

# GRACE NOTES

## LAYERING SMALL GRACE UPON SMALL GRACE

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God's truth comes to us from different places at different times. Each truth event sounds a small note of grace that together, if we listen, make up the musical score of God active in the world today. Listen to these ten small notes of grace from ten recent books.

Jaroslav Pelikan  
*Interpreting the Bible and the Constitution*  
New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004

This is the kind of comparative book most great scholars dream about writing, but few attain the stature to do so. Before his death last year, Pelikan found himself in rarified air, so respected that neither biblical scholars nor constitutional law experts could mount much of a campaign against a church historian's poaching on their turf.

Pelikan's interest was piqued by observing that both Christians and Americans have allegiance toward sacred texts; in the case of Christians, the Bible, in the case of Americans, the United States Constitution. Both advocate living according to the teachings of these respective texts. Both realize that their texts were written long ago and in order for them to provide guidance and meaning today, a certain amount of interpretation is necessary. Both have professionals charged with guiding us in this application of our sacred texts, theologians and constitutional lawyers and Supreme Court judges. Both also recognize that lay men and women have interpretive roles to play.

The resulting discussion makes for a fascinating book. Learning takes place because this unlikely comparison forces us out of our insular worlds. The trick, Pelikan infers, is to be able to retain the old, the tradition, even as we create what seems new, appropriate to our context. A text: "Every teacher of the law who has been instructed about the kingdom of heaven is like the owner of a house who brings out of his storeroom new treasures as well as old" (Matthew 13:52).

Cormac McCarthy  
*No Country for Old Men*  
New York: Random House, 2005

America's greatest novelist since Faulkner has produced what some critics have called a "potboiler." It is a great read with a disturbing message. The story is about Texas good old boy Llewelyn Moss who while hunting in the remote desert of West Texas finds the leftovers of a drug deal gone bad: bullet ridden SUVs, dead bodies, kilos of heroin, and two million dollars. Against his better judgment, he takes the money and sets off a chain reaction of violence and escalating evil hard to imagine and impossible to control.

McCarthy's other novels are also set in West Texas and Mexico. They are not Louis L'Amour westerns, however. They deal with good and evil, yes, but refuse to accept the old simplistic fault lines between the good guys and the bad guys. They are stories that reflect Tolstoy's observation that evil resides not "out there" but deep within every human breast.

Evil is ubiquitous, of course. And perhaps, strictly speaking, it has never been rational. Even if one is willing to postulate a fallen, sinful world, the evil we see does not fit any rational choice model yet designed. McCarthy's message is that the irrationality of evil seems to be increasing rather than decreasing. His implied question: Where is the hope?

Karl Barth  
*The Church and the Churches*  
Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2005

This is a reprint of an address Barth gave to the 1937 World Conference on Faith and Order at Edinburgh. Barth's presupposition, of course, is that the ideal state is universal acknowledgment of the oneness and centrality of Jesus Christ. The problem to be addressed is the multiplicity of the churches, which Barth says hurts the mission of the church to ancient religions, modern ideologies, the Christian Church itself, and individual members of the churches. But most of all, the multiplicity of the churches is an indictment of our faith in the Lordship of Christ.

The solution to the problem is not tolerance of all diversity, nor federations and alliances of different churches, not even the ecumenical movement. These may all be good things in a penultimate sense, but they must start with the surrender of our particularity to the oneness of Christ. And individual problems are solved by listening to Christ and then choosing with a clear *sic et non*, the way of Christ. All issues regarding confessions, revelations, dogmas, and ordinances, are already solved by

Christ's oneness and in grappling with them our task is to listen for the voice of Christ together.

As always with Barth, his emphasis is on the universality of the Christian faith, which always, everywhere overrides the particularity of the churches. Barth is always a good read when the important issues of contextualization threaten to swamp our commitments to the gospel.

John W. O'Malley

*Four Cultures of the West*

Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004

O'Malley distinguishes four cultures in elite United State discourse, each with their own goals and styles of "conversation": Prophetic culture whose goal is revealed truth and style is proclamation; Academic culture whose goal is empirical truth and style is argumentation; Humanist culture whose goal is the common good and style is dialogue; and Art culture whose goal is beauty and style is performance.

The author describes the historical development of all four cultures, going back to the Middle East, Greece, and Rome. Each of the four cultures is personified: e.g., prophets Martin Luther and Martin Luther King, scholars Aristotle and Aquinas, humanists Homer and Erasmus, and artists Justinian and Michelangelo. Emphasis is placed on the style of discourse each favors, since when they conflict they tend to do so because proclamation, argumentation, dialogue, and performance don't easily mesh.

The four cultures often, however, see themselves as complementary to one another rather than competitive, with some historical figures seeming to occupy two or more of these worlds. The value of a descriptive paradigm like this is that by seeing why the cultures might clash, and how they have in history, the possibility of sympathetic understanding among them increases.

Wayne C. Booth

*The Rhetoric of Rhetoric: The Quest for Effective Communication*

Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2004

This book is an excellent introduction to the history and practice of rhetoric—its ups and downs as a discipline, its good and bad practices, and why it is so important today. The author, an emeritus professor from the University of Chicago, chooses a broad definition for rhetoric: "The entire range of resources that human beings share for producing effects on one another." Rhetoric, he says, is about communication: making arguments for issues, persuading others of their value, and listening to others' points of view.

Listening rhetoric is Booth's constructive contribution to the kind of communication necessary today in a world where our public audiences are increasingly global and our issues are increasingly interconnected. Serious attempts to understand where people are coming from has the effect, he argues, of tipping the balance toward good rhetoric. He gives major examples of good and bad rhetoric from the fields of education, media studies, and politics. At times his disagreements with President Bush and the war in Iraq make the book seem more focused on that issue than on rhetoric—but it certainly is a handy and important issue from which to draw conclusions about public communication these days.

Christian communicator — rhetors — can learn much from this book. Mission, evangelism, and witness are, after all, religious rhetoric at their core, and learning to do each better is something all Christians should be committed to.

Malise Ruthven

*Historical Atlas of Islam*

Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2004

This atlas introduces the reader to a history of Islam, using both short narrative descriptions and elegant, four-color maps. In word and picture one is led from the time of Muhammad in the seventh century to the 2003 movements, organizations, and influences that characterize modern Islam. Most of us need few reminders of Islam's importance in the world today: over one billion Muslim adherents, control over much of the world's oil supply, and a universalistic religious urge rivaled only by Christianity's.

This means that to understand the world today, one must understand Islam. And there is much to understand. Embedded in the history revealed in these maps and illustrations are answers to questions about why Islam and modernity create such a volatile mix, why the kind of democracy Westerners espouse does not relate to the Muslim consciousness, why human rights is such a flash point for Islamdom, and why despite an intimate and common history, Christians and Muslims have such a contentious relationship in the early years of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

It may be helpful to Christians interested in mission to Muslims to know the intensity of their own mission effort to the rest of the world. The maps in this superb volume show the growth of this increasingly sophisticated world religion. And they also suggest that such a complex civilizational force might well be the greatest mission challenge of our era.

Gregory MacDonald  
*The Evangelical Universalist*  
 Eugene Oregon: Cascade Books, 2006

If evangelicals were to embrace universalism, the belief that one's eternal destiny is not fixed at death and that those in hell can repent and that everyone will eventually do this, then the first thing one must do is show that this is what the Bible teaches. Gregory MacDonald presents a careful and plausible reading of biblical texts to show why he believes this is what the Bible teaches. This is the most thorough part of this book. It is a biblical case for universal reconciliation.

The second step would be to create a theology that supports such a reading of the texts. MacDonald goes some ways toward this. He engages the current literature that supports an evangelical universalism well. And he engages a few of the theological issues that the position raises and the theologians and philosophers who, mostly, support this position.

As for the pronouncing, arguing, persuading, and performing part of the task—the convincing other evangelicals that this is what we should believe, the rhetorical part—he really only implicitly addresses those issues. That he chooses to write the book under a pseudonym is his clearest statement of what kind of a rhetorical strategy is called for in championing this position. A good book for those interested in constructive evangelical theology.

Rebecca Y. Kim  
*God's New Whiz Kids? Korean American Evangelicals on Campus*  
 New York University Press, 2006

The idea of this book is based on demographics: Asian American students form increasingly large percentages of the student populations of UC Berkeley, UCLA, Harvard, Yale, and other elite American universities. Even more pronounced, though, is the dominance of Asian American students in the evangelical campus groups at these same universities. Just one example, duplicated at all these universities: There are more than 50 evangelical campus groups at UC Berkeley and 80 percent of the students in those groups are Asian American.

The overall issue this development raises in the mind of the author of this study comes from the fact that these groups are not multiracial or even pan-Asian. They are typically single ethnic groups, whether Chinese, Japanese, Korean, or white. Why, the author asks, does a religion like evangelical Christianity which proclaims a universal message for all peoples at all places, divide along strictly ethnic lines?

To find out she studies in some detail the second generation Korean

American (SGKA) student groups at one of these large, secular institutions (which remains anonymous). She concludes that ethnicity and religion have similar goals related to identity and meaning making and thus support one another. A fascinating and important study.

Manuel Castells

*The Information Age: Economy, Society, and Culture*

*Volume I: The Rise of the Network Society (1996)*

*Volume II: The Power of Identity (1997)*

*Volume III: End of Millenium (1998)*

Oxford: Blackwell

If you ever wondered where the theoretical base for the *Lexus and the Olive Tree*, and *Jihad vs. McWorld* came from, look no further. The ideas, however derived, come from the world's greatest living sociologist, Manuel Castells, who between 1996-1998 published a trilogy collectively called *The Information Age: Economy, Society, and Culture*. You may not have time to read 1503 fairly dense pages, and/or prefer to read the popularized versions from Friedman, Barber, Jenkins, et al. You should, however, know it is there.

It explains in compelling detail:

The decline of sovereign states' power and the new power bases;

The dramatic effects of the information technology revolution;

What personal identity and meaning are becoming in the information age;

How criminals are adjusting their operations to these new networks;

How the conflicting trends towards globalization and tribalization create the social worlds in which we live;

And much more.

If you have time to read just one of the three volumes I recommend the second, *The Power of Identity*. For us, the question of what it means to be Christian (or Jewish or Muslim or Hindu or Buddhist), that is, the question of our religious identity is compelling. Castells shows us how the information age has thrown the questions surrounding religious identity and meaning up in the air. This can, in some cases, reduce its importance. In others, however, a single reference point of meaning is the only thing that can sort out the complexity of the modern world. Complex identity confusion, then, becomes an opportunity to tell the story of Jesus.

Jimmy Carter

*Our Endangered Values: America's Moral Crisis*

New York: Simon and Schuster, 2005

At the other end of the accessibility spectrum from Castells is Jimmy Carter, who is as far from technical sociology as Jimmy is from James. This book is obviously meant to be a challenge to the so-called religious right's championing of values debates in recent elections. So in many respects it must be read as a partisan political book.

Even if you are a Republican, however, you cannot dismiss this book simply on partisan grounds. At the very least, Carter models what every politician must be able to do today: that is, articulate how his or her faith influences his or her role as a public figure. The old answer that it doesn't simply won't do anymore. And the "new" answer that some seem to hold, that political power must be used to champion sectarian religious dogmas, won't do either. Any work that tries to articulate a position somewhere between those two extremes is worth reading. This book is worth reading.