

RECONSIDERATIONS

EXPLORING A BIBLICAL UNDERSTANDING OF LIFE AND CULTURE

DECEMBER 2004

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ARISTOCRACY AND OBLIGATION: THE MEDIEVAL LISTS OF ALMSDEEDS *Eleonore Stump*

This fall the Christian Study Center, in cooperation with the Department of Philosophy at the University of Florida, sponsored a Culture Seminar lecture series on Issues in Contemporary Philosophy. The series concluded on November 18 when St. Louis University Professor of Philosophy Eleonore Stump spoke at the University of Florida on "Personal Relations and Moral Residue: The Holocaust and Stain on the Soul." As a moral philosopher Prof. Stump draws from medieval Christian thought to address issues such as evil, pain, and suffering. Because of her acclaimed work on this topic, in 2003 Prof. Stump was asked to deliver the prestigious Gifford Lectures in Aberdeen, Scotland. The day after her lecture at UF, Prof. Stump addressed a gathering of Christian faculty and graduate students at the Study Center, discussing the Medieval notion of bodily and spiritual almsdeeds. We offer here a print version of that talk.

From the time Augustine decisively bested his opponents in the Pelagian controversy, orthodox Christian theologians and philosophers in all periods and places have agreed that we are saved by faith, and only by faith. Our works do not save us. Our faith in Christ does. I emphasize this point at the outset because I want to talk about our works, and I want to make sure that no one supposes I am talking about what we need to do in order to win salvation. I do want to talk about our responsibilities as Christians, however, and not just as Christians

but as educated Christians.

The first thing to see in this connection is that in virtue of the education we have received, we are among the aristocrats of the earth. I don't mean to say, and you must not get mixed up and think that I am saying, that we are better than other people in virtue of being educated. Anybody who thinks that aristocrats are better than other people hasn't thought enough about aristocrats. What makes aristocrats different from other people is definitely not that they are better than other people but rather only this, that an enormous amount of the

good things of this earth have been lavished on them. For how many people, in how many places and times, has our sort of education been possible even to dream about? Imagine how many people at the margins of society could have been supported on what it takes to put one American student through college for a year? And so this is the sense in which our education has made aristocrats of each one of us. A vast quantity of the good

things the earth has to offer has been bestowed on us in the process of our education.

Now the only excuse that anyone has ever thought up to justify aristocracy is service. And the same thought is in the Gospels: a person to whom much has been given is a person from whom much will be required, too. And so each of us has a serious, weighty responsibility to serve others with

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Sometimes when we think about our responsibility as Christians, we think about our responsibility to the poor. And this is a good thing to think about. In fact, during the medieval period, it was thought that there are seven acts of help which are owed to those in need. These acts are called the seven acts of corporal almsgiving, and the medieval list is instructive for us. They are feeding the hungry, giving drink to the thirsty, providing shelter to the homeless, preparing clothing for those without it, visiting the prisoners, ransoming the captives, and burying the dead. It is worth repeating them because they are certainly worth remembering. The seven acts of corporal almsgiving are feeding the hungry, giving drink to the thirsty, providing shelter to the homeless, preparing clothing for those without it, visiting the prisoners, ransoming the captives, and burying the dead. Whatever our special obligations are as educated Christians, they do not absolve us from the ordinary obligations attendant on all Christians, to care for those in some bodily need.

But I mention this list of seven acts of almsgiving only to set it to one side, because I want to talk about a different list of almsdeeds. The medieval period had a second list of seven, and it's that second list I want us to think about. This is the list of the seven acts of spiritual almsgiving. This list is obligatory, too. This second list of acts of almsgiving is especially important for us, insofar as at least some of the things on the list are things which we, in virtue of our education, are more able to do well than we would be without our education. This list is specially instructive for us, specially obligatory for us.

The list of seven spiritual acts of almsgiving are: instructing the ignorant, counseling those troubled in faith, consoling the sorrowful, speaking up for those victimized by injustice, forgiving injuries done to us, bearing with those who trouble us, and praying for everybody. Shall we hear that list again as well? The seven spiritual acts of almsgiving are: instructing the ignorant, counseling those troubled in faith, consoling the sorrowful, speaking up for those victimized by injustice, forgiving injuries done to us, bearing with those who trouble us, and praying for everybody.

This is a wonderful list, in my view, and it only makes things better that the acts on the list are obligatory for us.

That is, consider the person who always blows his nose loudly, with juicy sniffing, at the dinner table. If you manage somehow to avoid giving him a sharp rebuke or a disgusted glance, if you manage even to avoid being irritated with him in your heart, on the medieval view you have achieved only what bare justice requires. The poor of the earth, including those who are poor in the sense of being a pain to their fellow human beings, these poor have a right, in justice, to love and care from us. So bearing with those who trouble us is an act justice requires of us.

In an even more paradoxical way, acts of mercy are obligatory on us. We are obligated to forgive those who are unjust to us; and we are unjust to them if we do not. You can see for yourself that this claim is true, however odd it sounds. Consider the parable of the prodigal son, and imagine a different

ending to the story. Imagine that the prodigal son came home and said to his father, "Father, forgive me! I have sinned against heaven and against you and am no more worthy to be called your son"; and then imagine that the father said to his son, "Well, I've considered being merciful and forgiving you, but I've decided against it. You're right: you're not worthy to be my son. So off with you! Go some place else!" Surely, surely, we would think ill of that father and blame him for hard-heartedness. None

of us would approve of him, would we? And so as you can see, there's something morally wrong with the father if he doesn't forgive his son. The father has to forgive him, if he wants to retain our moral approval.

Speaking up against injustice done to others is also obligatory. We might understand the sort of self-protectiveness or cowardice that makes a person silent when he should step forward to protect those victimized by injustice, but we certainly think less of people who give in to that sort of cowardice. When we learn that a Catholic bishop knew about the sexual abuse being perpetrated by a priest in his diocese but protected the priest rather than the victims of that priest, we feel moral scorn for the bishop. In order to avoid moral scorn, there are times when we have to speak up, even if it is at

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cost to ourselves.

And so the spiritual almsdeeds are obligatory on all Christians. But clearly some of the acts of spiritual almsgiving on the medieval list are especially obligatory for educated Christians, and those are the acts of instructing the ignorant and counseling those doubtful in faith. These are acts of spiritual almsdeeds where our gift of an education gives us a special responsibility to others.

Furthermore, the medievals thought that the spiritual almsdeeds are more important than the corporal almsdeeds. They believed this because they saw that there is a hunger of the body and then there is a hunger of the soul, for faith, for understanding, for company and consolation in affliction. And the medievals thought there would be more pain and more peril for a person who doesn't get fed when he is hungry in soul than when he doesn't get fed but is hungry only in his body.

Whether or not they were right in their rank ordering, what is clear is that there are terrible hungers of mind and spirit as well as hungers of the body, and that those with some education have a special responsibility to do what they can to meet those psychic needs. We are called to do what we can to pass on our education by teaching, in any way we can -- by research, by formal classroom teaching, or by any kind of informal teaching -- those people with whom we can share what we ourselves have been given.

It isn't possible to give a specific set of formulations about our obligations with regard to learning which will fit everybody. But here is one thing which will apply to all of us who find ourselves in higher education. We do no one any good with mediocrity. Sometimes we get tired. Sometimes we get lazy. Sometimes we feel defeated. Sometimes we get mixed up and think that there is some virtue in selling ourselves short; and so we excuse our failure even to try for mastery and excellence by telling ourselves that we don't have much talent. But none of this is acceptable, is it? Our God is a consuming fire. If we let ourselves get close to that fire, in the love of the life of faith, we will blaze, too, won't we?

Mother Teresa's nuns are all over the world now. She built an incredibly powerful and influential

organization. And she started as one small, obscure, powerless woman; she started by picking up a broom in the house of a poor family in Calcutta and sweeping the floor for them. Augustine's mother thought he would never convert to Christianity. Aquinas's classmates thought he was dumb. Milton wrote virtually all his great poetry when he had lost his sight, his property, his job, and his community. Our job is not to try to determine how much talent or opportunity we have been given, in order to avoid having to go too far or try too much. Our job is to give everything we've got and let God determine what to make of it. And so we need to strive hard for all the excellence we can in whatever work God gives us to do.

I want to finish by reflecting briefly on how we are to evaluate our success in our efforts to fulfill our obligations when we have struggled for excellence.

What is most instructive for us, as we reflect on where we are and what we have achieved, is, I think, the story of Cyril and Methodius. They were brothers, born in the 9th century AD in the Greek-speaking part of the Christian world. They took it

as their lives' work to convert the Slavs, the people of Russia and other territories where Slavonic was spoken. But at that time there was no written language for Slavonic. So Cyril invented an alphabet for Slavonic, and Cyril and Methodius translated the Scriptures into Slavonic, writing them down in Cyril's invented language. Then they set out for the Slavonic-speaking countries to evangelize, with their newly made Slavonic Bibles. They gave their lives to that effort.

But they made very few converts, and then they died. Their work and their Slavonic Bible were largely forgotten.

But later, much later, when there was a new move to evangelize Slavic peoples, the missionaries took the Bibles made by Cyril and Methodius with them and began a wave of conversion which brought one nation after another to Christianity, until in the 10th century all of Russia was converted.

Cyril and Methodius might have thought that they had spent their labor in vain. They might have thought, at the end of their lives, that they had been entirely unsuccessful in what they set out to

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do. But they were faithful. They gave all they had to what they saw as their vocation, as educated Christians in the service of the Lord. And the fruit that crowned their labor and sacrifice was enormous - only it came after their deaths, and not before.

And so success for us has to be defined differently from the way in which it is defined in the secular world. For us, success is being faithful in all we do, to the best of our ability, to give back all that has been bestowed on us as educated Christians, to

understand what our calling obligates us to. What happens to our efforts is in God's hand, and it's his business, not ours.

Eleonore Stump is Robert J. Henle, S.J. Professor of Philosophy at St. Louis University. Her 2003 Gifford lectures, Wandering in Darkness: Narrative and the Problem of Suffering are forthcoming on Oxford University Press.

We at the Christian Study Center wish our readers a rich and blessed Christmas season. May this English carol encourage you to reflect on the incarnation of Christ in his first Advent, so that you live in the light of his life and await his second Advent.

Infinite Light

The greatness of God in his love has been shown,
The light of his life on the Nations is thrown;
And that which the Jews and the Greeks did divine
Is come in the fullness of Jesus to shine:

The Light of the World in the darkness has shone, And grows in our sight as the ages flow on.

He rolls grim darkness and sorrow away
And brings all our fears to the light of the day;
The idols are fallen of anger and blood,
And God is revealed as the loving and good:

The Light of the World in the darkness has shone, And grows in our sight as the ages flow on.

And, though we have sinned like the Prodigal Son,
His love to our succour and welcome will run.
His gospel of pardon, of love and accord,
Will master oppression and shatter the sword:

The Light of the World in the darkness has shone, And grows in our sight as the ages flow on.

The Light of the World is more clear to our sight
As errors disperse and men see him aright:
In lands long in shadow, his Churches arise
And blaze for their neighbors the Way of the Wise:

The Light of the World in the darkness has shone, And grows in our sight as the ages flow on.

Traditional English Carol from *The Oxford Book of Carols*

CENTER HIGHLIGHTS

FALL RE-CAP

The Christian Study Center continues to offer the university community the thoughtful consideration of a Christian understanding of life. The fall line-up included six Culture Seminar lectures, two guest lectures and a reading group on Flannery O'Connor, the Director's class on "Contradictions in the Gospels", and other classes on topics ranging from Pauline theology to Christianity and the environment to the poetry of John Donne. The Culture Seminar explores the intellectual resources of the Christian tradition, addressing challenges of cultural change and cultivating conversation within the academic disciplines. One series addressed *Issues in Contemporary Philosophy* as we welcomed **Merold Westphal (Fordham University)** and **Eleonore Stump (St. Louis University)**. Westphal helped us welcome a capacity crowd for the first time in our classroom, packing in over 85 people to hear about the "Christian Uses of Modern Atheism." Stump's lecture on campus drew an engaging crowd as she discussed "Personal Relations and Moral Residue: The Holocaust and Stain on the Soul." In a second series, we drew from local scholars in religion, law, and history to address topics in *Christianity and Democracy*. Turning to literature, **Corbin Carnell**, **Marsha Bryant** and **Padgett Powell**, all professors in the English department at UF, visited the Study Center to offer insight into Flannery O'Connor, the focus of our reading group. As we look to the spring we are moving into new territory as we explore the theme of *Christianity, Creativity, and Meaning*.

In addition to our educational programs, we were also glad to launch **Pascal's**, a new coffee shop in the Study Center, creating an atmosphere for study, reflection, and conversation. **Please mark your calendar for Grand Opening events the week of January 10.**

SPRING AT THE STUDY CENTER

CHRISTIANITY, CREATIVITY, AND MEANING

This spring we are embarking on the theme of *Christianity, Creativity, and Meaning*. Through this emphasis, we hope to explore how Christian thought can supply a framework for creative expression, be it in the visual arts, performance art, literature, or whatever else.

MONDAYS IN THE CLASSROOM

"Imagination and Meaning: An Introduction to Christianity, Creativity, and Meaning"

Dr. Richard Horner, Director of the Study Center

Monday, January 10, time to be announced, Study Center Classroom

"The Face of Jesus: Christian Themes in Western Art"

Dr. Robert Westin, Professor of Art History, University of Florida

Mondays, January 24, 31, February 7, 14, 21, time to be announced, Study Center Classroom

"Body Art and the Possibility of Meaning"

Dr. Richard Horner, Director of the Center

Mondays, March 7, 14, 21, 28, April 4, 11, time to be announced, Study Center Classroom

READINGS IN CHRISTIANITY AND CREATIVITY

Reading group: "Essays in Christianity and Creativity"

Monthly discussion will focus on selected essays ranging from Saint Augustine to Madeleine L'Engle. Reading selections will be available at Study Center info table. Wednesday, January 12, noon, Study Center Conference Room.

Future discussions: Wednesdays at noon, specific dates to be announced - see website.

The Pascal Society - "Readings in Creativity and Scholarship"

For undergraduate and graduate students involved with Study Center programs.

Readings available at Study Center info table.

Time to be announced. See website for future meeting times.

PBS'S "THE QUESTION OF GOD"
OFFERS A FRESH APPROACH TO A
TIMELESS CONVERSATION

Richard V. Horner

This fall PBS aired "The Question of God: Sigmund Freud and C. S. Lewis." Based on a book of the same title written by Dr. Armand Nicholi, Jr., the program grew out of a very popular seminar that Dr. Nicholi, Professor of Psychiatry at Harvard University, has taught for many years. In addition to teaching about the lives and thought of Freud and Lewis, the program also offered a round-table discussion among seven individuals who included Christians, skeptics, seekers, and representatives of other understandings of human spirituality.

One's evaluation of the program will depend on what one expects from it. I can imagine some Christian viewers lamenting the fact that the program left the glass half empty, but I can just as easily imagine other Christian believers, ourselves included, celebrating the fact that the glass was half full - especially in a land that is as parched as the one we view through our television screens. Yes, the program might have gone further in developing an apologetic for Christian faith and in refuting Freudian psychology, modern skepticism, and generalized notions of spirituality, but when one remembers that a great many of the people who watch PBS view the phrase "Christian thinking" as an oxymoron, it was refreshing to see PBS present Christian understanding as a serious option that is still to be taken seriously.

We do well, then, not to assess the program on the basis of what we might want to see in an ideal world, but to assess it on the basis of its own implicit goals. On this basis, we commend the program to you for several reasons that resonate with our own mission as a study center. First, it seeks to educate and does a good job of that. The program offers solid teaching on the lives and thought of both Freud and Lewis, and it does well to give us these two figures as representatives of two great understandings that have played a major role in the modern world. Second, the program seeks to create conversation around significant questions that are basic to human experience and to do so with ears that listen as well as mouths that speak. The program is exemplary in modeling what it means to listen to others, and Armand Nicholi is especially striking in his ability to listen in a way that also evokes honest ques-

tions. Finally, the program seeks to give serious consideration to a Christian understanding of life, and again it succeeds. You might find yourself quibbling with the details of the presentation, but it is wonderfully refreshing to encounter the thoughtful consideration of a Christian understanding of life on prime time television.

If you did not see the original broadcast, we do encourage you to purchase your own copy (www.pbs.org/wgbh/questionofgod/) or come borrow ours here at the Study Center. We also suggest that you consider the following as you listen to the program.

1. Let the program create conversations in your own life. You might watch it with friends or family, and when you have finished watching it let it inform conversations you have elsewhere as well.

2. Let it lead you further into the writings of Freud and Lewis - and beyond. Learn more of what both of these important thinkers have to say. The better you understand Freud, the better you will understand the culture around you, the more you will grapple with the important issues that Freud explored, and the more fully you will understand your own beliefs. Meanwhile, a four-hour program can barely dip into all that C. S. Lewis has to offer. If you are local to Gainesville, you can find the complete works of Lewis in our library, but one way or another, we all do well to read and re-read what Lewis has to offer in his essays and his fiction.

3. Let it provoke your own thinking. One of my favorite students here at the University of Florida, who has now moved on to graduate school, used to attend the meetings of the atheist and agnostic organization at UF. She did this not to evangelize but to hear the questions that her friends raised in that setting and to deal with those questions honestly. No matter what your beliefs, this program will do that for you. Someone in your own round-table discussion will almost certainly say something that will drive you nuts. When that happens, how will you respond? Will you just dismiss that comment, or that person, out of hand or will you do the hard work necessary to listen and to formulate a thoughtful and compassionate response?

Personally, the program has provoked numerous questions and suggestions for further inquiry and thought. For instance, I wonder if Lewis' conversion should be described as "a leap of faith?" If not, however, how should it be described? How would you describe the process by which you came to faith? And why do you continue to hold to the convictions you do?

Secondly, I was delighted that, as the story of C. S. Lewis unfolded, the program focused for some time on the distinctiveness of Christianity and located that distinctiveness in the person of Christ and still more specifically, in the incarnation. The program made it clear that it was this central truth of Christianity that drew Lewis from a general notion of theism to Christ himself. Lewis recognized that, while other religious teachers and leaders have made claims to prophetic status, Jesus claimed that he was God. Lewis understood that this constitutes a difference that makes a difference, and he also admitted that it is hard to dismiss. Either Jesus was what he said he was and we must take him seriously, or he was a lunatic or liar and we must dismiss him out of hand. This was one of several points in the program where it was refreshing to hear a thoughtful consideration of a Christian understanding emerging out of a television set that so rarely gives voice to such wisdom.

Having done so well in focusing on the centrality of the incarnate Christ it was odd and disappointing to see the program loose sight of Jesus only moments later as the group discussed what is typically called the problem of evil. In this important discussion no one actually mentioned Jesus. How odd that a discussion that deliberately seeks to give Christianity a place would leave Jesus out when it comes to such a basic and critical aspect of human experience.

This is by no means the first time that I have seen Jesus left out at this critical point, but it is always striking and troubling every time it happens. Perhaps you've noticed this as well. Why is this the case? And what difference would it make to have gotten Jesus, and his sufferings and death, into the discussion that concluded the second of the two parts of this program?

Third, how shall we respond to the final question of the program? Nicholi suggests that Freud and Lewis represent conflicting parts of our selves. He suggests that there is both the yearning that Lewis embodied and the defiance that Freud embraced in each of us. What do you think? Do you agree? If so, how would you make sense of this conflict?

These are only a few of the questions that I find myself asking as I watch the program. They suggest lines of further reflection and opportunities for further conversation here at the Study Center and beyond. Add your own, and keep thinking.

Shall we criticize the PBS broadcast for not answering the questions that it raised? No. To the contrary, we would do well to make the program a success by letting it provoke us to humble inquiry, earnest reflection, and compassionate conversation.

*Richard V. Horner, Ph.D.,
is Director of the Christian Study Center.*

THANK YOU FOR YOUR INTEREST AND SUPPORT

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CALENDAR OF EVENTS

January 10-14: Grand Opening for Pascal's, the new coffee shop in the Study Center.
see website for details: www.christianstudycenter.org.

January 10: "Introduction: Christianity, Creativity, and Meaning"
Dr. Richard Horner, Director of the Study Center
Time to be announced, Study Center Classroom

January 12: "Readings in Christianity and Creativity"
Reading selections will be available at Study Center info table.
Noon, Study Center Conference Room, future discussions to be announced.

January 14: The Pascal Society - "Readings in Creativity and Scholarship"
For undergraduate and graduate students involved with Study Center programs. Readings available at Study Center info table.
Time to be announced. See website for future meeting times.

January 24: "The Face of Jesus: Christian Themes in Western Art"
Dr. Robert Westin, Professor of Art History, University of Florida
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March 7: "Body Art and the Possibility of Meaning"
Dr. Richard Horner, Director of the Study Center, *Time to be announced, Study Center Classroom, class will continue on Mondays: March 14, 21, 28, April 4, 11.*

Times are subject to change, please check our website (christianstudycenter.org) for final schedules.

See website for future events, including future Culture Seminar lectures.

If you do not wish to receive *Reconsiderations*, please email us at info@christianstudycenter.org or call 352-379-7375.

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