

of the 50's and 60's—Donne, Marvell, Austen, Fielding—all well worked over, the comment well within the expected, aimed straight at an academic audience. Only a very thin-skinned academic will object to the carefully oblique censure of the revolting Brecht. Like Enright, most academics will share Wayne Booth's surprise that a student's paper on deer-hunting could be sincere, and sympathize with Dan Jacobson's shock on realizing that a line-'em-up-and-shoot-'em Englishman's talk was not a put-on. Yet, can such surprises be genuine? Whatever one thinks of bloodsporters and gunboat diplomats, surely it is odd that the ironic attitude of raised eyebrow and gathered skirt (imputed irony, one might call it), once the protection of gentility against foul-smelling mobs, should survive in academic common rooms.

Hence a well-intentioned essay proves to be a *Hamlet* without the prince. Irony is not academic at all. In Anglo-American tradition, whose literature is overwhelmingly Christian, the facts underlying the greater ironies derive from revelation—from such things as the news that wisdom is folly, that the first shall be last, and that he who gains the world will lose his soul. In that tradition there is nothing frivolous or evasive in saying that things are not what they seem. This gives the ironies of the masters their power, whether comic or tragic: Chaucer, More, Erasmus, Shakespeare, and Swift among the classics, Chesterton, Waugh, Powell, Spark, and Amis among the moderns. None of them, except Shakespeare and Swift, figures in this book.

"There is apparently less irony to be extracted from Shakespeare," says Enright, "than one might expect of our national poet." If you think of Shakespeare as a national poet, and look for verbal ironies, that may be true. Approach him as a Christian poet, and the case is much altered. As Kenneth Muir said years ago, the center of *King Lear*, the storm-scene of Act 3, turns on a verse from the *Magnificat*: *He hath put down the mighty from their seats, and exalted the humble and meek*. Enright's comment on *Lear* is trivial compared to this. His treatment of Swift, though, focuses the point.

For a long time, Swift's *A Modest*

Proposal (which, as *Chronicles* readers will remember, was that the state of Ireland was so bad, its only recourse was to sell the children for food) has been used as a crash-course in irony for unsuspecting freshmen and, more recently, high-school students: an inept solution, whether you consider the future of literature or of the students. Some students always take Swift straight, and suffer bewilderment, while some of their teachers make merry over the fact, and others express concern. Yet, it might be that these students are victims of an unpleasant practical joke, of a kind that would certainly disgust Jonathan Swift. Well: it seems that a school board somewhere in New York state banned the pamphlet on grounds of bad taste, something that Enright finds "beyond the bounds of credibility." And up go those eyebrows again.

Swift would agree that *A Modest Proposal* is in bad taste, but then so was the state of Ireland. As an orthodox Church of Ireland priest, Swift must have assumed that his readers would recognize the scriptural ground bass of his irony. Any mention of murdering children should make a Christian think first of the Slaughter of the Innocents, always explained to him as absolute evil, and aimed at the life of his own Savior, who came as a little child; then of the Savior's words:

Whoso shall offend one of these little ones which believe in me, it were better for him that a millstone were hanged about his neck, and that he were drowned in the depths of the sea.

No Christian reader can mistake Swift's purpose. Non-Christian readers in secular schools, on the other hand, might miss the point entirely, might even think there's something to be said for the idea; the best they'll be able to do is discuss something called "the irony" in a mirthless, self-satisfied way. Anyone might call that bad taste. Worse still from the standpoint of a school board, readers with Christian inklings might connect Swift's variation on the Slaughter of the Innocents with their own America as well as with 18th-century Ireland. In schools where abortion is not unheard-of, Swift's bitter indignation might sear some consciences. And that

would be in even worse taste.

Neither I nor D.J. Enright knows what lay behind the school board's decision to keep Swift out of their classrooms. It would be equally interesting to know why Enright would include him. No sensible person wants to see Swift banned; no sensible person wants to see him intruded upon youngsters not ready for him, either, or made the subject of academic trivialities. And how curious that Enright should be so scornful of these New Yorkers when he has left so many of the greatest ironists out of his own collection! This is a more serious lacuna in a book on irony than the omission of Swift—for whatever reason—from an 18-year-old's reading list. Where is Chaucer's trendy monk who wanted to know how the world should be served, Erasmus' Folly who said that Christianity could be very hard on the clergy? One suspects that they and their modern descendants, also missing, belong to another world and another book.

Against a Clockwork God

by Douglas Groothuis

The Pagan Temptation by Thomas Molnar, Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans.

Western civilization dare not rest on its laurels, warns Professor Molnar, because its laurels are laced with philosophical and religious errors that threaten to topple it. The "pagan temptation"—the ancient pantheism, monism, and mysticism largely displaced by the Christianization of the West—now threatens to "repaganize" the Western world. And, ironically, if Christianity cannot alter its own "desacralizing" dynamics it will unintentionally assist this repaganization by default.

Molnar's thesis is that "the pagan world view persists behind the Christian world view and that favorable circumstances . . . allow it to manifest itself with renewed vigor." Although he doesn't cite him, Molnar agrees with C.S. Lewis that "pantheism is . . . the permanent natural bent of the human mind. . . . It is the attitude into which

the human mind automatically falls when left to itself."

Throughout the book, Molnar spotlights the metaphysical chasm between paganism and Christianity, leaving no room for syncretistic fancies about "perennial philosophies" (Aldous Huxley) or "primordial traditions" (Huston Smith) that somehow unite all religious expression. Molnar demonstrates just the opposite and often adds apologetic punch to the exposition: "Human beings are not part of the substance of God, nor do they contain divine 'sparks' in their souls. Only by distinguishing between humanity and divinity can we give full credit and respect to reason and its exploration of God and nature; to history, which is human action always lovingly watched by God; and to faith, which is not a reabsorption into the divine but a state of trust in the good will of the Father."

The "pagan revival" commenced when Christian thinkers provided favorable circumstances for paganism by advocating an arid rationalism devoid of what Molnar calls "mythical imagination." Molnar's exposition of this development in the Middle Ages is an insightful reflection on the challenge of faithfully and reasonably integrating faith and reason. Although he rejects the pagan world view, Molnar understands it as catering to the human need for imaginative symbols, rites, and ceremonies—that mysterious sense of the sacred not exhausted by ratiocination. Inasmuch as Christian thinkers (consciously or unconsciously) sheered Christianity from the sacred, they fostered a hunger for meaning easily tempted by the exotic allure of paganism.

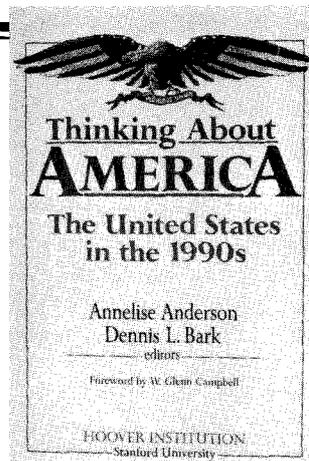
For Molnar, the antidote to the "pagan temptation" is the resacralization of Christianity through "mediating zones through which religious people reach for the transcendent." Here Molnar's sacramentalism comes to the fore, and he expends no little effort developing a sacramental theology. By "mediating zones" Molnar has in mind the liturgy, rites, symbols, and mysteries of the Roman magisterium which, he believes, help illuminate the transcendent in ways not available through reason or written revelation alone. He slights Protestantism for supposedly abolishing these sacramental zones in its zeal to crush all idols of mere human imagina-

tion. Protestantism, he thinks, tends to reduce God to a cold and distant abstraction and to divorce His creation from the divine.

Molnar believes that Christian spiritual life suffered when the Reformers understood the sacraments as "external signs of grace received by faith" instead of symbols which involve the congregation in reliving the Christian mythos. "This is the difference: the sign is a *remembrance* in the presence of the past event. The symbol incorporates that but goes beyond it: it is the *renewal*

of a past event in the present in which past and present are unified and made continuous."

It is just here that Protestants appreciative of Molnar's historical and cultural analysis must part company with him. Although he never uses the term, Molnar assumes a transubstantial view of the Lord's Supper wherein Christ is thought to be repeatedly slain and offered for the sins of the world. With the Reformers, modern Protestants see this to be in disagreement with the finality of Christ's sacrificial



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death they find in Scripture. For them, the sacraments, as important as they are, do not have salvific value, but rather function as a means of sanctifying grace for those—and only for those—who respond in Christian faith. Molnar finds this view “impersonal, reified, and alienating” for the church. He thinks that rejecting transubstantiation consigns worshipers to the mere phenomena of the signs which are interpreted subjectively and so divorced from the actual objective reality (or being) of the sacrificial event itself. But the Protestant could reply that the sign helps worshipers subjectively commemorate a unique, objective, and unrepeatable historical event of supreme importance. Worshipers are instructed to respond properly in light of the reality being commemorated. Just how this is “impersonal, reified, and alienating” seems unclear.

Molnar’s critic could further respond that his own view comes close to viewing the Lord’s Supper as a magical rite in which an elixir is dispensed which is automatically efficacious to all involved, irrespective of the subjective state of the recipient. It could also be added that Molnar’s notion of *reliving* the sacred event, rather than *commemorating* it, borders on the cyclical view of history embraced by the very paganism he rejects. (Molnar himself quotes Augustine’s refutation of the cyclical view: “God forbid that we should swallow such nonsense. Christ died, once for all, for our sins.”)

Questions should also be raised regarding Molnar’s understanding of “myth.” He does affirm that the “mythic” need not be factually false. He rightly sees the Christian drama of redemption as “mythic” since it answers a deep primordial need and addresses and answers—through revelation—the universal concern of creation, fall, and redemption. To borrow a phrase from C.S. Lewis, the Christian story is “myth become fact,” or, as G.K. Chesterton put it, Christianity is “an answer to a riddle.”

Yet Molnar believes that the Bible contains some factually false mythical material: “All things considered, the great difference between pagan myths and the Gospels is that most of the latter’s stories are historically factual, and mythical elements touch only the inessentials.” This reminds me of what

Peter Berger calls “cognitive bartering” in which orthodoxy barter with modernity for the supernatural elements it may retain: “We’ll give up the virgin birth, if we can keep the resurrection.” Although this is not Molnar’s aim, to admit any mythical accretions is to begin to undermine all historical authenticity. We cannot edit holy writ according to the whims of modern speculation and hope to escape unscathed (a point Molnar himself makes in reference to the truncated theology of Hans Kung). Moreover, there was insufficient time between the historical events and their commemoration in the Gospels for mythical accretions to develop.

Very importantly, *The Pagan Temptation* is a valuable resource for putting various forms of neopaganism and new occultism (which often go under the name of the New Age movement) into better perspective. Neopaganism is not a trifling fad but a perennial temptation with cultural force to transform the West. What is at stake is nothing less than Western civilization as we know it. Although some will find aspects of his sacramentalism unconvincing, Molnar calls us to discern just how modern Christianity itself may be contributing to the pagan allure by neglecting a proper understanding of the imaginative or mythic aspects of orthodoxy.

If it is true, as Molnar believes, that “in the minds of vast segments of the West, the Christian God has died . . . his death is simultaneous with the assumed ascent of humanity to divine status,” we then face a challenge of the highest order.

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Galileo Brought to Book, Again

by Bryce J. Christensen

Galileo: Heretic by Pietro Redondi, Princeton: Princeton University Press; \$29.95.

Galileo Galilei lives in the imagination of every high-school atheist as the ar-

chetypal champion of Truth, standing heroically against the malice and superstition of the ecclesiastical authorities who condemned him. This version of the events works wonderfully as melodrama but fails miserably as history—the Italian scholar Pietro Redondi has uncovered documentary evidence that Galileo’s astronomy was not the principal reason that Church authorities brought him to trial. Rather, the real but hidden issue lay in the impossibility of reconciling Galileo’s materialist philosophy with the Catholic theology of the Eucharist.

Why then was Galileo tried for his views on the earth’s movement? In a painstaking work of historical sleuthing, Redondi traces the tangled motives of the principals involved: Pope Urban VIII, an early defender of Galileo who later came under attack from Spanish clerics for alleged laxity in fighting heresy; Father Grassi, the shrewd scientist, architect, and Jesuit who detected more than a whiff of heterodoxy in Galileo’s writings; Cardinal Bellarmino, the “hammer of heretics” who officially informed Galileo of the Church’s opposition to Copernicanism in 1616; Father Guiducci, Galileo’s student and admirer whose efforts to help his mentor backfired; Cardinal Barberini, nephew of the Pope, who personally stage-managed Galileo’s trial; and Galileo himself, who fanned the winds of controversy with his intemperate polemics. Top Church authorities genuinely wished to avoid the public scandal of bringing Galileo to trial for advocating doctrines contrary to belief in transubstantiation. (In 1624, just nine years before Galileo’s trial, the Inquisition had ordered the body of Mario Antonio De Dominis exhumed and burned because of his advocacy of atomist principles very much like Galileo’s.) Yet to still the damaging allegations and rumors, Church leaders felt it necessary to publicly discipline Galileo on the less serious—and therefore less scandalous—charge of Copernicanism.

The proud defiance of Galileo’s apocryphal “Eppur si muove!” (“It still moves!”) has sounded through the centuries. But the defiance loses its authenticity when we learn that Galileo’s trial was the result of ecclesiastical plea bargaining designed to protect the Vatican as well as the defendant. As Redondi explains: “Since Galileo had been pro-