

Introduction

Meeting Madonna and C. S. Lewis Again, for the First Time

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The following is a personal essay with some names of people and places changed.

CONSERVATIVE CATHOLIC, LIBERAL CATHOLIC

I no longer believe the following two assertions:

1. The writings of C. S. Lewis represent pure, orthodox Christian thinking that is safe reading for conservative Christians who wish to avoid exposing themselves to the kind of false theology written by revolutionary “Christians” since the Age of Enlightenment steered Western civilization up a cultural dead end.
2. Madonna Ciccone, like her equally despicable heir apparent Lady Gaga, is an exhibitionist pseudo-feminist who courts music sales and media controversy with salacious music videos deliberately designed to provoke anger from devout Christians. Her over-the-top, insincere music video “Like a Prayer” should not be taken seriously as any form of personal spiritual statement.

The story of how I formed these opinions—and then shook free of them—is worth telling. Like Fr. Gleeson, pastor emeritus of St. Barnabas Roman Catholic Church in Staten Island, I will begin by reassuring you that this story will be brief. Like Fr. Gleeson, I will be lying. However, I hope you will not be timing me as I timed him, and that you will be more tolerant of my digressions than I was of his golf stories and their dubious relevance to a given week’s readings from the First Letter of Paul to the Thessalonians. I also hope that you will not try to understand me too quickly, as my beliefs and character shift throughout this story as radically as my opinions of Lewis and Madonna.

A member of the latter part of Generation X, I was raised in New York's most conservative, suburban borough and rarely availed myself of any of the cultural opportunities presented by my proximity to Manhattan. Thanks in large part to feelings of teenage angst and alienation, I became very religious in seventh grade and looked to my parish priests for the support I could not find from my peers, who were not unlike individuals from contemporary reality TV shows set in New Jersey. My favorite homilist was Fr. Eric Sokolowski because his sermons were as well constructed as Garrison Keillor's *Tales from Lake Wobegon*, as wholesomely funny as a Bill Cosby stand-up routine, and eminently tolerant and compassionate without a trace of fire-and-brimstone nonsense or the use of guilt or coercion against the parishioners. My mother informed me that it was unsurprising that his homilies were the best because he was a Jesuit and, apparently, Jesuits were pretty smart. By contrast, Fr. Theo (37-minute-homily-on-"Footprints-in-the-Sand") Gleeson was a terrible public speaker but was surprisingly comforting during confession. The priest I spent the most time with, however, was Fr. Luke Jansen. Fr. Jansen was not only my parish priest but also a personal and family friend. He had many dinners at our house, introduced me to the marvelous film *A Man for All Seasons*, and gave me my first paying job as a part-time secretary at the rectory. We took one notable trip together. When I was in high school, Fr. Jansen took me to visit the Legionaries of Christ seminary in Thornwood, New York. I presume he had hopes I would join the order and use my rhetorical abilities to help it fulfill its mission to improve the quality of sermons delivered during Sunday mass around the world. There was something appealing about the idea of using my writing ability to make the world a better place, but there was nothing remotely appealing to me about celibacy, so there was never a chance I would embrace that plan.

Fr. Jansen was a good friend but, upon reflection, he was perennially trying to shape my tastes and opinions to keep them in line with Church teaching. He encouraged me to listen to Rush Limbaugh, watch Mother Angelica on EWTN, stay away from New Age writings and post-Enlightenment literature, stop listening to unchristian pop music by Bon Jovi and Madonna, and—instead of going to a secular college—be sure that I attend "the only real Catholic College in America," the archconservative Christendom College. I was young and impressionable, and a lot of his arguments, as he phrased them, seemed irrefutable to me; they were often strong, declarative statements that did not invite replies but seemed to end conversations with a firm period. Consequently, there was an extended time during which I began thinking a lot like he did. We both, for example, loved Limbaugh for including this passage in his second book, *See, I Told You So* (1993):

Don't you love the way some people appeal to the Catholic Church (and other churches, for that matter): You've got to bend with the times. You've got to change Church doctrine, so that what we're doing isn't defined as sin anymore. . . . And the Church rightly responds: "We are the standard. We are not going to water down our teachings, our beliefs, or our doctrine so that you can feel better about your sin." (108)

Nevertheless, even at my most reactionary, part of me rebelled against the certainty Fr. Jansen and others would often display at St. Barnabas R. C. Church. They all *knew* they were right about *all* matters spiritual and political. Real Catholics were Republicans. Fake Catholics were Democrats who (un)intentionally work for Satan. End of story. I both envied and dreaded that level of certainty. I never pretended to know *everything* about *anything*. Not even *Doctor Who*—and I knew *a lot* about *Doctor Who*! I was also disturbed when Fr. Jansen told me, “The more religious you become, the more evil the world looks and the harder it is to like people.” I thought: *That doesn't sound right. Maybe I shouldn't become more religious then. And didn't Jesus want us to love other people more as we get more religious, not dislike them more?*

The worldview promoted by some key members of the clergy and the laity at the parish was indeed a dark and insistent one. Around the time I hit puberty, Catholic laity teachers overseeing my religious instruction at Saint Barnabas's after-school “released time” classes showed me violent images of late-term abortions to discourage premarital sex and encourage me to vote for the pro-life candidate in each election. An enormous, red-lettered banner, “ABORTION IS THE ULTIMATE VIOLATION OF HUMAN RIGHTS,” has graced St. Barnabas's otherwise undecorated brick exterior since roughly 1989. I spent decades of my life averting my gaze from this deeply disturbing sight whenever I walked or drove past the church.

On other matters, where less was at stake than democracy vs. theocracy and reproductive freedom for women vs. personhood for fetuses, I found it easier to push back against the steady flow of Church propaganda. The battle over whether or not I should be a Madonna fan was an interesting one because it seemed much ado about nothing. I told Fr. Jansen that Madonna was harmless because she was often “just kidding” when she would promote unchristian ideas like “living in a material world.” Besides, she was an Italian American not in the Mafia, which made her something of a role model for me. I didn't have to grow up to be a gangster or own a pizzeria. Italians could get other jobs, too. Like singing. Despite my objections, Fr. Jansen did get me to internalize the idea that religious people shouldn't watch her music videos because they were too sexy. Though I've never owned cable TV, my suspicions that he was right that I *couldn't* “handle” her music videos stemmed from the time in sixth grade when I was at a friend's house watching MTV and caught a glimpse of Madonna's “Like a Prayer.” I had found myself equally disturbed and intrigued by the highly erotic images of a voluptuous, ethnic-looking Italian American in a wine-colored teddy bearing the stigmata and dancing in front of five burning KKK crosses. I feared that if I watched much longer, I shouldn't be answerable for the consequences, so I asked my friend to change the channel.

The irony is that I had heard the pop song on the radio often, and it had become a personal favorite. Interestingly, I had always thought the lyrics were clearly religious. Madonna seemed to be singing an ardent love song to her boyfriend and God at the same time. Or was God her boyfriend? I decided the song was weird in that it was simultaneously sacred and profane. That incongruity fascinated and irritated me, and I obsessed over the song—finding the enigma it represented as unsolvable

as that highly irksome Rubik's Cube thing. But I hated that as much as I adored the song, I lived in fear of seeing the music video. The fear instilled in me by the Church seemed . . . well . . . *stupid*. I hated feeling stupid. Whenever my religious myopia reared its head in conversation, my friends in the gifted program in Susan E. Wagner High School would regularly call me out as being "too smart and nice to really believe all that narrow-minded crap." Was it all crap, or could someone be religious and not be *stupid*?

As I was wrestling with these questions during my senior year in high school, I began to suspect that Fr. Jansen was not necessarily a good influence on me—or the rest of the congregation. After a series of false starts, the alarm claxon finally rang insistently in my head when I heard his homily decrying the Church's decision to allow girls to be "altar boys." I was deeply offended by his wistful invocation of his childhood clubhouse with its harmless, charming "no girls allowed" sign. Yes, the "He-Man Woman Haters Club" in the *Little Rascals* is harmless and charming precisely because Spanky is clearly the villain of "Hearts Are Thumps"—a fact lost on Fr. Jansen in this instance. Also, that short was from 1937. Some things in society have evolved since the 1930s. When I finally saw him serve mass a year later with an adorable altar girl at his side, I remembered his words and fumed for the entire mass, not because there was an altar girl, but because I knew that he didn't want her to be there, and that she was only there because his side had lost the debate.

Disturbing as it was, the altar girl debate was not enough to shake me free of my devotion to conservative Catholicism. The issue of the Church's teachings concerning the sacredness of semen—which was at the root of the Church's condemnation of masturbation, birth control, homosexual sex, and certain forms of heterosexual sex—would be at the root of my break with old school Catholicism. I was always uneasy about the Church's teachings concerning semen, but I dealt with my uneasiness by subsuming it. It helped that the issue of gay rights rarely came up during homilies at St. Barnabas in the early 1990s, so I was not often confronted by Catholic homophobia. This lack of discussion of homosexuality made me complacent and enabled me to pretend that the Church had no problem with gay people. Then there came the St. Patrick's Day Parade controversy. Irish gays petitioned to be allowed to march in the parade, but the Catholics involved in organizing banned their participation. In protest, the gays held their own parade, and Mayor David Dinkins joined the gays in solidarity instead of participating in the main parade. Conservative Catholic Staten Islander voters later had their revenge on Dinkins for choosing the side of the gays by being instrumental in sending Rudolph Giuliani to Gracie Mansion, thereby ensuring that New York City's first African American mayor served only one term. (Significantly, Giuliani would also ultimately choose to march with the gays instead of the main parade.) I didn't follow the news closely and didn't know all the arguments, but it had seemed to me that the parade was more about the ethnic quality of "Irishness" than it was about Catholicism and homosexuality, which suggested to me that *all Irish people should be allowed to march*—and maybe even those who were Irish at heart, too. Fr. Jansen did not agree. He told me that the Catholic Church could not be called anti-gay for not allowing gays to march in

New York City's Saint Patrick's Day Parade because there was one gay group that the Church would approve of marching: Courage. Courage would pass muster because it promoted gay celibacy and its mission statement did not fly in the face of Church teaching.

"Hmmm," I said.

"What?"

"If I were gay, I wouldn't think much of that argument."

"Why's that?"

"Because the members of Courage sound like gay people in denial."

"They aren't in denial. They just aren't sexually active."

"That just doesn't sound right to me."

"It should sound right. It is a perfectly reasonable position."

"Does Jesus even really care about sex? He seems more like he cares about feeding the hungry and healing the sick and not using violence against fellow men. He couldn't have had sex hang-ups. Half his disciples were women, and half of them were prostitutes. And he opposed the stoning of the adulteress. And he says *not one word about homosexuality* anywhere in the Bible."

"But he told the adulteress to 'go and sin no more.' He did not give her license to continue to commit adultery. Jesus has rules about sexuality. He's against divorce and against lustful thoughts. He's quite clear on these points. I know what you're thinking. You can't pin all of the rules concerning sexuality on St. Paul the male-chauvinist pig and make Jesus a proponent of free love in the process."

"But I like pinning things on Paul," I muttered, clearly sulking now.

"Paul is *very* misunderstood."

"Well . . . I don't know. You make some good points."

"Exactly."

"You know, we sure spend a lot of time talking about what we're *against*. *Against* abortion. *Against* gays in the frickin' parade. Can we talk about what we're *for*? Be more positive? I don't want to be that guy who says 'no' to everything and is against everything."

Later on, I told my classmate Amelia about this conversation and said things to her that I failed to say to Fr. Jansen. "You know, nobody can control who they fall in love with. I sure can't. I have a frustrating tendency to develop crushes on married women, lesbians, and fictional characters. Jane Eyre's pretty sexy, you know, when she really lays into people for being jerks. So is Elizabeth Bennett. And I think Ellen DeGeneres is just adorable, but there's rumors about her, you know. I can't really date any of them, anyway. They're impossible crushes. So I spend a lot of time alone. Imagine being expected to be celibate your whole life because you fall for a mate your parents, the Catholic Church, or society wouldn't approve of. If I had to join a chapter of Courage for straight people, I'd go stark raving mad. I'd hang myself in the closet. And even the name! *Courage*. The courage to do what? Hate yourself? And this from a Church filled to bursting with gay priests and lesbian nuns, many who are not celibate, and some who are sex offenders? I don't get it." I was suddenly worried that what I was saying offended Amelia, as I had a bit of a crush on her,

too, actually. “So . . . um . . . I hope you don’t mind my saying this. I know you go to Saint Barnabas.”

“I don’t mind,” she said.

Fifteen years later, I heard from a mutual friend that Amelia was not only a deeply religious Catholic but a closeted lesbian.

My guardian angel during this rather conflicted period in my life was my mother, who feared that Fr. Jansen was having too much influence on me. For example, she revealed only after the fact that she had had deep reservations about our trip to the seminary, but she hadn’t wanted to prohibit my going. Unlike Fr. Jansen, who envisioned me enrolled in Christendom College, my mother lobbied heavily for the State University of New York at Geneseo because it had a strong English Department and an Ivy League quality education while charging affordable, state-college tuition. Part of me wanted to go to a Catholic college because I was religious and wanted to meet other religious Catholics, but Mom would hear none of paying higher tuition for an inferior education tinted with religious sectarian propaganda. Fortunately, my mother intuited that the main reason I wanted to go to a Catholic college was not because I needed to be around people who all thought just like me, but because it was important to me that I meet more educated descendants of immigrants with whom I had cultural ties and intellectual interests in common. In contrast, I did not want to go to a college where most of the students casually threw around the word “papist” as if it were not offensive, and—moderate Republican though I was—I feared that this was exactly what would happen if I chose to attend college in what is now known as a “red state.” But state colleges in New York were filled with descendants of immigrants, so I didn’t need to go to a Catholic college to meet students of Irish or Italian Catholic extraction if that, indeed, was really who I wanted to meet. So, Mom advocated finding fellow Catholics at Geneseo through the college’s Newman Community and otherwise learning more about the real world by continuing to interact with fellow students from a plurality of cultures and religious and political backgrounds as I had always done through virtue of attending K–12 public schools. Since Mom was against my attending a religiously affiliated institution of higher learning, I decided that I, too, was interested in Geneseo because 60 percent of the student body was female and because there appeared to be a course in the catalogue called *Age of Dante* taught by a Bill Cook and Ronald Herzman that would help me learn more about my Italian and Roman Catholic heritages. (At the time, I had thought that these were great criteria for settling on Geneseo. In retrospect, I was absolutely correct.)

I suggested that Christendom might be a good backup choice. Fr. Jansen did say that it was the only bona fide Catholic college because it adhered strictly to *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*, rejected the liberal philosophy of Vatican II, and took all of its educational cues from the Magisterium—the teaching authority of the Catholic Church. As the school website reveals:

We’re not like other colleges.

And that’s a good thing.

Founded in 1977 in response to the devastating blow inflicted on Catholic higher education by the cultural revolution which swept across America in the 1960s, Chris-

tendom's goal is to provide a truly Catholic education in fidelity to the Magisterium of the Catholic Church and thereby to prepare students for their role of restoring all things in Christ.

I argued that if I went to Christendom, I wouldn't be attending a Diet Catholic College for "Buffet"/"Cafeteria Catholics" but a Roman Catholic college for "authentic" Catholics. Mom told me that under no circumstances would I be going there, especially since there were only roughly 40 undergraduates enrolled at the time (these days, around 389). "What kind of college had such a small student body?" she asked. "I bet those people are pretty weird."

Looking back on all this now, I must say that I am really glad I didn't go there. (Thanks, Mom!)

Dejected that I would be attending a public school as "liberal" as Geneseo, Fr. Jansen offered me, as a parting gift, a trilogy of science fiction books by C. S. Lewis that he described as being a jeremiad against secularist, morally relativist college education. I remember him pointing to the artwork on the cover of the third book, *That Hideous Strength* (1945), which featured a college academic building across the street from a laboratory. He said, "You see, the evil scientific ideas cooked up by the professors in the college lectures influence the students, who graduate and cross the street to work at the labs to make reality the dangerous thoughts that had been advanced by professors playing 'devil's advocate.' So, you see, the college professors and the scientists collude, indirectly, to aid the devil in his campaign against God."

This seemed like an instantly graspable allegory and pure propaganda, so I decided I need not waste time reading *That Hideous Strength* and could, instead, use the time I had saved to chase girls on campus at Geneseo. After all, I had already learned that science was evil from growing up watching *Bride of Frankenstein* (1935) and the post-Hiroshima-and-Nagasaki parables *Them!* and *Godzilla* (both 1954). Indeed, the message was now overfamiliar, and I was beginning to wonder if scientists had been getting a raw deal all these years. Certainly, I knew that college professors, for example, weren't all evil because my mom, a college English professor, was a rather nice person, all told. So the books sounded to me like "message" books that promoted a message I didn't agree with. However, thanks to seeing *Shadowlands* with Anthony Hopkins, I retained an interest in exploring C. S. Lewis's life and writing despite having no interest at all in reading the *Narnia* books or the science fiction trilogy. But I would not truly revisit Lewis or Madonna until after my college education. And after my conversion.

LIBERATING THEOLOGY

Fr. Jansen was both right and wrong about the effect college had on me. By the end of my freshman year, I had met a number of wonderful liberal and atheist students and professors and could no longer stomach anyone casting aspersions on their patriotism, morality, or worldview, nor could I listen any more to someone like



Liam Neeson plays the voice of Aslan in *The Chronicles of Narnia* film series, pictured here in *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* (2005). The majestic lion, C.S. Lewis' Christ avatar, is a favorite hero of evangelical Christians in America, but Lewis himself did not always promote as orthodox a theology as a modern American might expect.

Photo courtesy of Walt Disney Pictures

Limbaugh, who made his living demonizing a group of—as it turns out—*really, really, really nice people*. Yet Geneseo did not inspire me to switch political parties. I managed to remain a Republican even after earning my master's degree, proving conclusively that college does not brainwash everyone into becoming a Democrat. No, higher education did not make me a Democrat. The Republican Party of the past fifteen years accomplished that all on its own by going batshit crazy (DiPaolo 2013; Friedman 2011; Mann and Ornstein 2012; Reich 2012; Sullivan 2009). If you don't understand what they've done to warrant my defection, then I doubt I'll be able to explain it to you, but I will give a few minor examples: the eight-year-long nightmare campaign to destroy Bill Clinton, the 2000 recount, the Iraq War, and the Great Recession. That is all for now on that score.

But, back when I was in Geneseo, I was a moderate Republican who was sometimes accused of being a RINO ("Republican in Name Only") by my newfound, really nice liberal friends. Among those really nice liberals were a handful of left-leaning college professors who attended the same Newman Community masses I

did—including the Cook and Herzman who taught that wonderful, upper-level Age of Dante class I enrolled in as a freshman. The liberation-theology-espousing priest who headed the group gave homilies in which he complained of ballooning military budgets, toxic waste dumping, and atrocities committed by the Shining Path, and never once whined about altar girls.

Less enamored with this Newman priest than I was, my friend Walter stopped going with me to Newman after hearing only one such homily. “That priest wants to see the military budget *cut*?! Pinko!”

“Wouldn’t *Jesus* want to see the military budget cut?” I asked.

“Jesus would have lost us the Cold War,” Walter said ominously.

“Well, I’m going back next week. You find a pro-war priest somewhere else, if it means so much to you, but I’d prefer it if you went to church with me.”

“No way. Hippie priest? No way!”

I shared a modicum of Walter’s discomfort with the notion of Catholic liberalism, but it didn’t last. All told, this was a very different congregation than St. Barnabas’s, and I preferred it in every respect. I was initially stodgy about its flower child trap-pings and needed to be reassured that the gender-neutral pronouns for God that had been written into the missalette were a good thing. However, I got out of my own way and warmed to the community quickly. By the end of my freshman year, I decided it was a more authentic Christian community than St. Barnabas. Frankly, I thought going to the same church as my (*ahem*—*secular humanist*!?) college professors was pretty neat and it made the school feel like a home away from home. And not only did I go to church with these professors, but they invited my classmates and me to their homes for meals on several occasions, and they organized study abroad opportunities to broaden our horizons. I took two annual trips to the Shakespeare Festival in Stratford, Ontario, to see a series of marvelous plays with Herzman and Wes Kennison and several other English majors. I studied abroad in Siena, Italy, enrolled in a course taught by Cook, which enabled me to revisit my Italian roots and see in person all the sites and works of art I’d studied in my medieval courses. Most importantly, on a personal level, I made a pilgrimage to the memorials dedicated to my cultural heroes, Dante, Galileo, Rossini, Machiavelli, and Michelangelo in the Basilica di Santa Croce in Florence.

And this was supposed to be moral corruption?

Though Fr. Jansen and Limbaugh would disapprove of the 1990s iteration of the college I attended and the religious student organization I joined, the Newman Community of Geneseo did not represent a compromised, watered-down version of Catholicism. There is nothing easy about being a liberal Catholic in the vein of Dorothy Day or Thomas Merton. If you think fighting for the preservation and progression of civil rights in America is easy, then you’ve never tried it. It is a ceaseless, debilitating battle against implacable foes with bottomless financial resources and no sense of social conscience. There is nothing easy about being an environmentalist. And, while pacifists are considered cowards, there is nothing remotely easy about opposing war, being branded a traitor by self-righteous zealots on cable TV, and trying

to love your enemy instead of demonizing or trying to jail or kill him. As cultural critic and theologian Ben Saunders has written:

Do unto others as you would have them do unto you. Don't be so selfish. Don't be so judgmental. Don't expect to get your way all the time. Try loving yourself as you are. Try love, period. Be kind . . . all day? Be kind *all day*![!]

The irony is that the [conservative] religion I rejected, because I thought it looked difficult and restrictive, is actually a thousand times easier than this kind of spirituality. Saving yourself for marriage, not eating shellfish, covering or shaving or not shaving your head, hating infidels and burning heretics—by comparison, that stuff is *easy*. But loving your enemy? Loving your neighbor? Heck, loving yourself? Now *that's* difficult—maybe as difficult as it gets. (2011, 14)

Thanks to my time at Geneseo, I no longer feel beholden to having to obey the Magisterium in all things. My education also gave me the courage to follow my heart about the Church's deeply troubling official teachings on social issues. This was because I was assigned reams of reading: some of the most important political, historical, literary, philosophical, and theological tracts ever written, by almost all of the famous people you can think of whose names appear on Oxford World Classics book covers. After immersing myself in such great thinkers, I suddenly felt empowered to think for myself and was able to choose what parts of each classic I embraced, what I rejected, what my favorite philosophies were, my favorite art and literary movements, and what my core personal values were. Moved to become an English major and a medieval studies minor, I spent my time at Geneseo taking a series of reading-intensive interdisciplinary courses that were often team-taught by a trio of Distinguished Teaching Professor friends from three departments: Cook was a historian, Herzman a literature professor, and Gary Towsley a mathematics professor. In courses such as Medieval Poetry and Cosmology, The Bible as History, The Bible as Literature, Galileo, Medieval Italian City-States, the High Middle Ages, and Age of Dante, I was assigned—and actually read and understood—a number of notable Catholic writers, including Dante, Hildegard, Bernardus Silvestrus, Thomas of Celano, Thomas Aquinas, and St. Augustine, and boned up on the theology related to Pre-Copernican Astronomy.

In addition to spending my time majoring in Cook–Herzman–Towsley, I took excellent creative writing courses with Rachel Hall (who forced me to *not* write vampire fiction, but autobiographical essays to stretch my writing ability), and a superb music course with Anne-Marie Reynolds (who took her students to the opera to see *La Traviata* in Kodak Hall at Eastman Theatre of Rochester, New York, and who tutored me on music theory every week during office hours to help me pass the course). I also took a series of literature and cultural studies classes that made me better read and that moderated my entrenched political beliefs. I was assigned the British Romantics, and the Transcendentalists, as well as feminist cultural critics, multicultural literature, Darwinism, deconstructionist criticism, and the writings of prominent enemies of religion, including Salman Rushdie, Karl Marx, Sigmund Freud, and Carl Sagan.

I want to note here in an aside that not every student who goes to Geneseo reads and experiences all of the above. However, every student who graduates from Geneseo gets a good, solid liberal arts education through its rigorous and superb general education requirements, most notably its Western Humanities I and II courses, which are—by their very nature—challenging and intellectually stimulating and expose students to a number of the aforementioned texts and authors. This is both a wonderful and a terrifying thing depending on whom you speak to. (Business majors, for example, live in fear of these courses.) These courses are *epic*—epic enough that they change the lives of dedicated students and really alienate lazy students (like my friend Walter) and those who (also like Walter) wish they had attended a vocational school instead of a liberal arts institution. Though there are some politicians and vocational major department heads and bureaucrats who sometimes try to coerce the humanities professors at Geneseo to abandon their commitment to a liberal arts education, and use various tactics to scuttle the Hum I and II general education requirement, I think these courses are a central part of what made Geneseo . . . Geneseo. Similar to “great books” courses offered by other liberal arts colleges, only on steroids because of the amount of reading involved and the quality of the teaching attached to it, Hum I and II changed my life, just as Cook promised it would. I was so inspired by Humanities I and II that I wanted to take every course the college offered that was in the same vein. And those courses, too, changed my life.

Here’s a case in point.

As part of his Galileo seminar, Towsley assigned one of the most important works I read—Galileo’s *Letter to the Grand Duchess Christina* (1615). In it, Galileo argues for the peaceful coexistence of science and religion and for an intelligent, nonliteralist reading of the Bible. Everything in the Bible is true, he writes, but if any passage contradicts the known laws of science, then that passage must offer a *symbolic* truth instead of a *literal* one. Galileo argues that it is far more sane and religious to search for alternative, allegorical ways of understanding the Bible to help enable science to flourish than it is to cling desperately to a literal, possibly incorrect interpretation of a Bible story and hamstring scientific progress in the process.

This idea was a relief to me, and I embraced it instantly. I felt instantly smarter and was finally convinced that one need not be stupid to be religious after all.

Generally, I was reassured that my literary, historical, and theological readings all validated the idea that one need not agree with the pope on every single social and spiritual teaching to remain an authentic Catholic. In *The Divine Comedy*, Dante places orthodox theologians and heretics together in heaven, making those who were bitter enemies in life blissfully happy colleagues singing in concert throughout eternity. In contrast, Dante places in hell Farinata, an egomaniac who only deigns to befriend people with the right pedigree who vote the way he does. These were instructive poetic and theological points indeed.

In my biblical studies, I was most influenced by the theologians who are a part of the Jesus Seminar. Of course, Fr. Jansen had warned me about the Jesus Seminar and its color-coding of Bible passages based on the relative likelihood of a line presenting a historical fact or a narrative conceit. He made the members of the seminar sound

like obsessive-compulsive fools and Bible debunkers. The charge is disingenuous. As Jesus Seminar member Robert T. Fortna has asserted, he and his colleagues “are not in the business of ‘debunking’ the gospels, as many have said. On the contrary, we debunk the kind of simplistic, literal reading of the gospels that leads to fundamentalist and rigid interpretation, and is dangerous in the modern world. Take, for example, the malevolent and reactionary politics of some fundamentalists, or their savagely homophobic stance” (2002, 230). I’ve read several essays by Jesus Seminar members, but my favorite writer of the group thus far is Marcus Borg. (Cook introduced me to Borg in his Bible as History course.)

Borg’s *Jesus: A New Vision* (1987) presented Jesus as a proto-hippie figure and the establishment members of the Jewish faith as the conservative Republicans of the Roman world. This reading of the Bible cast Fr. Jansen and me in opposition to Christ—and the horrifying credibility of the scenario shook me to my core. I had been complacent in thinking that I was one of the good guys because I followed party-line Church thinking in most ways, but here was Borg showing me, quite convincingly, that Jesus *would have no time for me* if he met me in real life. If I wanted to *really* follow the teachings of Christ, I needed to learn what he was *really saying* and to make a radical change in my personality and belief system.

As Borg would later argue in *Speaking Christian* (2011), modern-day Christians are too focused on a heaven-and-hell-centric theology and a purely supernatural view of Jesus that strips Christianity of all of its imperatives to actively engage with humanity to make the world a better place. Instead, heaven-and-hell Christianity is born of ignorance of religious literature and history, fosters a reactionary political mind-set, overemphasizes prayer and miracles, and focuses on what Christians *believe* instead of what they *do*. According to Borg, in its earliest days, Christianity was revolutionary and progressive, supporting women’s rights and promoting learning and tolerance among the diverse peoples of the vast Roman Empire. Back in 1995, reading Borg’s writing helped convince me of the wisdom of the Jesus Seminar’s mission statement and the authenticity of this “New Vision” of Jesus. I continue to feel this way today.

(Note: I must admit that, from a science-fiction fan perspective, I liked the irony that one of the main people who had saved me from hive-mind thinking was named Borg; the Borg, coincidentally, are *Star Trek* villains who promote hive-mind thinking. That’s my idea of “funny.”)

STRANGE BEDFELLOWS: LEWIS AND MADONNA

After undergoing this revolution in my thinking, I decided to revisit everything I had thought I understood. Whom had Fr. Jansen told me to embrace and who to ignore? Was he *always* wrong? Did he *sometimes* get it right? It was time, amusingly enough, to revisit Madonna and C. S. Lewis. I found I had been avoiding the “problematic” aspects of their work for all the wrong reasons. While there was a good deal of truth

in Fr. Jansen's assessments of their works, there was also an extent to which he was utterly wrong about both of them. In a way, he had stereotyped them, transforming them into a cardboard prophet and a cardboard succubus, respectively. Or perhaps he had made them sound like androids: one programmed to be a doctrinaire preacher and the other programmed to be a seductive Femmebot? But those characterizations were always destined to be wrong. After all, no flesh-and-blood human being can be an alabaster saint or an unrepentant sinner all the time and have free will and a soul. What I discovered about both "sinner" and "saint" was fascinating. I will reveal my findings about Lewis first.

Over the course of my years as an undergraduate at Geneseo and as a graduate student at both the College of Staten Island and Drew University, I read *A Grief Observed* (1961), *The Great Divorce* (1945), *The Abolition of Man* (1943), *The Screwtape Letters* (1942), "A Case for Abolition" (1947), and *Surprised by Joy* (1955). What I discovered about Lewis in those pages greatly surprised me. Lewis wrote in *A Grief Observed* that the Judeo-Christian God is not impressed with a "House of Cards" faith built upon ignorance and complacency, but wants his flock intellectually and spiritually challenged (2002c, 37–52). Consequently, this good God, like a dentist, deliberately causes us pain in order to heal us, using personal hardship and exposure to difficult truths as a means of laying waste to our entire worldview and rendering us devoid of not only false beliefs but also dogmatic thinking of any kind. Once we recover from this trauma that God has caused, we can rebuild our faith and worldview from a newer, sounder foundation. If our new ideology is no better than the old one—yet one more House of Cards made of only slightly less flimsy card stock—then God will wreck our House of Cards faith once again—and yet again still—until we finally replace a House of Cards faith with a Cathedral faith.

Lewis posited this idea in the wake of his wife Joy's death in 1960 during a period of grief that threatened to engulf his faith. Reading this as an undergraduate at Geneseo, I felt that the ramifications of Lewis's House of Cards faith concept liberated me from my own dogmatism and borderline anti-intellectual bigotries. While I had sympathy for Fr. Jansen's belief that Christians should not take unnecessary risks with their faith by continually exposing themselves to anti-Christian ideas, I could not wholly agree with it. In notable contrast, the Oxford professor Lewis did not fear that reading books might transform a Christian into an atheist. Indeed, Lewis went through a similar transformation himself. His exposure to Norse mythology, among other classic texts, caused him to question his faith, yet, he ultimately returned to Christianity with a fuller, renewed, and more intellectually rigorous Christianity at his command.

Unlike Christians who fear that education will lead them inevitably down the path of secular humanism, Lewis does not betray a secret dread that he knows his beliefs are bunk and won't stand up to scrutiny or exposure to alien intellectual ideas. No, he has the courage of his convictions and can immerse himself in the greatest thoughts of other cultures and religions and not fear being tainted or derailed by

them. So, in *A Grief Observed* at least, Lewis demonstrates greater fear of the demons of Ignorance and Want found in Charles Dickens's *A Christmas Carol* than he does fear of the consequences of eating fruit from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil in *Genesis*. So, based on *A Grief Observed*, I wondered if, perhaps, Lewis would have supported my decision to attend Geneseo instead of Christendom College?

Furthermore, Lewis included in *A Grief Observed* a powerful hymn to gender harmony and symbiosis. When I first read the passage, I found what he wrote about gender conflict and love striking, as I had been prone to a troubling degree of male chauvinism thanks to my immersion in conservative Catholicism:

There is, hidden or flaunted, a sword between the sexes till an entire marriage reconciles them. It is an arrogance in us to call frankness, fairness and chivalry "masculine" when we see them in a woman, it is arrogance in them, to describe a man's sensitiveness or tact or tenderness as "feminine." But also what poor warped fragments of humanity most mere men and women must be to make the implications of that arrogance plausible. Marriage heals this. Jointly the two become fully human. "In the image of God created He *them*." Thus, by a paradox, this carnival of sexuality leads us out beyond our sexes. (Qtd. in Loades 2010, 171)

As Ann Loades has observed, this passage represents for Lewis—someone who had opposed the creation of female clergy and had some questionable ideas about gender relations—"something of a late revolution in his thinking . . . coming close to the end of his life [that is] . . . perhaps all the more impressive and commendable for that" (Loades 2010, 171).

Some critics might argue that Lewis's hymn to the sanctity of marriage is, for all its positive portrayal of women, ultimately conservative as it leaves little room for the possibility of same-sex love. However, it is on this theme that Lewis's writings surprised me the most. In his autobiography, *Surprised by Joy*, Lewis condemned the elitism, violence, and insular thinking of the British public school system, painting a picture of the secondary preparatory school he attended, Malvern College, that is as negative as the representation of the British public school system found in the Lindsay Anderson film *If. . .* (1968). Most surprising of all, like the Anderson film, Lewis suggests that one of the few redeeming qualities of the public school system is that some young boys find a rewarding, romantic love between one another that mitigates the experience of having to come of age in such worldly, oppressive, materialistic, and socially stratified surroundings. He wrote:

And that is why I cannot give pederasty anything like a first place among the evils of the Coll. There is much hypocrisy on this theme. People commonly talk as if every other evil were more tolerable than this. But why? Because those of us who do not share the vice feel for it a certain nausea, as we do, say, for necrophily? I think that of very little relevance to moral judgment. Because it produces permanent perversion? I find very little evidence that it does. . . . Is it then on Christian grounds? But how many of those who fulminate on the matter are in fact Christian? And what Christian, in a society as worldly and cruel as [Malvern], would pick out the carnal sins for special reprobation?

Cruelty is surely more evil than lust and the World at least as dangerous as the Flesh. The real reason for all the bother is, in my opinion, neither Christian nor ethical. We attack this vice not because it is the worst but because it is, by adult standards, the most disreputable and unmentionable, and happens also to be a crime in English law. The World will only lead you to Hell; but sodomy may lead you to jail and create a scandal and lose you your job. The World, to do it justice, seldom does that. (1966, 108–9).

What Lewis seems to suggest here is that the British people of his day were terrified of suffering the same fate as Oscar Wilde. So, the collective British memory of Wilde's 1895 trial, conviction of "gross indecency," imprisonment for two years, and endurance of hard physical labor as punishment—an experience that, essentially, destroyed his health and killed him—is the real cause of rampant British homophobia? Not any decrees against same-sex love in the Bible made by Paul or the Hebrew scriptures? This is a fascinating proposition that sounds true indeed.

Now, compare Lewis's thoughts on homosexuality within the British public school system and his descriptions of the causes of rampant homophobia in then-contemporary society to the kinds of statements that contemporary conservative Christians in America make about homosexuality—some of the very same Christians who cite Lewis as a hero of theirs and a champion of mainstream Christianity and conservative morality. Lewis's views may not be quite as liberal as, say, the views of contemporary gay Roman Catholic Andrew Sullivan, but are they not kinder, more tolerant, more enlightened, and more thoughtful than those expressed on Christian radio or by right-wing pundits or Christian political candidates eager to win votes from fellow conservative Christians with acidic, anti-gay rhetoric? When I first read this passage, I was astonished. I remain surprised that it exists. I have never seen it quoted elsewhere. How many Lewis aficionados even know of its existence?

My reading of Lewis led me to other ideas that I knew Fr. Jansen would take issue with. For example, I wondered what the significance was of the conflation of hell and purgatory in C. S. Lewis's *The Great Divorce*, and why some lost souls were ultimately able to escape hell and enter heaven. Around that time, I encountered similar "escape from hell" narratives that I found equally refreshing, as it suggested that my non-Catholic and non-Christian friends and family members had a chance of getting into heaven. For example, in *The Commedia*, Dante allows an obscure pagan character from *The Aeneid* a place in heaven that the virtuous pagans in limbo fail to win and hints that Virgil might find his way out of limbo as a reward for helping to save Dante the Pilgrim's soul from perdition. The film *What Dreams May Come* imports the Orpheus myth into a Judeo-Christian vision of the afterlife and presents a happy ending in which the Robin Williams character is able to rescue his wife from hell because, suicide that she was, she killed herself while in a state of deep depression and could be saved from her own emotional and literal hell by a loving spouse who was willing to share her psychic burden. These tales led me to research the Catholic heresy of *apokatastasis*, a theological idea originating with the Church father Origen, which posited that hell might one day be abolished and that universal salvation might be extended to all at the end of time—even the damned souls in hell

and their fallen angel jailors. This was a heretical idea I had discovered because of *Great Divorce*. Thank you for leading me into heresy, Mr. Lewis.

Finally, Lewis's anti-animal-experimentation pamphlet, "A Case for Abolition," contains some of the most intelligent and passionate passages on animal rights, human rights, and race and class equality I have ever read. It is a poignant anti-fascist diatribe written by a devout Christian:

The Christian defender [of vivisection], especially in the Latin countries, is very apt to say that we are entitled to do anything we please to animals because they "have no souls." But what does this mean? If it means that animals have no consciousness, then how is this known? They certainly behave as if they had, or at least the higher animals do. I myself am inclined to think that far fewer animals than is supposed have what we should recognize as consciousness. But that is only an opinion. Unless we know on other grounds that vivisection is right we must not take the moral risk of tormenting them on a mere opinion. On the other hand, the statement that they "have no souls" may mean that they have no moral responsibilities and are not immortal. But the absence of "soul" in that sense makes the infliction of pain upon them not easier but harder to justify. For it means that animals cannot deserve pain, nor profit morally by the discipline of pain, nor be recompensed by happiness in another life for suffering in this. Thus all the factors which render pain more tolerable or make it less totally evil in the case of human beings will be lacking in the beasts. "Soullessness," in so far as it is relevant to the question at all, is an argument against vivisection. . . .

If loyalty to our own species, preference for man simply because we are men, is not a sentiment, then what is? It may be a good sentiment or a bad one. But a sentiment it certainly is. Try to base it on logic and see what happens!

But the most sinister thing about modern vivisection is this. If a mere sentiment justifies cruelty, why stop at a sentiment for the whole human race? There is also a sentiment for the white man against the black, for a *Herrenvolk* against the non-Aryans, for "civilized" or "progressive" peoples against "savages" or "backward" peoples. Finally, for our own country, party or class against others. Once the old Christian idea of a total difference in kind between man and beast has been abandoned, then no argument for experiments on animals can be found which is not also an argument for experiments on inferior men. If we cut up beasts simply because they cannot prevent us and because we are backing our own side in the struggle for existence, it is only logical to cut up imbeciles, criminals, enemies or capitalists for the same reasons. Indeed, experiments on men have already begun. We all hear that Nazi scientists have done them. We all suspect that our own scientists may begin to do so, in secret, at any moment. (2007, 160–65)

So do these words mean that Lewis is "an animal rights nut"? An "environmentalist wacko," as Limbaugh dubs lovers of nature? Does he engage in class warfare and the rhetoric of "victimhood" like most "liberals" Limbaugh decries? In my mind, these words were not written by the Lewis that Fr. Jansen had described to me.

But what of Madonna Ciccone? Was she an exploitative, irreligious fallen woman? Or was she religious in her own non-Catholic-Church-approved way?

The mass media has made much of her fascination with the Kabbalah over the years, and she can be seen engaging in regular group prayer with members of her

entourage in the documentary film *Truth or Dare* (1991). Whether her public praying or scholarly/theological interest in Jewish mysticism is “authentic” or “staged” is hard to ascertain. As Milton has observed, hypocrisy can be suspected, but it is the only sin known only to God because the only human heart we can ever see into is our own.

The narrative that unfolds in the music video of “Like a Prayer” (1989) is fairly straightforward, though some of its meaning needs to be inferred. In the video directed by Mary Lambert, Madonna plays a character (whom I shall call Madonna) who watches across an apartment complex courtyard as three shadowy youths with a Caucasian ringleader stab a dark-haired woman and then flee the scene, leaving her to bleed to death. While Madonna stands frozen, watching from the shadows, a young black man rushes to the side of the injured woman only to find that he is too late and she is dead. Police swarm onto the scene, instantly presume the black man’s guilt, and arrest him. Madonna moves to intervene but sees that the real murderer has not fled far and is also watching from hiding. He catches her eye and gives her a warning look that tells her to stay out of it.

Riddled with guilt over her inaction, Madonna visits a nearby black church. While in the church, she is haunted by visions of a field of five burning crosses, suggesting that her failure to help the black man has made her complicit in the kind of racism that permeates American culture—racism that is not just perpetrated by the cross-“lighting” Ku Klux Klan but by a mostly white police force that instantly assumes black criminality as well as by white/Italian American witnesses who allow such horrible miscarriages of justice to go unchallenged and uncorrected. As she worries over her dilemma, she accidentally cuts herself with a ceremonial dagger, and the stigmata appears on her hands, suggesting that she is suffering with the persecuted black man and, by extension, suffering with Christ. (For, as it is written in Matthew 25:40, “Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.”) But first she must pray for the strength to free the black man—and do so allegorically—before she has the strength to come forward and testify in the real world.

When the vision of the lit crosses vanishes, Madonna is again aware of her church surroundings. Adjacent to the altar, she sees a statue of Christ sculpted to look exactly like the African American youth wrongfully accused of the crime. Since the church is, presumably, in a bad neighborhood, the statue is “protected” from vandalism by a steel cage. Madonna opens the cage to free the statue, and it comes to life. The black Jesus caresses and kisses Madonna as a black gospel choir appears before the altar, serving as the chorus of the pop song. When Madonna snaps out of her reverie, finding the choir gone and the statue back in its place, she gains the resolve she needs to go to the police station. She tells the guard on duty, “He didn’t do it,” and the prisoner is released from his cage and vindicated. Perhaps, now that he is out of his cell, he and Madonna will have a romantic, interracial relationship.

A number of published accounts that range from interviews with Madonna to critical studies to (un)authorized biographies present a consistent view of the



A promotional image for Madonna's "Like a Prayer" (1989) featuring a sexy, praying Madonna Ciccone.
Photo courtesy of Sire Records/Warner Bros.

development of “Like a Prayer” (see Considine 1989; Epstein 2004; Holden 1989; Johnston 1989). Reportedly, when Madonna wrote the lyrics to “Like a Prayer,” she was, indeed, writing a deeply personal, religious, and sexual song that summed up her feelings at the time about her Catholic upbringing, turning thirty, her mother’s death at age thirty, her father’s alternative rages and emotional detachment, and her recent divorce from Sean Penn. During this period, Madonna felt abandoned by the men in her life—including her father, her gadabout brother Martin, and her ex-husband—so it is unsurprising that she would turn to God as the one male figure she could love who would never leave her feelings unrequited. The song showed her love for God as literal and physical, which was the source of much of the accusations of blasphemy, but the song was also very much about the psychological effects of burdensome Catholic guilt. As Madonna explained in a 1989 interview with *Rolling Stone* magazine:

Because in Catholicism you are a born sinner and you’re a sinner all your life. No matter how you try to get away from it, the sin is within you all the time. It was this fear that haunted me; it taunted and pained me every moment. My music was probably the only distraction I had. . . .

I have a great sense of guilt and sin from Catholicism that has definitely permeated my everyday life, whether I want it to or not. And when I do something wrong . . . if I don’t let someone know I have wronged, I’m always afraid I’m going to be punished. And that’s something you’re raised to believe as a Catholic. Both the song and album stemmed from this uneasiness; my direct prayers to God, it is beautiful and divine. (Johnston 1989)

Catholic theologian Andrew Greeley saw the eroticism of the Song of Songs in the Old Testament as biblical precedent for the eroticism of the music video (Epstein 2004, 91). As much of an oxymoron as the term may have sounded in 1989, the “erotic theology” of the video is simultaneously medieval and ahead of its time. As Steve Jungkeit has observed, devout Christian mystics and artists have a long and storied history of using erotic, orgasmic imagery to depict a prayerful, rapturous communion with God. This is true despite many Christians’ discomfort with depictions of prayer as being an inherently sexual enterprise. According to Jungkeit, Christians who accept the prospect that platonic, pure love is good and erotic love is bad embrace a binarism that

neglects the productive role of the erotic in many strands of Christian theology, even as it ignores the multiple meanings of eros discovered in a source such as Plato’s *Symposium*, to say nothing of the theological appropriations of Platonic eros. . . . [T]exts and figures such as the Johannine letters, Augustine’s *Confessions*, Pseudo-Dionysus, Margarete Porete, Julian of Norwich, and others . . . are all mystics. Their writings frequently resort to vivid erotic metaphors to capture what a love of God might be like, a fact often ignored by later generations of interpreters who were evidently uncomfortable with the sensual dimensions of these sources. (2010, 325)

Grace Jantzen, Graham Ward, Marcella Althaus-Reid, Mark Jordan, Virginia Burrus, and Catherine Keller have all produced recent scholarship that “seek to retrieve eros as a central theological virtue,” Jungkeit writes (2010, 324). Given the precedents cited by Jungkeit and Greeley, many of the objections to the music video appear overstated. Still, there were many reasons that the video caused such consternation, not the least of which was its portrayal of a powerful female protagonist and its depiction of racial injustice in America.

Focusing on “Like a Prayer” as a means of understanding Madonna in general, Anthony Julian Tamburri writes in *Re-viewing Italian Americana* (2011):

Of the numerous things Madonna calls to the fore . . . is how little society tends to tolerate ambition (and success) in women. Lest we forget that today women still feel the strains, the pushes and pulls, of what it means to be a successful, independent woman in a world still grounded in patriarchy. . . . A Madonna video—*Like a Prayer* and *Justify My Love* especially—often exudes a *sui generis* ideology independent of the usual patriarchal control. (46)

He adds: “Sexuality constitutes both a prominent and a problematic theme of Madonna’s music/performance: but it is not always all-encompassing. . . . [T]here themes—sexuality, religion, and race—serve as integral components of Madonna’s *visione del mondo* and figure, at the same time, as reasons for which some of her videos ruffle, to say the least, the dominant culture’s feathers” (47).

Given that both Italian Americans and African Americans have suffered racially motivated persecution for not being “white” enough, it is not surprising that there have been notable moments of solidarity between the groups. Several critics, myself included, have written about the positive and negative aspects of black–Italian relations: Matthew Calihman, Jennifer Guglielmo, Salvatore Salerno, and Alfred Lubrano. Madonna’s “Like a Prayer” video was one such moment of black–Italian solidarity, but Madonna is not the first prominent Italian American to cite the mainstream American culture of white privilege, social Darwinism, and self-serving Christianity as being complicit in prejudice, segregation, racial profiling, and lynching. In a 1962 interview in, of all places, *Playboy Magazine*, Frank Sinatra spoke of how authentic Christianity is best exemplified by the Sermon on the Mount in the Gospel According to St. Matthew, and any kind of Christianity that pits human being against human being and preaches hatred and social division is not real Christianity but an abomination. He notes that his biblical precedent for his beliefs should rescue him from accusations of heresy, and he singles out Christian enemies of desegregation for special reprobation.

Remember that leering, cursing lynch mob in Little Rock reviling a meek, innocent little 12-year-old Negro girl as she tried to enroll in public school? Weren’t they—or most of them—devout churchgoers? I detest the two-faced who pretend liberality but

are practiced bigots in their own mean little spheres. . . . Now, don't get me wrong. I'm for decency—period. I'm for anything and everything that bodes love and consideration for my fellow man. But when lip service to some mysterious deity permits bestiality on Wednesday and absolution on Sunday—count me out. (Qtd. in Tamburri 2011, 78)

The Church has judged “Like a Prayer” sacrilegious. I think it is wrong. Would the priests who condemned Madonna’s work have been less offended by it had Madonna been male? If the race theme had been dropped? If Christ had not been black? If Madonna had not had a romantic moment with Christ? I don’t know. All these might seem like reasonable objections to the video for some people, but they are also knee-jerk reactions. It is easy to be offended. It is hard to think. It is still harder to feel empathy. I wonder what made me more open to regarding Madonna’s “Like a Prayer” as a legitimately Christian statement than Fr. Jansen was? Madonna and I both being Italian Americans with an August 1 birthday? My rebellious Generation X personality? Was my openness to an apologetic reading of a seemingly heretical text linked to my liberal arts education at Geneseo? Had I gone to Christendom College, would I have been too enamored of the Magisterium’s perspective to see a genuine form of Christianity hiding in plain sight in this video alongside the burning crosses and the wine-colored teddy? They may not be the pope, but the religious thinking of Steve Jungkeit, Andrew Greeley, and Frank Sinatra all point to ways in which the “Like a Prayer” music video can represent an unappreciated species of authentic Christianity instead of mere mass-marketed, profitable blasphemy.

Similarly, C. S. Lewis’s most unorthodox statements of faith—the ones enumerated above—are those most likely to get him removed from the reading list of the Religious Right. These same statements also demonstrate that Lewis, even when being unorthodox, was showing an authentic Christian desire to love his neighbor and love all of creation, including those members of the created order who have typically been ignored, persecuted, or even killed by so-called righteous Christians.

What I had learned from the experience reassessing Madonna and Lewis was not to listen to clergymen and activists who warn me away from dangerous and unchristian art. After all, there is a very real possibility that these clergymen are, perhaps out of ignorance or willful blindness, uncharitably refusing to give the art the benefit of the doubt. Perhaps this is because they have not properly studied art and literature enough to understand how to give new works a fair chance. Perhaps it is because they cannot tolerate any unordained prophet challenging their God-given authority as spokesmen of Christ, no matter how obviously Christian the message. After all, these are the same Church authorities who would probably kill Christ himself should he ever threaten to strip them of their authority by returning to Earth to speak for himself once again.

At least, that’s what Dostoyevsky posits in the parable of *The Grand Inquisitor*, and his simple, provocative thesis sounds frighteningly plausible.

ONWARD, CHRISTIAN TEACHERS, HEALERS, AND PEACEMAKERS!

After I revisited Madonna and Lewis, I recalled other public figures and narratives that had been labeled either “safe” or “dangerous” by Fr. Jansen or other spokesmen of the Catholic Church that I might have taken at face value as good or evil wholly on their advice. I recalled over the years all of the controversial works I was supposed to avoid, and usually did. I thought of all the controversial works of the present day and those yet to be crafted. I think now of *Dogma*, *The Last Temptation of Christ*, *The Godfather: Part III*, *The DaVinci Code*, *The Brides of Christ*, *The Golden Compass*, Peter Watkins’s *Privilege*, Ricky Gervais’s *The Invention of Lying*, Joe Ahearne’s *Perfect Parents* and *Ultraviolet*, Terrence McNally’s play *Corpus Christi*, Stephen Adly Guirgis’s play *The Last Days of Judas Iscariot*, Bill C. Davis’s *Mass Appeal*, Andres Serrano’s “Piss Christ,” Chris Ofili’s elephant-dung-covered painting “The Holy Virgin Mary,” *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, and the Miramax film *Priest*. I also recall avoid-



The 2009 film *The Invention of Lying* (written and directed by Ricky Gervais and Matthew Robinson.) takes place in an alternate, social Darwinist universe in which art, fiction, and religion do not exist, and all forms of lying are impossible. In this scene, Mark Bellison (Gervais) discovers he is the first person with the ability to lie when he fools a guileless bank teller into placing money that isn’t his into his hands. Mark later invents the concept of the afterlife as a means of comforting his mother on her deathbed. The conversation is overheard and Mark becomes responsible for the founding of the first world religion.

Photo courtesy of Warner Bros.

ing the television shows *Nothing Sacred* and *The Thorn Birds* despite my mother's being an avowed fan of both. How many of these supposed heretical texts were, secretly, as authentically and improbably Christian as Madonna's "Like a Prayer"?

I also recalled the Christian narratives that were often presented to me as "safe": holiday movies such as *A Christmas Carol*, *The Ten Commandments*, and Ronald Reagan's favorite film, *It's a Wonderful Life*. There was also Dante's *Commedia*, Milton's *Paradise Lost*, Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, Graham Greene's Catholic novels like *The End of the Affair*, Evelyn Waugh's *Brideshead Revisited*, the Arthurian legends, *Pilgrim's Progress*, and the pseudo-Christian/pseudo-Bushido *Star Wars* saga. How many of these "safe" narratives were secretly as revolutionary, and as authentically Christian, as the never-discussed subversive passages of C. S. Lewis? And what of the works of literature that were not intended to be Christian but challenged or built upon Christianity in fascinating ways? What of Percy Shelley's indebtedness to Milton and Mary Shelley's commentary on religion in *Frankenstein*? What of the pseudo-Unitarian, pseudo-Christian Platonists in the American Transcendentalist tradition? What of secular works that were so relentlessly nihilistic and atheistic that they took on a strange form of religiosity—like *Hamlet* and *Waiting for Godot*? How were these texts to be read? Some of these last questions were a bit ambitious for me, so I started smaller. Even with a small canon of approved and condemned works to examine in front of me, I still had a lot of books to read and movies to watch.

As I made my way through these works, I determined that my interest was not, primarily, in works that raised many questions and criticisms but provided few or no answers. (*Dogma*, for example, seemed like this kind of work, as did *The Last Temptation of Christ*.) What I was looking for was a literary or pop culture artifact that broadcasted to the general public the Jesus Seminar members' claims about who the historic Jesus might have been, what constitutes authentic Christianity, and why heaven-and-hell Christianity is a false Christianity employed by establishment forces as a weapon to crush progressivism everywhere. Many of the above texts hint at some of these themes, but the two that dealt best with the themes were the already discussed *Priest* and *The Ruling Class* (1972, written by Peter Barnes and directed by Peter Medak).

The Ruling Class is about the aristocratic Gurney family, which is thrown into crisis when the entire family fortune, lands, and seat in the House of Lords fall to Jack Gurney (Peter O'Toole), a hippie socialist who thinks he is Jesus Christ returned to Earth. Literally. When Jack conspires with his communist butler to redistribute the fruits of his inheritance throughout England, the family tries to cure him so he will stop thinking he is Jesus and start being a little more selfish and greedy like any sane aristocrat. They introduce Jack to another schizophrenic who thinks he is God: the Electric Messiah. Significantly, the Electric Messiah is a cruel and vengeful God instead of a socialist. He delights in human misery, boasts that he allowed the Holocaust to happen, and tortures Jack for doubting his divinity. Jack is transformed by the experience into an insane Tory who now thinks he is Jack the Ripper. In the final segment of the movie, he makes a rousing speech to the House of Lords demanding



Jesus Christ reborn in the 1970s as a hippie socialist. “Jesus” plans to redistribute his family’s vast wealth to the people of England until his family members “cure” him of his generosity – and enlist him in their economic and social war against the middle and working classes.

Photo Courtesy of United Artists

that they work together to crush the hippie movement and restore law, order, and Christianity to England, thereby making it an imperial power once again. In retrospect, this ultra-dark concluding segment seems prophetic—it anticipates the real-world arrival of Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher a mere handful of years later.

Peter Watkins’s 1967 film *Privilege* has a virtually identical thematic message and is, arguably, a better and darker film, only it is about a conspiracy of corporate executives and clergymen who coerce a teen rock idol who is more popular than Jesus into publicly converting to Christianity to abruptly and artificially end the 1960s youth movement.

Both *The Ruling Class* and *Privilege* feature the song “Onward, Christian Soldiers” as the rallying cry for conservative interests to take on the hippie movement.

At one time in my life, I was too influenced by members of this “vast right-wing conspiracy” and came close to joining it. Thanks in part to my not attending Christendom College, I ultimately defected to the other side. The Marcus Borg side. The hippie Jesus side. It is very possibly the losing side in these horrific, never-ending

culture wars raging in the United States, but I would rather be on it than on a side I no longer believe truly fights in the name of Jesus. The “Onward, Christian Soldiers” faction fights for the establishment church, for multinational corporations, and for the military-industrial complex, but it does not fight for the average person. Nor does it fight for God. If being on the winning side means joining their ranks once more, please count me out. I’d rather be vilified with all the other vanquished enemies of empire than live to serve the growth and perpetuation of the evils of empire at the expense of 99.9 percent of humanity.

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