

THE HAMMER AND THE FREE SPIRIT

Toward a Practical Heresy

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I was scraping white paint from the business end of my hammer when it hit me—not the hammer, but the the idea I’d been waiting for all summer. I’d spent the time at my usual odd welter of projects (and some loafing). In May, right after the college year ended, I helped my son tear down the engine of the Volvo we got cheap because it had serious issues. Then I replaced the small, high windows in our family room with a beautiful (if overpriced) bay window so that we could see the back yard and put up some bird feeders. In July I worked on my sister’s utility room with my dad and brother, rebuilding a closet and laying a new tile floor, and then put down new floors in our upstairs bathroom and our kitchen. Now I needed the hammer to drive stakes to frame the little patch of concrete I was hoping to pour in the neck where our driveway widens and we always end up driving off the edge into what’s supposed to be grass but is usually mud.

In between all these tangible projects, I was reading arcane texts about remote times and places, especially about various heresies and heretics. I found stories of people whose beliefs were often extreme, sometimes touching, sometimes ludicrous, sometimes frightening, and whose ends were often sad, violent, or both: the gnostics, the Cathars, the Free Spirit heretics, the Anabaptists who included many of my own ancestors, many others. My search led me into all sorts of other scattered texts and authors: Heraclitus, Lao Tzu, the poet Antonio Machado and social critics like Raoul Vaneigem and Greil Marcus. In between, I spent a week in the woods at a nature writing workshop and took a little trip with my wife to Quebec, including a pilgrimage to the Lady of the Harbor in Montreal, immortalized in Leonard Cohen’s “Suzanne.” By the ham-

mer moment I was spinning, mind and body, among all these various interests, intentions, demands and desires.

I started pondering all this a couple of years ago when a student turned up one day in a black t-shirt that read “Heretic in Good Company.” It listed many great and unconventional men and women—Luther, Calvin, Joan of Arc, Meister Eckhart, Margaret Porette, Peter Waldo, Menno Simons, even Jesus himself. The point is one I’ve been muddling over ever since: many of the ideas and ideals that human beings now cherish most dearly were first received as the rankest of heresies, their proponents attacked, imprisoned, tortured, even killed. At least one corollary seems equally clear: very likely we are still doing the same thing, deriding as heresy or dismissing as crazy ways of thinking that will prove themselves out over time, and win wide if not universal acceptance.

This is not just some otherworldly, arcane business, although reading the heresy debates of the past can boggle the mind and the spirit. The intensity of the rhetoric, often, seems inversely proportional to the significance of the issue. But while the terms and the sides have changed, the days of religious wars are not over. Even in these post-Christendom times, the ways we organize the human world still often depend on our religious beliefs and assumptions, especially in societies like the United States (and much of the Muslim world) where religion continues to play an enormous, if enormously complicated, role in public life and discourse.

My own Mennonite tradition has been entangled in questions of heresy from its start, nearly five centuries ago, in a set of related groups who came to be known as “Anabaptists” for their practice of baptizing (or re-baptizing) adult believers. These rebels saw themselves as pious believers who only meant to renew the church, but their rivals—not only Catholics but the newly emerging Lutherans and Calvinists and other emerging reformers as well—saw them as threats to both the religious and the social order. Part of the threat was theological; some Anabaptists adapted decidedly unconventional beliefs.¹ While these theological issues generated vast numbers of tracts, pamphlets, and books, however, the true issues had—and have—less to do with abstract theological questions than with their implications.

As Humpty Dumpty said to Alice, the real question is who is to be master. Like Calvin, other authorities of Europe saw in Anabaptism a radical threat to the order of things—for the Anabaptists claimed that their first loyalty was to Christ rather than to the State, and that when the two conflicted there could be

only one choice. Even the Anabaptist refusal to swear oaths, based on Jesus' "Let your yea be yea, and your nay be nay," threatened social cohesion, particularly the bonds that held peasants in sworn obedience to their masters for labor and as soldiers. The Christian must obey his conscience before all secular authority—the logic was dangerously simple and dangerously lucid, as was the insistence that true Christians must take Jesus' words and example seriously and refuse to take up arms or to kill. If the broad range of citizens came to believe so, who would fight the nobles' wars?

The loose but fervent movement that led George Blaurock, Felix Manz, Conrad Grebel and the handful of others to pouring water on each other's heads in an upstairs room in Zurich in 1525, and made the rebel Dutch priest Menno Simons into a fugitive, was vigorously opposed wherever it cropped up. Manz became the first Anabaptist martyr when he was drowned in the River Limmat in downtown Zurich, and thousands more followed. But the spectre that most terrified Europe was not that of these radical but nonviolent reformers. Far more unsettling were the apocalyptic Anabaptists who came to believe that, given the impending millennium, God's chosen could freely use the sword against their enemies. Their most spectacular moment began when a group of radical Anabaptists seized power in the small north German city of Münster in 1534. Political maneuvering soon developed into a full-scale insurrection; the rebels eventually instituted community property, polygamy, and absolute rule, even conducting spot executions in the city's main square.

Drawing zealots to the city from across northern Europe, the Anabaptists held out for more than a year against the besieging armies of Bishop Waldeck. Eventually the city was retaken, hundreds killed, and three ringleaders were paraded around Europe in chains for months and then executed; their bodies were hung in cages from a Münster church tower. Much of Europe came to believe that this was the true and appalling face of Anabaptism. As A.G. Dickens remarks, "In the imaginations of many otherwise gentle and moderate men, Anabaptism seemed . . . a vast international conspiracy to tear down the fragile social structure of Europe. In that setting, some degree of persecution hence became quite inevitable and it was by no means wholly religious in character."

The violence of Münster (and elsewhere) was as great a shock to the developing Anabaptist movement as to its opponents. In response, most became more committed to nonviolence than ever. Menno Simons' belief that nonresistance was essential to true Christians was both clarified and intensified after he mourned his brother's death in a nearby uprising. Still, Dickens is right about

the public impression: for centuries the term “Anabaptist” conjured up images of wild-eyed heretics wielding bloody swords rather than the stolid, obsessively publicity-shy farmers who soon came to dominate the movement. Ever since Münster most of the various descendants of Anabaptism have preached and practiced nonviolence—if not with perfect consistency, at least with persistence. But such bad press is hard to fight. How many of us base our views of our enemies on the worst things they have ever done, and our views of ourselves on the best things we hope some day to accomplish?

The particular issues over which the religious combatants of Reformation Europe killed each other seem mostly quaint if not trivial today. But structurally similar conflicts continue to threaten us all. Zealous religious fundamentalists, Islamic and Jewish and Christian, influence world affairs out of all proportion to their numbers. Yeats put it most succinctly, though we are long past the historical moment he wrote of: the worst are still full of passionate intensity. Liberal tolerance is not extinct—probably in some form it is still the majority view—but the variously intolerant wield a great deal of power and plenty of weapons. Not least among these weapons is the shared conviction, across a wide range of political and religious fundamentalisms, that their own violence is holy and their cause just, while their enemies are heretical, infidels, or under the spell of the Devil, and can and should therefore be assaulted with whatever force is required to destroy them. Shortly after 9/11, a nearby church proclaimed on its sign that “Allah is not America’s God.”

The problem of heresy is also a problem of orthodoxy, and of the place of diversity of belief and practice in civil society. While certainly some heresies have been genuine dangers to the social order, many others were repressed mainly because they threatened entrenched power elites, however oppressive. Some of these which managed to persist have brought great gains in human freedom and dignity. Above all, I mean to argue, it is intolerance and the drive for enforced purity that separate dangerous ideologies—both orthodox and heretical—from the useful ones. Good heretics may offer pointed critiques, but they do not force their views on others, whether with swords, hijacked airliners, cruise missiles, or Bradley fighting vehicles.

Sarah Lammert, as a Unitarian no friend of rigid dogmas, argues that there are essentially two religious impulses. The first, she says, attempts “to control the human spirit and force people to behave morally. . . . under the guise of a demanding and unforgiving God who requires above all that we believe certain

things and act certain ways, interpreted by the authority of a hierarchical religious institution.” The alternative impulse, Lammert suggests, “is to free the human spirit to directly encounter the mystery of being-ness. . . . appear under the guise of a loving God (or Goddess, or Creator Spirit, or Spirit of Life) who requires only that we dedicate our hearts and minds toward spiritual growth.”

Anabaptism has not always furthered this second impulse rather than the first. Though it began as a revolt against religious hierarchy, even its nonviolent practitioners have often imposed their own rigid moral structures and strictures; even the cherished “priesthood of all believers” in practice often became the rule of the few over the many. But the revised and possibly heretical practice I have in mind would be both much indebted to Anabaptism, and to something very much like the second impulse Lammert describes, whatever the cost to order and conformity.

The refusal of worldly power and organizational authority is a key feature of the Sermon on the Mount and Jesus’ career as radical teacher and unconventional revolutionary. Anabaptists have from the start considered the life and teachings of Jesus the most essential guides for living as true Christians. But parallel teachings can also be found throughout the religions of the world. The Tao Te Ching offers one classic exploration of ruling through a humility and resistance to abuse of power that in some ways may be even more radical than the New Testament. Often its imagery is water-related, as in this intriguing passage which suggests that the best way to rule is through humility:

LXVI

The reason why the River and the Sea are able to be king of the hundred valleys is that they excel in taking the lower position. . . .

Therefore, desiring to rule over the people,

One must in one’s words humble oneself before them;

And, desiring to lead the people,

One must, in one’s person, follow behind them. (128)

Such paradoxes are typically dismissed as amusing but useless by those who claim to be “realistic.” When the going gets tough, we learn early, only sissies are squeamish, while true heroes unleash all the violence they can muster against

the evil-doers, then return to their grateful women and children and a world made right once again. The myth of redemptive and controllable violence is deeply ingrained in American culture: just a short time until we eradicate our enemies, and then all will be peaceful. One more just and necessary war, and then all will be well. You know the arguments.

But I am convinced that the most dangerous people on the planet, whatever their nation or creed, are those who not only dream of making things perfect but have plans to enforce their version of perfection on everybody else. The dream of eliminating evil and ushering in a realm of eternal peace and justice is seductive, but it has never been, and I think will never be, successfully uncoupled from violence. If George W. Bush were better read he might have pondered more deeply the great cautionary tale on this theme—Melville’s *Moby-Dick*—before vowing to carry on unremitting warfare until the evil he finds personified in those he names enemies is destroyed.

I was working on the concrete because the old job—hastily poured at least twenty years ago, before we bought the house—had cracked into five or six pieces. To make things worse, the biggest piece had somehow gotten itself undermined on the outside, so that with the right pressure it became a sort of small teeter-totter. Just before we left on vacation, my wife drove over the outside edge, the piece tipped up, and the inside edge caught the tie rod under the car. It made a big clunk, poked a hole in the rubber bellows around the tie rod, and must have also stressed the seal on the steering rack—because when they called me out to check sticky red power steering fluid was puddling on the driveway. With much wailing and gnashing we examined the damage, and pondered what to do—would our beloved but temperamental Volvo make the 2000 miles we planned to drive, or would it need a new steering rack in some isolated corner of Quebec?

I took the car to our local mechanic, who was leaving for the weekend in a couple of hours and wanted nothing to do with my panicky entreaties. Finally, after a sweaty hour under the car trying to figure out just how bad it was, I poured in a bottle of power steering fluid advertised to have mysterious leak-sealing powers, duct-taped the bellows, and put a spare can of fluid in the trunk. We drove off for Quebec, had a grand time, and the level never dropped a millimeter, though the engine oil kept dripping from the other leak I haven’t been able to find—oh, never mind. When we got back, I knew it was time to deal with the driveway.

In his classic *The Pursuit of the Millennium*, a history of heretical movements of medieval Europe, Norman Cohn devotes a long section to the “Heresy of the Free Spirit”—the adherents of which tended to claim that the secret knowledge of Christ would enable them to “become God,” to dispense with labor and other obligations and free themselves from moral codes, especially those governing sex. This “Elite of Amoral Supermen,” as Cohn terms them, also (often) claimed to be free to lie, steal, and murder, at least according to the accounts of their more orthodox opponents.

Cohn then turns his attention to the Anabaptist movement, duly noting its generally communitarian and egalitarian origins. In his lengthy discussion of the Anabaptists of Münster, though, Cohn suggests that the two heresies intersected disastrously in the Münsterite leader Jan van Leyden (also known as Jan Bockelson) as what began as a communitarian ethos was overtaken by a pathology that combined elitism, violence, and absolutism—a disastrous mix held together by a fervor that I only reluctantly call “religious.” After proclaiming himself King of the New Jerusalem, Cohn notes, “In language worthy of any adept of the Free Spirit [Jan van Leyden] explained that pomp and luxury were permissible for him because he was wholly dead to the world and the flesh. At the same time he assured the common people that before long they too would be in the same situation, sitting on silver chairs and eating at silver tables, yet holding such things as cheap as mud and stones.” (273-74)

But must the Free Spirit lead us to the bloody square of Münster? Must all attempts to construct a visionary alternative to the status quo be derailed into self-destructive violence and abuse of power? Whatever the difficulties, both external and internal, the impulse to seek relief from the weight of the world and the labors of daily life in some kind of visionary break from the ordinary is very old and not inevitably, or even primarily, religious in origin. Mircea Eliade’s classic *The Myth of the Eternal Return* traces the yearning in a great number of early societies for a return to a paradisaical world without labor or death. Raoul Vaneigem, the “Situationist” philosopher best known for his involvement in the 1968 student uprisings in Paris, argues in *The Movement of the Free Spirit* that the Free Spirit movement was driven by a version of this yearning, something more sociological than theological: “The attitude that plunged Christianity into the most complete disarray came from the most ordinary of resolutions, and from the most popular and shortest of credos: ‘Enjoy life and laugh at everything else.’ In the eyes of the Church there was no more urgent task than to silence anyone who encouraged the idea that such freedom could be pursued without

fear or blame, or without any constraint whatever; hence it smothered and destroyed them or clothed them in the tawdry religious garb of heresiarchs.” (103)

In his *Lipstick Traces: A Secret History of the 20th Century*, Greil Marcus also argues that the Free Spirit movement was one manifestation of an ancient and recurring theme. A rock music critic turned historian, Marcus sees 70s punk music as another recurrence of an anti-social, absolutist, nihilist impulse which he finds popping up throughout history—in the Ranters of seventeenth-century England as well as in the Dada and surrealist movements. Marcus points out the slight but uncanny coincidence that Johnny Rotten, lead singer of the Sex Pistols, who proclaimed himself “an Antichrist,” was given at birth the name John Lydon, nearly identical to Münster leader Jan van Leyden. “So much for one true Christ, for one true Antichrist,” Marcus writes. “And to root motives in a mere coincidence of names is specious—but serendipity is where you find it. John Lydon was raised a Catholic; when in 1980 two born-again Christian rock critics . . . asked him if he suffered remorse for his blasphemies, Lydon said he did, and disavowed nothing.” (93)

Marcus claims that a wavery but unbroken line at least two millennia old connects a startling variety of extravagant religious, literary, and musical expressions: “Little Richard’s glossolalia could be traced back thousands of years to gnostic chants that moved through time till they became the sort of prayers offered by mystics like John of Leyden, after which they found their way into Pentecostal churches, where Little Richard learned the language of “Tutti Frutti”” (93). An underground link between these varieties of enthusiastic expression, oddly, might help to explain why rock music and its various successors have been so bitterly denounced by the self-appointed defenders of orthodoxy: like the fourth-century bishops who attacked the Gnostics, like Calvin and Zwingli attacking the Anabaptists, the self-righteous recognize on some level that the most serious threats to their authority come from the “heretical” variations that claim their home turf. The rock concert and the Pentecostal service have obvious ritual similarities, and both are consciously designed to generate the abandonment of ordinary consciousness. Even more restrained and liturgical observances, and (near some other extreme) the austere Sunday morning meetings of my plain Mennonite youth, may differ wildly in style but still share more than we think with more exuberant rituals.

Critics like Marcus and Vaneigem (and me) often are to be found walking a fine line, compelled by common sense to keep a certain distance from the obvi-

ous excesses and disasters of the Free Spirits, yet entranced by their iconoclastic energy. Vaneigem glimpses within the movement “the most unfathomable parts of life, those parts of living that could not be expressed in either economic or religious terms . . . Its trail is crisscrossed with gleams of light that are inexplicable to historians.” Whatever its excesses, he celebrates its desire, expressed through “the emancipation of sexual pleasure and the nourishing of love,” to “transcend a life turned against itself, and to annihilate the pitiful pairing of oppressive God and oppressed nature” (93).

I do not know how thorough Vaneigem’s acquaintance with Emerson, Thoreau and Whitman might be, but in singling out for praise the sexual freedom and “no work” elements in Free Spirit thinking—especially the latter—he sounds very much like a Transcendentalist at some moments. Vaneigem concludes *The Movement of the Free Spirit* with a meditation on time: “There is no eternity,” he writes, “save that which lies at the heart of the present moment, in the unfettered enjoyment of the self.” (233) A century and a half earlier, that great loafer Whitman had left his newspaper work to contemplate at his leisure a spear of summer grass, the possibilities of unrestricted love and sexuality and the infinitude of the single, separate person. The ambiguously free spirit Thoreau had likewise abandoned his father’s pencil factory for the broad margins of life at Walden Pond. Among much else, *Walden* objects to hard, dull labor for the sake of some future good; instead, Thoreau insists that “God himself culminates in the present moment, and will never be more divine in the lapse of all the ages.” (93)

Yet of course Thoreau left Walden after two years, and spent several more constructing the text that would record, amplify, reshape, and mythicize his experience there. Whitman wrote and rewrote *Leaves of Grass* all the way to his deathbed. Every moment through which we live may indeed be a divine culmination, but still we experience a long succession of them. And the problem of how to sustain freedom of spirit over time—on every level from the practical to the abstract—haunts every manifestation of the movement in one way or another. How to carve out a place to exist, in the face of inevitable hostility, without violence? How to maintain an alternative community without merely reproducing one or another version of oppression?

Vaneigem sees one of the key problems: the full equation of self with God—which apocalyptic Anabaptists as well as the more radical Free Spirit heretics either flirted with or openly proclaimed—leads inexorably to the sort of destructive “freedom” that destroys others and ultimately the self as well. “To proclaim

oneself God is fatally to inherit his lie or, if you prefer, his authoritarian truth. To behave as master of things and creatures . . . dismissing all guilty conscience regardless of one's actions, is to pledge allegiance to the artificial processes of denatured nature," he admits (246). Against this danger, Vaneigem can offer only a murky route toward real "fulfillment of life"—something to do with "an alchemy of individual fulfillment . . . achieved by a gradual relinquishment of the economy's hold over individuals" (249). But he insists that however questionable their actions, "followers of the movement of the Free Spirit identified, with remarkable lucidity, all that is negative: work, constraint, guilt, fear, money and possession, keeping up appearances, exchange and the striving for power." (250)

Finally, the experience of physical love is Vaneigem's great hope for a kind of sensual salvation. Somehow, through "the intensity of attention each individual gives to the refinement of his own pleasures" he claims we may "learn to abolish guilt and discover innocence" and overcome the fragmentation of our mental and physical lives. "There, finally, in outline, is the universe of the gift. It is not the sacrifice implied by the law of the exchange, but love of the self emancipated from individualistic selfishness and its exclusive appropriations; selflove that is enriched by what it offers." (256)

Perhaps lacking such faith in the transformative power of sensuality, I can at least agree with him that "the universe of the gift" and the sort of self-love "emancipated from individualistic selfishness" seem worth pursuing. My own heresy, then, might begin by dispensing with the goal of ushering in a Golden Age—especially by force. But it would include an urgent commitment to many small, incremental moves toward justice and harmony, all based on the principle of the Golden Rule and the recognition that nothing and no one can be abused without cost to the whole. If we cannot eliminate strife, we surely have options about the means we employ in seeking the good and the just. We should look through the available heresies for those that advocate without violence, those that are open rather than closed, those that offer rather than demanding. Most heresies have their martyrs. We should choose those whose martyrs shed only their own blood.

The problem of time remains. The dream of release from the harsh wheel of everyday existence remains forever potent, all the more so because it has proven so difficult. As Marcus finally concludes, this is the rock on which the pure Free Spirit impulse founders: it cannot be sustained, because it has no program beyond a harsh cry of rebellion and refusal of obligation. "This is the secret the

Sex Pistols didn't tell, which they only acted out," he notes:

the moment in which the world seems to change is an absolute, the absolute of passing time, which is made of limits. For those who want everything, there is finally no action, only an endless, finally solipsistic reckoning. . . . There is a hint of transformation here, of resentment, leading—who knows where? There is the certainty of failure: all those who glimpse possibility in a spectral moment become rich, and though they remain so, they are ever after more impoverished. (447)

I know the tug of the ecstatic moment as well. Yet I must finally stand up for muddling through, for giving up the search for an ultimate ecstasy or a perfected society in this world, for the difficult but necessary balancing of high expectations with acceptance of human imperfection. The drive for absolute perfection, of the moment or of the world, will take us nowhere that we want to be.

To find support for such a murky program among the early Anabaptists, I might turn to the most mystical, Hans Denck, who has long been dismissed as too esoteric by scholars intent on defining a pure "Anabaptist Vision" largely oriented around ethics and practice. But Denck has begun to reemerge as a figure with much to teach. In 1526 he compiled a long list of conflicting passages in scripture, not to destroy the faith by exposing contradictions but in pursuit of a larger if elusive truth: "Two opposing texts must both be true. But one is locked up within the other as the lesser within the greater, as time within eternity, place within infinity. . . . O, how blessed we would be if, in recognizing how little we have, we would decry our poverty and hunger after the bread of life which is the Christ of God our Father . . . for he is inclined to give only to the hungry" (135).

In an earlier essay entitled "Heresy and the Individual Talent" I constructed a playful but partly serious manifesto for what I called "Anabaptist Surrealism," noting that those two movements, while wildly disparate in many ways, both traced their roots to Zurich in times of great stress and strife, and both shared the impulse to practice—or at least to envision—radical new ways of organizing a human society whose members would not systematically exploit and kill each other. I proposed that the earnest, sometimes dour Anabaptist commitment to plain speech, action, and attention to the specific directives of Jesus would be well leavened by the surrealist love of chance, whim, dream, and humor, and

the surrealist recognition that reason and will—even or especially in the service of religious faith—are unreliable as any other masters, the more so the more absolutely they are served. Reciprocally, I think that the Dada/surrealist resistance to war and bourgeois conventionality, often so energetic and so desperately incapable of envisioning practical alternatives, might be well informed by Anabaptist models of community, nonviolence, and service.

Now I find myself trying to envision something that would go well beyond surrealist Anabaptism, something that would hold together these and many other seeming tensions and contradictions—not by main force but by a determination to make the holding together of apparent opposites a main value. Surely the problems of mind and body, spirit and flesh, cannot be solved once for all, and can hardly even be meaningfully addressed within the prison of those mistaken categories. A human consciousness reflecting on nature is only in some Cartesian delusion an isolated spark utterly separated from the object of its reflection.

I found an unexpected source of support for these groping thoughts in James Agee's often-praised but under-read classic, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*. As he comes to know more and more about the desperately pinched lives of the sharecroppers he and his collaborator Walker Evans lived among, and struggles to find language that might capture something of their realities, Agee notes his desire to escape the usual dualistic expectations in his writing about these people and their lives. "For I must say to you," he writes, "this is not a work of art or of entertainment, nor will I assume the obligations of the artist or entertainer, but is a human effort which must require human co-operation" (102). Among all the complicated accomplishments of his text, I would note especially Agee's insistence (shared by Evans) on evoking the particularity of their subjects, the individual human beings they lived and talked and ate with, observed and photographed. Agee acknowledges that such particularity is not to be captured in any final way inside the pages of a book, but he insists that at least it be recognized:

All that each person is, and experiences, and shall never experience, in body and in mind, all these things are differing expressions of himself and of one root, and are identical: and not one of these things nor one of these persons is ever quite to be duplicated, nor replaced, nor has it ever quite had precedent: but each is a new and incommunicably tender life, wounded in every breath, and almost as hardly killed as easily

wounded: sustaining, for a while, without defense, the enormous assaults of the universe. (53-54)

Never “quite to be duplicated . . . each is a new and incommunicably tender life.” This is a core insistence of my heresy as well. We are all one, and none of us is the same as any other, and so any one-size-fits-all dogma is bound to fail.

Even the welter of revolutionary movements that was early Christianity, as Elaine Pagels has demonstrated most deftly, was soon regulated and made to conform to the bureaucratic need for a set of doctrines and practices that could be easily promoted and enforced. I had always heard that my ancestors wanted to recover the purity of “the early church,” but Pagels’ *Beyond Belief* demonstrates that even the earliest church was no single, simple, pure thing, but a complex mix of all sorts of ideas and impulses, texts and stories. The Gospel of Thomas, rediscovered in 1945 with a trove of Gnostic texts near Nag Hammadi in Egypt, contains many familiar sayings of Jesus, but the context is quite different from the canonical New Testament gospels. The author of Thomas makes no effort to tell Jesus’ life story, instead offering a long, only casually organized set of “the secret sayings which the living Jesus spoke and which Didymos Judas Thomas wrote down.” Many are enigmatic even by biblical standards, pointing toward a mystical illumination more often associated with Eastern religions: “Jesus said, ‘Let him who seeks continue seeking until he finds. When he finds, he will become troubled. When he becomes troubled, he will be astonished, and he will rule over the All.’”

While scholars still argue over exactly what sort of gospel it is, most agree that Thomas is at mostly mildly “gnostic” in the sense that word is used by its enemies. It contains little of the exotic mythologizing and anti-materialism of more extreme Gnostic texts, instead emphasizing a spiritual journey toward full knowledge of the divinity within, leading toward illumination rather than deification. In her earlier book *The Origin of Satan*, Pagels discusses another apocryphal text and its refusal of the dualism of good and evil and the externalizing of evil. As she points out, Satan never appears in the Gospel of Philip. Instead, the Father and the holy spirit, direct events.

The Gospel of Philip offers an original critique of the way all other Christians, orthodox and radical alike, approach morality. . . . both orthodox and radical Christians assume that morality requires prescribing one set of acts, and proscribing others. But the author of Philip

wants to throw away all the lists of ‘good things’ and ‘bad things’ For, this author suggests, what we identify as opposites—“light and dark, life and death, good and evil”—are in reality pairs of interdependent terms in which each implies the other. (171)

Is it possible to refuse the harsh dualism of Good and Evil without concluding that all things are permitted to the elite? Can we live free of legalisms without slipping into the heresy of the Free Spirit? Pagels believes that the gnostic texts offer “the transforming power of love” as a crucial stabilizing principle: “For [Philip] the question is not whether a certain act is ‘good’ or ‘evil’ but how to reconcile the freedom gnosis conveys with the Christian’s responsibility to love others The central theme of the Gospel of Philip is the transforming power of love: that what one becomes depends upon what one loves” (172).

This may seem simple, then: Love, and do what you will.² Margaret Porete suggests in her *The Mirror of Simple Souls*—for which she was killed as a heretic in 1310—that the soul transformed by God will be freed from desire: “Ah! Gods, said Divine Love, who reposed in the annihilated soul, what a long road and what a great distance it is from such lost life to free life, to free life which wants nothing to do with lordship! And this wanting nothing sows the divine seed, taken from the divine will. Such a seed can never fail, but few people are able to receive it” (qtd. in Vaneigem, 141).

The problem, perhaps, remains one of sorting—not the sheep from the goats, not the “good” from the “bad” in some absolutist sense, but the loving and the lovely from all the rest. Even the soul that “wants nothing” must live in the world, must make choices and judgments. Put differently, the problem may be to operate somehow without the kind of easy categories for judgment on which we so easily come to rely. If we refuse to separate the Elect and the Damned, the Saved and the Abomination, the Good, Bad, and Ugly, how do we create the mental sets that we need to operate in the world?

We might consider something like the Halfway Covenant, the long-ago compromise made in the Puritan churches of New England when they faced a crisis. Their theology held that only true believers could be full members of the church, and that only those who had gone through a clear, identifiable conversion experience were truly believers. But as time went on, and more and more adults in the community had not experienced conversion and were only partial members of the church, the problem of what to do with the children of those adults became acute. Could and should such children be baptized? Yes, said

those who devised the Halfway Covenant, let us draw the circle wider lest it constrict to nothing. No, argued the great preacher Jonathan Edwards, we must draw a firm line between those who belong and those who do not.

This fundamental question is still being contested, *mutatis mutandis*, in many different contexts. By now you know where I stand: by my lights, surely Edwards was wrong and his more open-minded opponents right (though my Anabaptist joker cannot resist noting that the whole problem becomes moot if we simply abandon the dubious practice of infant baptism). But if we are to baptize some while they still gaze at the world with the wide clean eyes of babes, why not admit them all? As the man said, God will sort them out.

Poorly organized, outnumbered, and divided amongst themselves, the Gnostic groups withered along with many other early sects, especially after Constantine made Christianity the official religion of the Roman Empire early in the fourth century. As the church became The Church, many and various dissenters were labeled heretics and bitterly, sometimes violently opposed. Their texts were excluded from the canon, forbidden, destroyed; for centuries they were known almost entirely through the reports of their enemies. Still, there were always a few who resisted the categories of orthodox belief and practice, and refused to recant their most dangerous intuitions.

John Calvin's arch-enemy was Michael Servetus, who wrote a widely read book questioning the doctrine of the Trinity (and, almost incidentally, accurately describing the circulation of the blood 75 years before Harvey published his similar account). During Servetus's trial for heresy, which was to end in his being burned at the stake, Calvin asked this question: "How, unhappy man, if any one strike the pavement with his foot and say that he tramples on thy God, wouldst thou not be horrified at having the Majesty of heaven subjected to such indignity?"

Servetus replied: "I have no doubt that this bench, and this buffet, and all you can show me, are of the substance of God."

What if, indeed, all is of the substance of God? Not only you and I, but all the Republicans and Democrats, punks and preachers and executives, terrorists and soldiers and the mothers and fathers and children of soldiers and terrorists, Muslims and Christians and Jains and Hindus and atheists and agnostics, all the fishes and birds, the wheat and the corn and the weeds and the tall pines and the very soil from which they grow? If this is so, if we come to believe that this is so, then we might well choose to plant our feet with care, to treat the world

and all its things with care. Such a heresy I believe we might be able to use to live, and to live well.

For a long time I have treasured Leonard Cohen's song "Anthem" especially for its chorus: "There's a crack in everything—that's how the light gets in." Not until recently did I learn that long before, in his essay "Compensation," that old dreamer Emerson wrote something similar: "There is a crack in every thing God has made." The essay is a meditation on this world and the next, written in resistance to the idea that the good may suffer here but will be rewarded in heaven. To the contrary, Emerson claims, we need not make "the immense concession that the bad are successful; that justice is not done now." (171) "Every act rewards itself," he insists; "the world will be whole" no matter how partially and selfishly we seek to act: "You cannot do wrong without suffering wrong The exclusionist in religion does not see that he shuts the door of heaven on himself, in striving to shut out others. Treat men as pawns and ninepins and you shall suffer as well as they. If you leave out their heart, you shall lose your own." (180) The essay ends with a complaint about our resistance to change and growth:

We cannot part with our friends. We cannot let our angels go. We do not see that they only go out that archangels may come in. We are idolaters of the old. We do not believe in the riches of the soul, in its proper eternity and omnipresence. . . . We linger in the ruins of the old tent where once we had bread and shelter and organs, nor believe that the spirit can feed, cover, and nerve us again. We cannot again find aught so dear, so sweet, so graceful. But we sit and weep in vain. The voice of the Almighty saith, 'Up and onward for evermore!' We cannot stay amid the ruins. Neither will we rely on the new; and so we walk ever with reverted eyes, like those monsters who look backwards. (188)

What might it mean, to move out from the ruins, to find our way forward and discover the riches of the soul? To say with Servetus that all things are "of the substance" of God is not to say that we, or the benches and buffets of the world, "are" God; certainly it is not to say that we can all claim vast cosmic powers. Perhaps it merely but crucially means that our work is to cherish all the things of God as best we can.

I spent as much time chipping paint off the hammer head as I did driving the stakes to hold the frame for the concrete. I had to go to a wedding that afternoon so I was in a hurry, but I mixed up five bags of ready-mix one at a time in the rusty bed of the old wheelbarrow I'd borrowed from my friend Gregg. I shoveled the sloppy mix into the hole and smoothed it down, first with a scrap two by four and then with a trowel I'd bought a year before to apply linoleum cement but never used. I made a fairly neat job of it, and even used an old tool I found hanging in the garage to scribe an expansion joint across it at what I guessed was the right spot. Before I went inside to change I covered the spot with plastic to keep out the rain, and put some rocks and a bucket around the edge to hold down the plastic and discourage the family from driving over it too soon. When it had dried it didn't look bad at all, certainly better than before, though I realized too late that water tended to puddle along one side. Within two weeks there was a crack across one corner.

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Notes

1. One especially controversial Anabaptist idea was *psychopannychia* or “soul sleep”—the idea that after death the soul would sleep until the body was resurrected at the Last Judgment. “These babblers have so actively exerted themselves,” John Calvin complained, “that they have already drawn thousands into their insanity.”

2. If I draw mainly on Christian texts and heresies, it is because these are the traditions I know best, not because I claim any exclusive truth to be found in them. In fact, if I would claim anything, it would be that there is as much to learn from the errors and excesses of my tradition as from its insights and triumphs. I would say the same of all the other traditions.