

Realistic Living

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Abraham Lincoln died for our sins. He was murdered by White Nationalism, the same White Nationalism that our current president considers an essential part of his political base. Lincoln's bold presidency ended the overt political and economic operation of slavery, but the White Nationalism that could institutionalize and tolerate slavery is still strongly present among us. Perhaps a third of the population of our Southern States oppose taking down the monuments to White Nationalism. And an even larger group of US citizens (including cabinet members of our federal government prominently illustrated by our chief law enforcement officer) cannot understand the validity of the nonviolent, civil-rights organization called

"Black Lives Matter." Millions of our citizens simply do not admit that black lives actually do not matter enough to many of our police officers, police chiefs, judges, juries, prisons, and state governments.

These plain facts

witness to the truth of the Adam and Eve drama about human depravity.

The goodness of human nature may be the half of that biblical paradox that is the most in doubt in the actual minds and feelings of aware people today. How can it be that goodness is the essence of these While Nationalist humans who have taken over our federal government and many of our state houses? Where is the goodness in these vigorous Americans who have projected their own evil upon the true followers of Lincoln and upon those among us who

The Enigma of Human Depravity

a theological paradox
by Gene Marshall



In the opening chapter of the Jewish and Christian Bible we find a bold affirmation of the goodness of the natural world, including the "very goodness" of the human species. And in chapter two of the same Bible, humans are shown to be capable of selling out to human depravity. This paradox remains one of the hardest aspects of the Christian witness for both conservative and liberal Christians to take in. This is true as well for those who might consider a Christian practice if such a contradictory realism was made more clear to them.

still support putting the face of Harriet Tubman on our \$20 bill? Which is harder for us to face—the crass evil we see all around us or the goodness of those heroes and heroines who have risked their lives to manifest our so-called “higher angels?”

Augustine, the fourth century theologian who set in place Christian reflections that controlled the conversation among Christian thinkers for the next 800 years, created a way of handling this paradox. Augustine claimed that evil could be viewed as a hole in the good. Nothing was essentially real except human goodness, but many holes had been torn in this goodness. Evil therefore was essentially nothing—just a hole in the good. And this good has the position of power over these evil holes.

Søren Kierkegaard supported this trend of thinking with his analysis of despair. According to him, despair is produced by a commitment to unreality that is hopelessly despairing because this commitment to unreality does not unseat Reality with a capital “R.” Reality opposes unreality and Reality always wins this fight with unreality in the end. Furthermore, the only deliverance from the many forms of despair in our lives is to let Reality be Reality—that is, to trust Reality as the best-case scenario for our lives, even though the unrealities of our own creation seem much more pleasant, comforting, calming, and fun—until they cause our overt despair.

This line of awareness brings us to the most horrific sinfulness going on in our culture today—making up our own reality—whatever we like better than the really Real. Our current president dramatizes this depravity by commonly telling any lie that serves his current whims, while reserving the right to deny this lie and tell another lie the very next day. And a vast mob of hypocritical hangers-on excuse and support this unfortunately empowered personage in the hope that their own unrealities may last a bit longer against the ongoing assault of the ultimately winning Reality.

A primary illustration of this dynamic in our social life is the climate crisis deniers who can look in the

face of the horrific damages produced by hurricanes Harvey, Irma, Jose, and Maria and still deny the inconvenient truth that these warmer oceans are the direct result of generations of burning huge amounts of fossil fuels that very wealthy and still greedy persons and companies want to expand rather than phase out. The entire Republican Party and some Democrats still cannot take in the Reality of our climate situation. Even our heroic and effective first African American president could only come up with an “all the above” energy policy.

That limited view is also not Reality. Our Reality is that we are being challenged to initiate right away a 100% phase out of fossil fuels and a 100% phase in of solar, wind, and falling water sources. This also includes a 100% phase out of the all too dangerous and expensive nuclear power plants and be content with only one nuclear plant, located 92 million miles away from planet Earth. This is Reality. Everything else is a false hope leading to despair, and Reality Herself will win all the arguments against our self-invented foolishness.

And climate crisis is only one of hundreds of arenas of false-hope creations going on in the political, economic, and cultural passions and actions of this significantly depraved species of life on Earth.

So what is the answer to all this depravity? It is two missions on the part the Reality-loving portion of you and of me and of the whole human species. *Mission One* is healing despair with the saving witness that makes us aware of despair, of the forgiveness of our despair, and of the blessing of accepting that forgiveness and thus return to living our real lives. *Mission Two* is the structuring of Justice empowerments that restrain human evil. *Mission Two* includes becoming active citizens who are restoring citizen democracy of, by, and for the people, rather than continuing with the current oligarchies-of-the-rich who insist on clinging to our horrific patterns of despair. True democracy is messy and fumbling and imperfect, but everything else is worse. Democracy requires an informed

citizenry wise enough to laugh at all the liars. We educators have not yet done our job on this front.

And we religious innovators and leaders need to become ever more clear that underneath all the foolishness, laziness, and downright nuttiness of the masses of people is a profoundly good humanness that characterizes the natural being of every member of this rogue species.

The Christian witness welcomes us to the glory and hard work of this historic predicament and its challenges to show forth our true humanity.

The Wonder Woman Myth

An Alternative Superhero

By Alan Richard

Wonder Woman is a superhero movie unlike any you have seen. Feminist director Patty Jenkins (“Monster,” “The Killing”) and openly gay screenwriter Allan Heinberg (who also penned DC’s 2006 relaunch of the *Wonder Woman* comic book) have delivered an entertaining genre movie with a feminist twist, but they have done more than that. This *Wonder Woman* both deepens the meaning of the superhero’s “eternal mission” and challenges the wish-fulfillment fantasy that superheroes represent. It confidently takes hold of a corner of pop culture even more suffused with masculinist fantasies than most and uses it to tell us how giving up precisely those fantasies is what it means to take on the superhero’s mission.

Superhero stories, originally designed for comic books but now primarily delivered on the movie screen, differ from traditional hero stories because they have no “third act,” no ending. The mission of

a traditional hero is finite and ends in death or divinization, but the mission of a superhero is forever. The legendary figure most akin to the superhero on this score is Sisyphus, forever rolling the stone up that hill only to have it roll down again. But like traditional hero stories, superhero stories are also wish fulfillment fantasies about having access to the power to right things one imagines are wrong.¹ Behind this fantasy lies the dream that suffering is caused by some identifiable source of evil that can be overcome by sheer force.

The dream is an evasion of structural injustice and a misunderstanding of human freedom. It is a masculine form of wish-fulfillment that Wonder Woman, the most successful comic book superhero other than Superman and Batman, challenged from the beginning. In 1942, while Batman was still



shooting people and Superman was throwing trucks around, Wonder Woman was organizing boycotts, leading political rallies on horseback, and standing in picket lines. The newest movie version of her story, while problematic in many ways that critics have thoughtfully examined,² also takes on that masculine form of wish-fulfillment while shedding new light on the superhero’s mission and in doing so manages at moments to transform pop culture into poetry.

¹ For instance, Superman co-creator Jerry Siegel confessed that he and co-creator Joe Schuster were “shy little kids with glasses” and that Superman was “everything we weren’t and wanted to be.” Will Eisner, one of the earliest cartoonists in the comic book industry, says that the Golem, a wish fulfillment for “someone who could protect us,” was the precursor of the superhero.

² See, for instance, Cameron Glover’s “Why Wonder Woman Is Bittersweet for Black Women,” *Harper’s Bazaar* online, June 9 2017, <http://www.harpersbazaar.com/culture/film-tv/a9992873/wonder-woman-black-women-erasure/>.

THE WONDER WOMAN MYTH

The film begins with an image of earth from space, accompanied by the voice of Diana Prince/Wonder Woman (Gal Gadot) telling us that "I used to want to save the world, this beautiful place, but I knew so little then." We see Diana Prince in the present day receiving a World War I photograph of her as Wonder Woman posing with soldiers in a bombed-out village. The camera fades into a young girl in a toga, running through what looks like an ancient Greek island city. From here, the movie follows the broad outlines of Wonder Woman's origin as told in her first 1941-42 comic book adventures while reformulating the radical elements of the original character. Wonder Woman is Diana, daughter of Hippolyta, queen of the Amazons, an all-female species. High god Zeus created the Amazons after his son Aries corrupted "mankind," a species Zeus made "in his image." For a time, the Amazons overcame Aries' influence with love but then Aries once again turned "men" against each other. The Amazons were enslaved until Hippolyta led a successful revolt which left most of the gods dead, Aries in retreat, and the Amazons divinely hidden from the world on an island with a secret weapon that could kill Aries should he ever return. Diana, sculpted from clay by her mother and infused by Zeus with divine life and power, is that weapon.

So they have lived for millennia, until a warplane piloted by American spy Steve Trevor (Chris Pine) crashes on their shores. Diana rescues Steve and, hearing him talk about the mass devastation wrought by a "war to end all wars," immediately suspects that Aries has returned. She decides to go to "man's world" to confront him. In the movie as in the 1942 comic book, "mankind" and "man's world" mean both human beings as opposed to Amazons and male-dominated society. Diana is confident that if she makes her way to the war's most violent front, she will find Aries there and when she defeats him, humans will once again live in peace. Her mother opposes this, arguing that "mankind" doesn't deserve her help. "You know if you leave you may never return," she tells Diana. Diana replies, "What would I be if I stay?"

The remainder of the film follows Diana's quest for Aries, accompanied by Steve. Along the way, we see the absurdity of patriarchy as it manifests in innumerable ways both large and small from the perspective of a female protagonist who, being more powerful than the males who casually lord it over "man's world," is puzzled and righteously angry but not personally threatened. We see the devastation of war and the unimaginable scale of the suffering it unleashes. We see the courage that Diana and Steve share and the confidence that she exudes as a woman raised outside patriarchy. But when she finally confronts Aries, nothing is as she had expected. She is forced to consider the possibility that her mother was right about mankind not deserving help, and she is invited to affirm the possibility that love isn't about deserving. She is forced to confront the reality that justice and peace are matters of the long march rather than matters of eliminating some one source of evil. Heroes, she tells us, cannot save "mankind." "No hero will ever defeat" the spell that lies over the "world of men" because that spell can only be broken by the choice that each denizen of "man's world" makes.

Diana's quest turns the wish-fulfillment element of the superhero on its head.

Diana becomes Wonder Woman by recognizing that she will *not* save the world and neither will anyone else, that only the choice of love can save the world, that she can only choose this for herself and live out of that choice. This recognition gives her a new mission that isn't about the defeat of the enemy but about fighting and giving "for the world I know *can* be." She no longer imagines a final victory. This mission is "forever." It is a superhero's mission.



Scripture Conversations

in Christian Resurgence Circle Meetings
for 21st Century Human Beings

a spin by Gene Marshall

Even though many biblical scripture passages can be viewed as art forms (poems, stories, parables, etc.) a straight use of the usual art-form method of conversation does not work well for a conversation on most Scripture passages. By “the usual art-form conversation” I mean using this order of questions: (1) objective remembrances of the scripture reading, (2) personal reflections on our feelings about this passage, and (3) interpreting what this scripture means for the living of our lives today. This method is good for any contemporary movie or poem, or other contemporary art form. But scripture passages are not contemporary art forms. They can be made into contemporary art forms, but this requires more questions for a successful conversation about most scripture passages.

Discussing Psalms

For example, a Psalm is an ancient poem and therefore might be discussed like we would discuss any contemporary poem, except for one serious problem. It is written in metaphorical language that must be translated before this ancient writing can become useful contemporary poetry. We have no problem understanding that a biblical Psalm needs to be translated from its original Hebrew, but its two-story metaphorical language is an equally inhibiting barrier. Typically, we either misunderstand the Psalm or take whole stanzas to be meaningless.

Consider these opening verses of Psalm 90.

Lord, Thou hast been our refuge
from generation to generation
Before the mountains were brought forth
or earth and world were born in travail,
from age to age everlasting thou art God



Consider the following metaphorical translations for the first and last lines of the above verses:

The Final Reality we face in all events is like a foundation for our confidence.

From age to age without ending this Final Reality is our appropriate devotion.

With such a contemporary grasp of the meaning of these old verses, we are ready for the next verse: “You turn humans back in to dust.” on down to the glorious last line of the original Psalm 90 which reads: “Teach us to count our days carefully that we may enter the gate of wisdom.”

Discussing Passages of the Synoptic Gospels

When studying a synoptic gospel like Mark, Matthew, or Luke, we face both the two-story translation challenges and the literary fact that almost every passage in these texts is some sort of parable. In Mark, the quality of parable applies to all the healing stories, all the feeding stories, and still other stores like “walking on water.”

A parable is like a Zen koan: its literal meaning is not the point of the parable. We must look beyond the literal parable to the Spirit allusion that is being expressed by the parable. Interpreting a parable requires some spiritual imagination to see beyond

the literal story to the secret spirit truth of the parable that the reader is supposed to “get.” “Not getting” the meaning of the parable is supposed to be our first impression. “Getting the parable” requires a personal change or “Aha” experience in our inner being. Only if something like this happens to our understanding of the parable, can we move on to share how this text is addressing or challenging us in our lives today.

Therefore, in order to have an effective group conversation on a Synoptic Gospel scripture text, we need to teach at least these two methods to our scripture conversation participants: (1) metaphorical translation methods, and (2) parable interpretation methods.

The two-story translation issue can be solved by having someone translate the metaphors ahead of the group conversation, and then conduct the conversation on an already translated text. This may, however, not satisfy every group, for some may not trust those changes in the text without being in on the process of working that out. So questions that help a group do the translating together can also be used. But in no case should metaphorical translation be avoided for 21st century aware people.

Concerning the parable interpretation process, the whole discussion group must share in that, for the value of a parable is this fun game of hearing, pondering, and then seeing the truth of the parable. The parable interpretation method is a process of guessing the spirit meaning of some quite ordinary tale that is meant to point beyond itself to some spirit awareness. It is said that Jesus spoke in parables so that people would not understand him without some “spirit work” being conducted to move from being blind human beings to being seeing human beings.

Some may protest at this point that these methods are too hard for most groups. But being hard for us is exactly the reason why we must do these methods. After all, we are out to *hear the word of God*

for us today, not just play with understandings that we already have.

Hearing the Word of God

What do we mean by “hearing the Word of God”? First of all, we need some metaphorical translation of the word “God” as well as the word “Word” as applied to some sort of “Speech” from that *INFINITELY MYSTERIOUS SILENCE* referenced by the word “God” in Biblical scriptures. How can this *SILENCE* speak to us?

The “Word of God” is always heard in our own lives through some temporal historical event that is happening or has happened to us in our temporal lives. The so-called “Word of God” in scripture is some sort of provocation by the event of hearing and pondering a biblical text that interprets for us events that are already happening or have already happened to us in our life history. Without that life history there is no Word of God in the biblical text. Hearing the text can itself be an event of hearing the Word of God, only if the event of hearing that text awakens us to aspects of our eventful lives and how to view those personal events.

Also, “Hearing the Word of God” means becoming open to some sort of “lasting Truth” breaking through some familiar avoidance of such Truth about our lives—some awareness of falseness, some need for forgiveness, some challenge to behave better, some call to freedom, or some appearance of the Agape quality of Love.

A Scripture Conversation Example Using the passage Mark 6: 47-51

When it grew late, the boat was in the middle of the lake, and he was by himself on land. He saw them straining at the oars, for the wind was dead against them. And in the small hours he went towards them, walking on the waters of the lake, intending to come alongside them. But when they saw him walking on the water, they thought he was a ghost, and screamed

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out. For they all saw him and they were absolutely terrified. But Jesus at once spoke quietly to them, "It's all right, it is I myself; don't be afraid!"

And he climbed aboard the boat with them, and the wind dropped. But they were scared out of their wits.

(1) The Conversation leader first reads aloud this passage and then conducts a go round asking everyone to answer this objective question:

What words, phrases or images do you remember from this story?

(2) Then read this passage again and ask each of the following questions to the whole group, taking answers from only two or three persons for each question:

If this story is seen as a sort of parable, what might any of the key words point to in our lives? (Ask separately and in order about: "boat," "water," "wind against you," "walking on the water" and others this group might asks about)?

So when have the wild and stormy waters of your life left you "straining at the oars," "the wind dead set against you"?

When have you had a similar disbelief that a real human being could walk on the wild and stormy water of their actual lives?

When have you experienced the wind dying down when a person of confidence and trust stepped into your boat?

What does it mean for you or me to be this Jesus-quality in our lives with other people?

(3) Then conclude with a second go-round, each person answering this question:

How does this story and our discussion of it speak to you today?

The above example conversation shows that a great deal is required from the conversation leader in

preparing to lead step (2) of this conversation. Specific questions that match the Scripture must be created. The questions are not the same for every passage.

Discussing Old Testament Prophets



Most Old Testament passages, as well as some New Testament passages, will require a bit of historical commentary prior to reading the passage. For example, consider using the powerful prophetic writings in Isaiah 40 and following. The conversation leader can make this conversation much more relevant by reviewing the historical situation to which these powerful poetic verses were first addressed. Here is an example of a spin that might work on these verses.

The unnamed prophet, whose writings were preserved toward the end of the Isaiah scroll, is living in exile in Babylon where he and others were carried off years earlier. The Persians are now conquering the Babylonian Empire and allowing exiled peoples to return home. This unnamed prophet is addressing a captive people with the hope of returning to their native land and rebuilding the "people of God" as their contribution to all the nations of the Earth. Let us imagine ourselves settled in Babylon, some of us young enough to know no other land in our adult lives. We may not be sure about this option of making the long trek across the desert and rebuilding a broken down society whose current members may not welcome us.

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After such an introduction, read some of the lively verses from Isaiah 40 and following. Ask for objective responses to the poetry.

Then for Part (2) of the conversation ask mostly historical-type questions such as: Clearly refugees today are facing similar challenges. *When in your life history have you faced fresh openings and awesome challenges to redo your whole life? What new social arrangements do we hope for today? How do such hopeful developments strike us as challenges that scare us as well as call us?* And finally we might ask, *“What has this passage said to us about being the people of God in the 21st Century?”*

Then in Part (3) of the conversation, it will be effective to conduct a go-round on this always helpful concluding question:

How does this passage and our discussion of it speak to you today?

Domestic Tranquility and Christian Ethics

ethical axioms by Gene Marshall

“We the People of the United States, in order to form a more perfect **Union**, establish **Justice**, insure **Domestic Tranquility**, provide for the **Common Defense**, promote the **General Welfare**, and secure the **Blessings of Liberty** to ourselves and our posterity, do ordain and establish this **Constitution of United States.**”

“Domestic Tranquility” is more than pretty words in this preamble to the US Constitution; this phrase points to an essential social process that all human societies preform and all human societies need to preform well.

In the 21st century United States, “domestic tranquility” includes all these manifestations: law and order, policing, courts, judges, juries, prisons, procedural norms, reigning customs, taken-for-granted taboos, and the courtesies of governing.

Many of these activities are done so poorly or so unjustly that blacks, other people of color, most women, gay men, lesbian women, and other socially vulnerable people often wince, when even hearing about many of these essential processes. Some reformers have even tried to imagine societies in which some of these activities for maintaining domestic tranquility do not even exist.

But we must be attentive that we not to throw out the baby of necessity with the dirty bathwater of injustice. We must instead clean up every aspect of our attempts at domestic tranquility until these essential social processes function in ways that are really domestic, really tranquil, and really realistic for the procedures of living and governing.

For example, there is no such thing as “a war on crime” or “a war on drugs” or a war on anything domestic. “War” is a very special word for an extremely rare set of challenges under the overall

category of “common defense” not “domestic tranquility.” Police departments do not need war machinery, left over or not. Even well-trained swat teams are not the same as a military platoon. Swat teams handle domestic emergencies, not military campaigns.



“Soldier” is a different profession than “police officer.” A police officer is doing the task of

domestic tranquility, not common defense. A police officer is not called to kill the enemy, but to maintain the peace—to restrain illegalities designed to produce domestic tranquility. If the ordinary police officer carries a pistol or only a club, it is only to be used as a last resort. A person who longs to be some sort of BIG GUN needs to join the Army or visit a therapist or both.

DOMESTIC TRANQUILITY

Even more important than the training of individual police officers is correcting the basic style of operation that is taking place in many of our policing organizations. Law enforcement officers must be required to obey the laws they are enforcing, as well as the laws and rules that apply to any enforcement procedure. They must be held more strictly accountable for violations of these laws than the prospective criminals they are handling. If police officers are not aware of the laws and firmly dedicated to carefully enforcing the laws, they must be asked to pursue some other profession.

For criminal corruption to exist within a police force means that an entire body politic and all its citizens are failing. If a wealth-idolizing elite or a bigoted cultural group has corrupted a police force in order to carry out their biases or excesses, this must be unravelled and punished severely with due haste. Domestic tranquility must be re-established with all deliberate speed. Such seriousness is implied, not only by the U.S. Constitution, but by plain common sense. Any politician who has any problem whatsoever with the common sense goals of the "Black Lives Matter" movement should be referred for therapy or dismissed from office.

Why is this so important? Local communities of people must be able to honestly see the police forces as their friends and therefore cooperate with them carefully and completely. Police officers must be able to trust at least 90% of the population as helpmates in controlling the malfeasance of the other 10%. Domestic tranquility depends on this. There are no excuses here. Policing is a dangerous calling, or can be, but it is not a profession for those who love killing or dominating others. All of us should be committed to fair policing and to making policing as safe as possible. And police officers who risk their lives on our behalf need to be paid generously for this dangerous work. If a police officer needs to cheat to make a living, we the citizenry are responsible for the bad consequences of those arrangements.

It is in the context of these overall policing challenges that the nonviolent civil rights movement called "Black Lives Matter" is making its protests. Any opposition or dismissal of the core challenges of this movement are an attack on domestic tranquility and a violation of the US Constitution.

Christian Ethics

Law enforcement is not a process that redeems people from their unrealistic living, foolishness, and downright evil. Law enforcement is a process that controls the evil, foolishness, and unrealistic living that characterizes our entire species, has always characterized our species, and always will characterize our species. Each of us needs to know that we are capable of crime against our neighbor, and that being restrained from doing that crime is a blessing to the potential criminal in each of us, as well as in everyone else. It is not good Christian teaching to claim that some of us are sinners and some of us are not.

The best that can be said for any of us is that we are "sinners saved by grace." That means that the "better angels" of our profound humanness are being temporarily loosed from being corroded over with layers of delusory living. These "better angels" are not moral achievements, but qualities of our essential humanity to which we can surrender, once the surrendering decisions are revealed to us.



The Christian term "law of God" does not point to the same dynamic as a natural law that our intelligence has discovered, nor is the law of God the same as a human law that our social ingenuity has created. The "law of God" is not the 10 Commandments in the book of Exodus. "The law of God" points to the reign of the Ultimate Mystery or Final Reality over all the temporal processes of our everyday lives. The 10 Commandments and all other human articulations of law are approximations of what

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Reality is prescribing as realistic for the living of our human lives. We must decide the particulars of our legal realism, but realism itself is being given to us by Reality—a Reality we do not control or need to control.

When the Apostle Paul talks about our spirit healing being due to the action or grace of Final Reality upon our lives, requiring no accomplishment by us, he means that spirit healing is a different process than our obedience or disobedience to some articulate law. Paul does not imply by these statements a minimization of the importance of law or of law enforcement. It is simply true that the healing of our lives is not a human accomplishment, but a human surrender to the healing forces of Reality by which we are restored to our essential realism. This healing power that is present in the Christian witness is aimed at the individual human person, not the social order. People so healed have a better sense of justice for the social order, and it is therefore they who must conceive and lead the fight for manifestations of that justice.

Promoting the healing of the human spirit is a different expression of our unconditional love for others than the establishment and the enforcement of social justice. Law making can be love. Police work can be love. But these are different expressions of love than the healing ministries of witnessing to the grace of Reality that restores us to realism. Social justice is the use of social power to restrain our evil spirits. There is no substitute for the power of justice, and there never will be. If we are not active in political thinking and justice promotion, we are very poor exemplars of Christian love.

Domestic Tranquility is about the social justice of handling despairing and potentially despairing people. Domestic Tranquility does not heal despair, but it restrains the despairing from the consequences of their despair upon all of us. In love for ourselves and others, we can restrain evil. And we can restrain evil along with promoting the accompanying awareness that despairing persons

can be healed of their despair. It turns out to be another form of despair to assume that we are the guiltless avengers of the guilty. A police officer confronts the delicate task of restraining the consequences of despair, while also noticing the essential humanity that is potential within each human being, no matter how evil or dangerous. Any police officer who cannot hold this tension in mind, should be encouraged to pursue some other profession.

ART ON THE HUMANNESS SCALE



*reviews by
Joyce Marshall*

FICTION

A Tale for the Time Being
By Ruth Ozeki

Ruth, a character based on the author herself, finds on the beach a freezer bag containing the diary of Nao, a 16-year-old Japanese girl. This fascinating book gradually reveals the stories of both, alternating between Nao's diary as Ruth reads it, and Ruth's story of her life on a British Columbia island with her husband and small community. Nao's bag also includes writings from her great uncle, who was a kamikaze pilot and stories about her great grandmother who became a Buddhist nun. Ruth wants to help Nao, who struggles with many issues including being bullied at her school but whose story took place years earlier. This becomes interesting as the novel takes on the question of time from the teachings of Zen master Dogen and the perspective of quantum mechanics. Fascinating book.

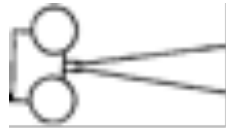
A Book of American Martyrs
by Joyce Carol Oates

This book couldn't be more relevant as it reveals all the wounds of our country's abortion issues and illuminates them as only a fine novel can. Luther Dunphy feels called by God to murder abortion doctor Gus Voorhees, which Dunphy considers to be

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justifiable homicide. Oates explores Dunphy's thoughts leading to the murder, the trials, his imprisonment, and his execution. She also takes us inside the lives of Luther's and Gus's wives and children as they deal with this violent event and its consequences. In particular we come to know Gus's daughter, Naomi, and Luther's daughter, Dawn, as each spends years sorting out their relationship to a father who lived according to his deepest ideals. Naomi attempts to create an archive of her famous father's life and Dawn pours her passion into becoming a professional boxer. This 736-page book felt in no way too long. I was stunned by its raw look at tragedy and moved to tears by its heart-felt relationship to each character.

MOVIES



Dunkirk. In telling the story of the attempt in 1940 to rescue Allied soldiers trapped on the French beach at Dunkirk, before the German troops arrive and before German planes strafe them or sink the rescuing boats, movie-maker Christopher Nolan focuses on one man from each area: the Land, the Sea and the Air. What the movie does for me is show what true heroism looks like. Mark Rylance, playing a British civilian who joins the amazing non-military flotilla of about 800 boats, faces tough decisions in ambiguous situations, risking his life and those of his two teenage sons who accompany him to save as many soldiers as they can. Tom Hardy, playing a fighter pilot trying to knock out the German pilots to protect the soldiers and the ships, uses his skill and resources to their utmost. Foot soldier Harry Styles' heroic role is to survive and to help as many of his fellow soldiers as he can to survive. "Well done," says a man greeting the survivors as they arrive in Britain. Yes, well done, for continuing to do the ordinary good-hearted thing in exceedingly extraordinary circumstances. Well done.

Broken Flowers. Bill Murray plays Don Johnston who has evidently been something of a

Don Juan in his earlier years and now seems to spend most of his time on the couch. Two events change that. His present girlfriend moves out and he gets an anonymous letter saying that he has a 19-year-old son who may be searching for him. When he shows the letter to his Ethiopian friend/neighbor he extracts from Don a list of names of all the women who could possibly be the mother, does internet research to locate them, and creates an itinerary for Don to visit them all, including plane tickets and car rentals. The combination of director Jim Jarmusch and actor Bill Murray creates a fascinating journey in an attempt to locate the mother, and maybe the son.

The Last Word. I like this film. Shirley MacLaine plays a role she's become perfect at: a pushy controlling old lady. In this instance she is concerned that she have a positive obituary when she dies and appoints a young journalist (Amanda Seyfried) to help her create not only the obit, but the life that justifies it. These two along with the feisty young black girl MacLaine takes on to mentor form a trio that makes my feminist heart sing. The film is funny and also "has its points."

Sophie and the Rising Sun is set in a 1941 fishing village in South Carolina. A wounded Japanese man is thrown off the bus and becomes gardener to one of the town matriarchs. When the Japanese bomb Pearl Harbor, the town folk's suspicious attitude toward the man turns vicious. In the meantime, one woman has fallen in love with the man. The two women risk themselves to save him.

Tokyo Story. This 1953 film by Japanese filmmaker Yasujiro Ozu is considered by some to be the greatest film of all time. I would certainly place it among the very best. It is a simple story about a family. A couple in their 60s travels by train to visit their children and grandchildren in Tokyo. Their son is a doctor; their daughter runs a beauty shop. They are all busy and find the elders to be a bother whom they feel obligated to entertain. It is easy to identify with this family and their issues. The film moves slowly. One of the main images is the fan.

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The characters are often sitting on the floor cushions slowly fanning themselves. This is a film whose effect lingers.

The Blue and the Gray is a 1982 TV series which tells the story of the Civil War, focusing on the families of two sisters. The Geysers are farmers living near Charlottesville, Virginia who are generally indifferent to the issue of slavery but are sympathetic to the southern cause. The Hales own a small newspaper in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania and are pro-Union and anti-slavery. One son in the Geysers family, John, is an artist who gets a job with his uncle's paper in Gettysburg as an artist correspondent covering the war. John becomes friends with Jonas Steele, a scout for the Union Army who meets and marries John's cousin, Mary. John's three brothers join the Confederate Army and his two cousins join the Union Army. The drama illustrates the awful ambiguities of family fighting family and is quite well done. Gregory Peck plays Lincoln and Stacy Keach plays Jonas Steele.

American History X. With the recent uprising of the neo-Nazi movement I found it useful, although not pleasant, to see this film again. Edward Norton does a fine job portraying Derek, a young man whose thinking is twisted first by his father's racism, then further by his father's death at the hands of black drug dealers, and finally by a white supremacist who trains Derek to lead a gang of violent youth. His murder of a black thief sends him to prison for three years where his experience of the racially divided gangs there disillusion him of his racism. He returns home to find his younger brother Danny involved in the neo-Nazi group. Derek tells his story to Danny in an attempt to save him from Derek's experience.

BFG stands for Big Friendly Giant and is Steven Spielberg's return to the style of his 1982 film, **E.T.** BFG lives in secret Giant Country where he takes ten-year-old Sophie, an orphan and insomniac, because she happens to see him wandering the city by night. The two of them "catch dreams" together and he protects her from being eaten by the

"unfriendly" giants while she helps him resist their bullying. The two go to the Queen and make arrangements for the British Army to remove the giants to an isolated island. The film is perhaps not up to the wonders of **E.T.**, but good, nevertheless.

Hunt for the Wilderpeople. This New Zealand film deals with a common story in a unique style. Ricky Baker, a juvenile delinquent who was abandoned by his mother, is taken by child welfare services officer Paula and to live on a remote farm with foster mother Bella and her husband, the cantankerous Hec. Bella is a fine mother to Ricky. When Bella dies suddenly, Ricky convinces Hec he prefers to stay with him than be sent to yet another family. They hide out in the forest with a national manhunt out to find them. The story is full of surprises, laughs, and sweet moments.

RECOMMENDED READING



reviews by Joyce Marshall

NONFICTION BOOKS

Exceptional America

What Divides Americans from the World and from Each Other

by Mugambi Jouet

University of California Press, 2017

Raised in Paris by a French mother and Kenyan father, Jouet went to college in America – studying history at Rice University, public policy at NYU, and law at Northwestern – and worked as a public defender in Manhattan. He uses the word "exceptional" as that which is different and unusual. He notes that it is the polarization of America that makes it exceptional – both within and with the rest of the Western world. Our country is divided over the role of government, access to health care, wealth inequality, financial regulation, climate change, science, sexual propriety, reproductive rights, the literal truth of the Bible, warfare, torture, and human rights. One of the ways we differ from other

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Western countries is this polarization within our country. Compared to other countries, we are more insular: we know less about the rest of the world and travel less. We lag behind other industrialized nations in criminal justice, health care, wealth inequality, and human rights. So, even though we have been a global leader in many areas, therefore being great with that meaning of exceptional, our present exceptionalism is likely leading toward decline.

Jouet sees four peculiar mindsets in America: profound anti-intellectualism, fervent Christian fundamentalism, a visceral suspicion of government, and racial resentment. His chapters focus on these and other factors which led to Trump's election, including the 2003 invasion of Iraq. In his final chapters, Jouet recalls our recent history and reflects on how America might eventually reclaim credibility as a global leader by (in his words) "building on its tremendous strengths, tapping into its enormous potential, and addressing the fundamental problems behind its decline."

Strangers in Their Own Land
Anger and Mourning on the American Right
A Journey to the Heart of Our Political Divide
by Arlie Russell Hochschild
The New Press, 2016

California Sociologist Hochschild, seeking to discover the emotional draw of right-wing politics, visited and eventually made friends with a number of largely Tea Party members in Louisiana. From 40 core interviews she selected 6 to profile, visiting places of birth, churches, burial plots, sharing meals etc. The first part of the book tells the story of each of those people, including their political opinions. From listening and getting to know them, Hochschild creates what she calls their "deep story" which she tells in metaphor, and checks it out with them. It has to do with waiting in line—waiting patiently for their turn at the American Dream and seeing others who seem to be unfairly cutting in ahead of them. She also creates a few individual deep self stories that fit some of them – Loyal Team

Player, Renunciate Worshipper, Stoic Cowboy, Rebel with a New Cause. Then she does some historical back story from the Civil War Era of the 1860s and the Civil Rights Era of the 1960s comparing the cotton plantation of the former to the present oil plantation, leading to the pile of kindling just waiting for Trump to ignite.

She ends with perhaps the best gift of all in this book of many gifts – two letters – two letters to deal with the serious division in our country. First, a letter she might write to a friend on the liberal left, encouraging them to get to know some folks outside their "political bubble" with awareness of the "good angels" of those on the right: their patience in standing in line in scary economic times, their capacity for loyalty, sacrifice, and endurance. Then a letter she as a liberal might write to her Louisiana friends on the right beginning with empathizing on many of their issues. Then she points out some facts (which the author summarizes in a fact check appendix) regarding what history shows that the Democrats have done relative to the Republicans. She goes on to say what might be the deep story of the progressives parallel to that of the right, noting that many on the left feel like strangers in their own land, too.

This is a fine, fine book and much needed today.

The End of White Christian America
by Robert P. Jones
Simon and Schuster, 2016

Jones, founder and CEO of the Public Religion Research Institute, gives a careful cultural analysis of White Christian America in its mainline Protestant and its evangelical manifestations, tracing the history of both. Although Jones includes a number of demographic charts to prove his case for the demise, the book is much more than statistics.

Quotes:

Because evangelical leaders made opposition to gay rights so central to their movement's identity, no issue captures White Christian America's loss of

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cultural power better than the rapid rise in public support for same-sex marriage.

One study found that the top three attributes young Americans associated with “present-day Christianity” were being antigay (91%), judgmental (87%), and hypocritical (85%).

Fully eight in ten white evangelical Protestants and 85 percent of white mainline Protestants have entirely white core social networks. The church is the most segregated institution in America.

Nevertheless, there are movements and churches within American Christianity that are making efforts to overcome its racist/sexist tendencies. There are also interreligious collaborations. Jones suggests that it might be more in keeping with the core of Christianity for it to become a powerless minority, a religion of outsiders with a chastened sense of repentance.

Shoah through Muslim Eyes

by Mehnaz M. Afridi

Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2016

The child of a relatively secular banker and his more religious wife, Mehnaz Afridi was raised in Pakistan, Dubai in the United Arab Emirates, England and Switzerland before coming to the United States in 1984 for her last two years of high school. She attended a school in Scarsdale, a suburb of New York with a large Jewish population. She was one of few Muslims in the area, and her introduction to interfaith relations involved being roughed up by her soccer teammates and hearing her parents being insulted.

Later when pursuing a master’s degree in religious studies at Syracuse University, she served as a teaching assistant to a professor specializing in Holocaust literature and spent five weeks visiting Israel which increased her interest in Islam and Judaism. She earned a doctorate in Islam and religious studies from the University of South Africa and also began recording oral histories of Holocaust survivors.

A practicing Muslim, she said, “I have the belief that if you speak for another, it means more than if you speak for yourself, for your own people. And when there’s so much daily tension between Muslims and Jews, it’s momentous for us to do this work, whether it’s me with the Shoah, or it’s a Jewish scholar speaking out about the Muslims in Bosnia or about Palestinian suffering. We are commanded by God to speak the truth.”

Her later visit to Dachau and a Holocaust survivor’s question to her - “What are you going to do about the Arab-Muslim denial of the Holocaust?” focused her role. She is now an assistant professor of religion at Manhattan College, where she teaches courses about both Islam and the Holocaust, and she is director of the college’s Holocaust, Genocide and Interfaith Education Center. She is also a member of the ethics and religion committee of the United

States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington.

Her book tells the detailed history of anti-Semitism and of other genocides. She explains how the German Holocaust of the Jews was different from other genocides, which is why she uses the Jewish term, Shoah. She tells stories of Muslims and Jews making friends when both were encamped



by Nazis in some of the Arab countries. Though some Muslims collaborated with the Nazis many risked or gave their lives to protect Jews. Her goal is to tell the truth of the entire story clearly so that Muslims and Jews can better understand one another and work together peacefully. She walks a difficult road which sometimes draws criticism and even threats toward her from both Jews and fellow Muslims.

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I Was Told to Come Alone
My Journey Behind the Lines of Jihad
by Souad Mekhennet
Henry Holt, 2017

Another courageous Muslim woman is Souad Mekhennet. She was born in Germany of immigrant parents: a Moroccan Sunni father and a Turkish Shite mother. She speaks German, French, Arabic and English. Because both parents had to work, they sent Souad to live with her Muslim grandmother in Morocco for three years when she was very young. Their family had stood up to the French colonialists and protected their Jewish neighbors. Her grandmother taught her to speak up when someone was in the wrong. As a young girl she was inspired by the Robert Redford/Dustin Hoffman film, All the President's Men, and decided she had to be a journalist. She saw these two reporters as those who took on people in power and were persistent in finding the truth. She saw that journalists didn't simply write what happened; they also changed lives.

By dogged determination from the time she was in high school, she began getting newspaper and radio jobs and got her college education more or less on the run while she traveled to do her reporting. Eventually she was hired not only by the Washington Post, but also the New York Times. The event of 9/11 began her work of answering the question, how did these nice guys become terrorists? Also, Souad felt the necessity of showing that Muslims are not by definition terrorists. She is a fine writer who skillfully weaves her personal story with the history of what has happened in the larger world. The book reads like a spy novel. She always goes personally to the center of where the action is, meeting with the jihadists themselves and getting their story, their motivations told while sometimes pointing out to them their own tendency to become oppressors. Because she had made herself trustworthy to them and at times by sheer luck, she avoided being tortured or even killed. The book is an education as well as a breath-taking page turner.

Al Franken: Giant of the Senate
by Al Franken
Twelve, 2017

Franken combines his comic sense from his Saturday Night Live days with a remarkably keen sense of the political world. Granted, this memoir describes his naivety as he learned the ropes of being a senator. But learn them he has, and in explaining how it came about, we learn a lot about the workings of our government. And an entertaining ride it is. Lots of gossip stories. And also inspiring. Beneath Franken's humor is a brilliant and honest man who is also willing to do his best to make friends with anyone, including Ted Cruz. And he is very practical. His approach is that whatever tiny percent that the Democrats can agree with the Republicans, it is worth every effort to do those things and serve the people as best you can. I hope he runs for president in 2020.

Into the Magic Shop
by Dr. James Doty
Avery, 2017

This memoir by neurosurgeon Doty is a page turner that inspires, brings tears, and teaches. When Doty is 12 he happens upon a woman in a magic shop who for three months teaches him methods that change his life. From a poor family with an abusive alcoholic father and a clinically depressed mother he becomes a respected doctor and philanthropist. But it is not an easy journey. It is the woman's lesson of the heart that proves the most difficult for Doty.

The Art of Friendship
by Christine Leefeldt & Ernest Callenbach
Pantheon Books, 1979

A married couple, Ecotopia author Ernest Callenbach and his therapist wife, Christine Leefeldt, share the friendship stories of many people from the era of the 70s, placing them in a variety of categories: Women's Friendships, Men's Friendships, Sex and Friendship, Power and Friendship, Resolving Conflicts in Friendship, and others. The book brings up memories of that earlier

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era, evokes reflection on one's own friendships through the years, and allows consideration of changes in one's friendships. I noted that I tend to have few and long-lasting friendships. One friend I talk to weekly goes back 43 years, and another very close friend 33 years. I still talk by phone occasionally to my school friend going back to 1941. The book has helpful insights, such as: expecting a friend to know what you want without telling them is the behavior of a dependent child. The authors also acknowledge the importance of listening and give good guidelines for doing so.

review by Gene Marshall

*NO is not Enough:
Resisting Trump's Shock Politics
and Winning the World We Need*
by Naomi Klein
Haymarket Books: 2017

This is a great book by a social affairs writer who is among the best we have. She published this book simultaneously in the United States, Canada, and Great Britain. Here is a quote that says it all:

"... it's clear that we need to do more than draw a line in the sand, and say "no more." Yes, we need to do that *and* we need to chart a credible and inspiring path to a different future. And that future cannot simply be where we were before Trump came along (aka the world that gave us Trump). It has to be somewhere we have never been before." (page 220)

Klein does a good job telling us how our inherited world gave us Trump, what Trump's world is like, and how bad this trend could become. Klein explains how Trump is showing us our dark side as North and South American nations and as a world community. Then, she helps us picture an antidote to that darkness, and be motivated to do our share in that "long emergency" so well described by David Orr in his 2016 book, *Dangerous Years*, as well as in Klein's own 2014 book, *This Changes Everything*.

In Part IV of this book she tells us "How Things Could Get Better." She insists that we must "Dream

Big" and that "Small Steps Will Not Cut It." She shows us how we are being given opportunities to make big steps if masses of people get involved. She insists that our vision of possible tomorrows needs to match our desperation and our enthusiasm. She shows us examples where this big vision is already being pursued.

Naomi Klein is not only a moving writer but also an accomplished investigative reporter and a social organizer in her own right. She concludes this book with her story about the organization in Canada of "The Leap Manifesto." She includes a copy of that manifesto. I conclude this review with some of her words about that Leap.

"We chose *leap* because it raises a defiant finger to centrist incrementalism—the kind that calls itself "cautious" but is in fact exquisitely dangerous at this late stage in the climate crisis." page 248

"Within days of The Leap's launch thousands of people had added their names, soon tens of thousands, and well over two hundred endorsing organizations. . . . The outpouring reminded me of a slogan I first heard in Argentina, during a raucous election campaign: 'Our dreams don't fit on your ballot.' That's what people were saying by signing The Leap: Yes, I am going to cast a ballot in this deeply flawed and constricted electoral system, but do not mistake that vote as an expression of the world I want." page 249

review by Jeanette Stanfield

*Age of Discovery
Navigating the Risks and Rewards
of our New Renaissance*
Ian Goldin and Chris Kutarna
St Martin's Press, NY 2016

In the final chapter of this book Ian and Chris attempt to summarize what they discovered about why the European renaissance of the 1400-1500s succeeded. These insights provide guidelines for those who are participating in building the New

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Renaissance in our 21st century world. Here is an outline of their discoveries:

Welcome Genius

- Welcome new truths.
- Discern what is objective information (fact) and what is opinion.
- Embrace wisdom of all cultures, sexes.
- Be open to new ideas.

Dare to Fail

- Choose bold action.
- Act out of long-term big picture view.
- Incentivize local citizens to seize opportunities

Find your Florence (major crossroad)

- Know that place matters with its craft, ethos and concentration of peoples where creativity can be released.
- Build new crossroads by strengthening communities' physical or digital foundations for exchange.
- Accommodate newcomers with their rich skills and cultures.

Mitigate Risk

1. *Make new Maps*

- Create maps that move beyond dichotomies
- Show actual relationships of nations beyond rich, poor, developed, developing
- See earth from space
- Avoid people labels that stigmatize and box in thinking and potential

2. *Admit risk*

- Strengthen and diversify each part of a system or infrastructure so that when one part fails the whole can still function.
- Do prevention measures before public crisis
- Acknowledge that we have all been hurt by inaction.

3. *Stoke virtue*

- Dignity- Practice respect and exploration of full potential of self and of others to rediscover what makes life worth living.

- Audacity- Act boldly encouraging confidence and hope amidst chaos and uncertainty.
- Honesty- Demand integrity in society to seed trust leading to robust resilient humanity.

Questions to Consider

- Where do you see genius flourishing or trying to flourish today?
- Where do you see risk being mitigated or trying to be mitigated?
- What excites you or frightens you about these times in which we live?
- What is a place you would call Florence for our time? What is a place emerging as a Florence?
- In what arenas do we collectively need to support bold action?
- Where are you supporting and/or creating the new Renaissance?



Who Are We?

Realistic Living is a nonprofit educational organization dedicated to religion and ethics. We see our core task as promoting and equipping a vital, vibrant, and viable practice of Christian living, theologizing, and action that deals with the actual problems we face in our contemporary history.

Our focus is on the Christian heritage, but we foster an interreligious attitude with other religious practices. We view a future of Christianity that contributes its gifts to the general interreligious dialogue and to an interfaith reconstruction of secular society.

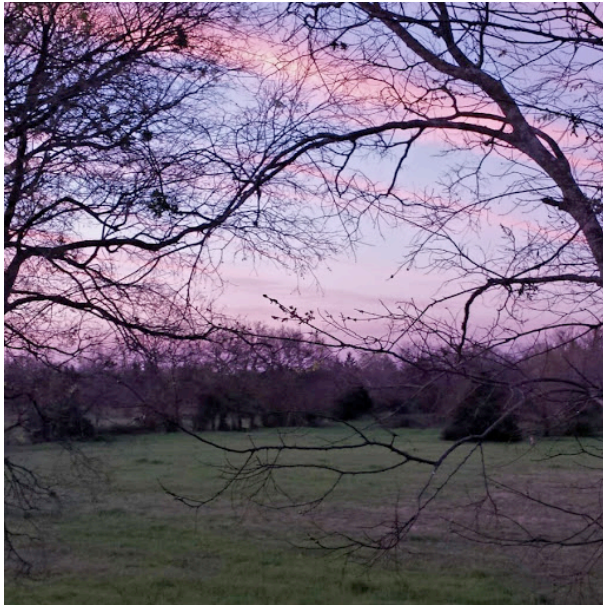
This new Christianity living ventures beyond the current individualistic overemphasis with an emphasis on small-group intimacy in weekly meeting circles of study, ritual, and action for a local geographical eco-region or parish of responsibility. That parish is viewed as part of the whole planet, for which each circle also assumes responsibility.

Each June we conduct four days of Leadership Training and Research that builds movement in local places across the continent and world.

We invite individuals and couples to consider a week-long sojourn with us in Bonham, Texas, tailored for your specific journey in spirit matters and in Christian mission to your local parish of responsibility. For more information on any of these and other topics, email us at:

jgmarshall@cablone.net

We invite you to visit our website, <http://www.realisticliving.org/> which contains many resources for your use: videos, books, solitary exercises, essays, courses, methods, and more.



Our Finances?

We ask you to think of Realistic Living as servant of a movement in which you can participate, not only with your financial support, but also with your use of our resources in your place of responsibility.

Your financial contributions are carefully spent on the important mission of this movement. You get a “big bang for your buck.”

We encourage you to consider monthly contributions that are sent automatically by your bank. We have already made considerable progress in this direction, giving us a steady monthly income in addition to a strong year-end financial support.

We ask our Journal constituency to become financial supporters. A gift of \$20 a year covers the costs of keeping you in touch with our publications, announcements, and reports.

Sending us your e-mail address enables you to receive on the 15th of each month our Realistic Living Pointers—a brief edge essay on religious and ethical matters.

Previous pointers are included in our RL Blog.

Our Facebook page, containing visits with a wide range of inspiring persons:
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*Please help us direct others
to all these resources
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is contemporary language for "Holy Spirit."

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