offer rest when so much of Christianity seemed only to add weight onto my guilt-racked life.

An ongoing exodus from perfectionism has defined much of my time at Cal Poly. Through my journey, I have come to believe that the same empire of fear that drives millions of football players to unnecessarily run the risk of traumatic brain injury also drives innumerable religious devotees into a wall of shame. Despite significant healing, I still live with an inner football coach who incessantly looks over my shoulder. For years, my heart’s cry has been: “Where is relief from this weight? How can I escape?”

Terrence Malick’s deeply contemplative film *The Tree of Life* (2011)<sup>1</sup> steps into this space and offers a path for healing by contrasting “the way of nature” and “the way of

grace.” Although adequately explaining this almost ineffably multifaceted dichotomy is a task well beyond the scope of this article, a brief introduction should help make sense of the argument that follows. One might say that the way of nature is the competitive streak in the cosmos, the tendency to control and limit others in self-preservation. It is characterized by combativeness, self-assertion, destructiveness, and greed. The way of grace, on the other hand, points to the free-flowing, expansive, and interconnected dimension of existence. It embraces joy, patience, forgiveness, and peace.

It is worth mentioning that although such a dichotomy may suggest some kind of spiritualistic antagonism toward nature—a belief that physicality and goodness are somehow fundamentally opposed to one another—this does not appear to be Malick’s intent. Please do not mistake “the way of nature” for nature itself. Neither should “the way of grace” be seen as divorced from physical reality. The word “way” here suggests there is a seat of authority over one’s life, and that either nature or grace can occupy this position. Adherence to one narrative or the other does not preclude interaction with the alternative sphere of existence; i.e. the way of nature is not utterly devoid of goodness or grace, nor does the way of grace remove a person from the natural world. Interpreting the duality with this in mind allows one to notice a great irony in the film: the way of nature, by itself, does not produce a natural life. Rather, it is the way of grace that brings a person into harmony with the organic world. Having viewed *The Tree of Life* many times, I am struck by its accurate portrayal of the human condition. If my sufferings under perfectionism have taught me anything, it is that the way of grace is lifegiving.

The main character, Jack O’Brien, is a middle-aged, well-to-do architect who enters an existential crisis. Amid an environment of shimmering skyscrapers and soaring industry, Jack finds that he has grown out of touch with the quiet places of his heart, that he has “gained the whole world but lost his soul.”<sup>2</sup> To answer Jack’s chasm of need, Malick turns the story back to the genesis of the universe, portraying eons of macrocosmic development that crescendo upon Jack’s childhood in 1950’s Texas. Most of the film follows as a study of the dynamics between the steely Mr. O’Brien, his tenderhearted wife, and their children.

Overflowing with multisensory glimpses of rapturous beauty, *The Tree of Life* has been aptly described as an impressionistic masterpiece.<sup>3</sup> Sunflowers reposing beneath

a twilight sky, a young woman silently leading Jack through a desert, underwater grass ebbing as waves ripple, boys running after their mother in a park—hundreds of images like these can make it look like some ostentatious and pretentious art project. On the contrary, *The Tree of Life* is deeply rooted in both the human experience and the mechanisms of the universe, and does so as an openly spiritual and Christian film. The movie begins with a quote from the biblical story of Job—an innocent man who inexplicably suffered the spontaneous loss of his loved ones, wealth, and health—theatrically spotlighting the transience of earthly existence as a main thematic thread. Furthermore, in place of dialogue and a sequential plot, a web of meditative and prayerful overtones traces out the storyline, an element that has led many to disdain *The Tree of Life* for being too veiled and labyrinthine—but therein lies its treasure.

Malick’s impressionism reflects the kindness of God. In its entirety, the film embodies the way of grace, suggesting the presence of a loving-kindness underpinning all things: photography that is gentle on the eyes; a nonlinear plot that calls the mind out of rigidity and into curiosity and wonder; a feast of intricately layered, highly symbolic images that invite the viewer to explore rather than barricade their meanings; and a narrative that overtly surveys the tragedy of gentleness squandered by avarice. The film especially reflects the way



1. Terrence Malick. *The Tree of Life* (2011: Twentieth Century Fox) Film.

2. Matthew 16:26, paraphrased.

3. Todd Long. “Art Criticism’s Theological Poverty: *The Tree of Life* as a Case in Point,” n.p., (2015).



of grace in that through such impressionism it emulates an “endless hermeneutic,” to quote the French phenomenologist Jean-Luc Marion.<sup>4</sup> By this, I mean that the film approaches irreducibility on every level, that the experience it gives to the viewer is so transcendently beyond what one’s limited perception, interpretation, meta-perception, meta-interpretation, etc. can fully apprehend that there is possibly no end to uncovering the film’s meaning, a meaning that is, in my study, elegantly cohesive across layers. For every layer of meaning I unpack, *The Tree of Life*, in its motherly, impressionistic mysteriousness, reveals yet another layer of grace. The ongoing experience of an endlessly impressionistic mystery is itself the way of grace.

I find *The Tree of Life* profoundly compelling because it calls me into an experience of grace beyond mere words. For instance, Malick’s depiction of Jack’s prelapsarian toddlerhood flies me back to the days of my early youth: when there were no GPA’s, no “football coach” yelling inside my head, no legalistic church culture burdening me with guilt—when the world was a tub of LEGO bricks, an open backyard with dinosaurs, and endless imagination waiting to be mapped in colored pencil. Through witnessing Jack’s infancy, I have felt the textures of Eden, a sensory experience that sermons cannot easily match.

4. Phenomenology is a field of philosophy Terrence Malick has spent much of his academic life studying. Thus, the topic of endless hermeneutic is relevant for understanding the film. Quote from: Jean-Luc Marion, *Givenness & Hermeneutics*, trans. Jean-Pierre Lafouge (Marquette University Press, 2013), 59.



In the way of grace, this Eden is not lost, but hidden. In Malick’s film, nature is not the dominant pattern in the universe: grace is. Underneath all the clamor and competition of the world, something else is stirring: something quiet, mysterious, gentle, motherly, wise. Patiently, the Spirit of Grace hovers over the world, wooing it with love, like tendrils slowly reaching up through the soil of nature. In the economy of grace, nature’s control does not have the final word. Indeed, it was grace that unclenched football’s grip of fear on my life. It was grace that lifted perfectionism’s weight off my life. It was grace that overturned religious dogmatism in my life. And grace will not stop until the whole world is transformed, until every fallen tear is raised in victory, until nature’s discord has been completely restored. Grace is unstoppable. The tree of life is growing in every corner of heaven and earth, a great webwork reaching out, even into the joy of eternal life.

The *Tree of Life* is a flower of endlessly opening petals, a phenomenology of grace. The impressionism at play within the film unveils the seductive mask of perfectionism and can lift our numbness toward nature’s darker side. In this manner, the film is a threshold from the desert of nature to the fields of grace, a haven from racehorse expectations and intellectual grabbiness, a place where motherly affection shines on all things with her smile. For those dehydrated by the way of nature’s demands—overworked athletes and worshipers alike—it effuses refreshing mountain springwater: the water of a Messiah whose aura is tender, nonlinear, and mysterious. Terrence Malick’s *The Tree of Life* announces a timely and transfigurative paradigm shift for the world: a light whose graces both enrapture and confound.

*Do not tread gruffly on the daisies  
Lest bees change into crazies,  
Nor snatch one rudely in your palm  
And rob the secret meadows’ calm;  
For every tender blossom weeps  
When you soil grace’s deeps.*

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# MY FATHER'S HANDS

BY NICK CHANEY

Arising with a heavy heart  
Not knowing where to start,  
Unable to live the life  
That's always been intended  
Feeling I've never ascended  
Always crushed by "do and don't"  
Knowing I can't and I won't,  
This talk of "freedom"  
Falls on deaf ears again.

Ashamed of what's been done:  
Blood on my hands, dirt on my face  
Pleasure gone, pain takes its place  
-Out of nowhere, God's command comes:  
Claiming to strike down in love  
Wrath comes down from above

Stricken down  
On the ground



Without sound  
Pride's cracked crown  
Anguish resounds  
With a world on fire–

“Father, you can't understand my plight  
You don't know darkness, only light.”

In a deep and lonely chasm  
That wretched pit of despair,  
A tender voice comes, out of thin air  
Unexplainable how  
But suddenly there

Your hand comes from above  
Reminding me of your love  
Feeling a gentle touch  
No longer just a crutch:  
A solid rock to stand on  
When all else goes wrong  
Finishing all you start  
Handcrafting this work of art

Rest and be free,  
Because it's never been up to me  
When too weak to stand,  
Down on my knees I am  
Held by my Father's hands.

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**Nick Chaney** is a second-year English major from Delano, California. Interested in theology, politics, and Romanticism, he aspires to become a high school teacher as a means to improve the community he lives in.

## THE NICENE CREED

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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.

At Cal Poly *Altheia* we welcome people of all backgrounds into a healthy discussion of truth. We affirm the Nicene Creed with the acknowledgement that views may differ on various points, such as the meaning of the word "catholic."



## A PRAYER FOR CAL POLY

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*"He has made everything beautiful in its time. He has also set eternity in the human heart; yet no one can fathom what God has done from beginning to end." —Ecclesiastes 3:11*

Our university speaks of success,  
But I find there is a poverty in us all  
That cannot be spoken, no matter how many words  
We throw in its direction.  
Where, where is the reason for this?

I cannot find the reason in my environment:  
Family, friends, possessions, and talents—  
What abundance I have, everything  
Except the gift to enjoy them  
Without this unspeakable lack.  
In this, possession turns to envy, talent into anxiety,  
Friendly reassurances become a grating sound, and  
Family becomes so distant  
I cannot hear them in the same room.  
I asked, Why is this?  
And found no answer.  
There I stood unanswered, asking  
Why is this?

Alone, circling through a fog  
Of indescribable darkness, searching  
In vain, for a reason  
For the name  
Of the nothingness clouding everything  
Around me and within me.

Enveloped by darkness, I realized  
Everything fades like grass  
Beneath the summer sun:  
All, like flowers spring and fall  
Depend on rains to rise,  
Life's speeding splendors soon will  
Cease. All is gift from God.  
The breath returns, I rest my eyes.  
Then I see that I can see, and sight is good,  
And in the quiet I find a note  
From God asking, Why is this?  
And I find myself also asking, Why is this!

So God come spar with me again,  
I want to fight with you, to  
Struggle in this, not as an enemy  
But as friends

—Nate, Lucas, and Marta



# ALETHEIA

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