CULTURE AND POLITICS

Liberties

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MARK LILLA

Lambs and Wolves

For paradise to be possible either the lion must lose his nails,
or the lamb must grow his own.

HANS BLUMENBERG

Before setting out to Moriah, where he intends to obey God's command to sacrifice his son, Abraham loads the wood into Isaac's arms and carries the burning torch and a sharp knife himself. On the way his son asks, *but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?* The question is devastating, as is Abraham's answer: *My son, God will provide himself a lamb.* It is a scene of unspeakable cruelty. (The murder of Abel is a crime statistic by comparison.) For Isaac is doubly innocent. Unaware of God's command, and presumably too inexperienced to beware fathers bearing torches, he is psychologically innocent. And since he has presumably done no wrong, he is morally innocent as well. All this weighs on Abraham, and it is meant to. He has agreed to be the hand by which innocence is extinguished.

There are other mythical traditions in which a father might kill a son without qualms, whether to gain divine favor or to assure a military victory. But the Hebrew Bible is a different sort of book. Its God is a test giver who keeps an eye on the moral spectator. Isaac turns out to be just a prop in a drama revolving entirely around his father. Once Abraham has proven his infinite resignation before God — without, in the end, committing the unspeakable — nothing more is required of the human lamb and the incident is not mentioned again. The real test for Isaac will come later, when he becomes an adult and is saddled with two difficult sons. One wonders if he ever thought back to that strange afternoon. He certainly would not have been encouraged to dwell on it. In Judaism there is no cult of the innocent white lamb.

In Christianity there is. The Gospels rewrite the Abraham drama and present a divine Father who for mankind's sake willingly sacrifices his divine-human Son, who just as willingly offers himself up. In this version, the Father is the prop and the innocent Son is the story. This focus on sacrificed innocence explains why lamb imagery suffuses the Christian imagination and shows up so often in scripture, theology, and the arts. But it is an ambiguous symbol. In the Gospel of John, Jesus announces, *I am the good shepherd: the good shepherd giveth his life for the sheep*. Early Christian iconography relied heavily on this metaphor, beginning with catacomb paintings showing the Redeemer with one lamb draped over his shoulders while two others accompany him. The image implies that to be a good Christian is to be a good lamb, harmless and willing to be led by someone who knows the way.

John the Baptist had something different in mind when

he declared, on first seeing Jesus, *Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world*. Now we are asked to think of Jesus not as a wise caretaker but as an innocent victim allowing himself to be beaten, lashed, spat upon, and crucified. A self-immolating Isaac. This image of a passive redeemer would leave a far deeper impression on the Christian imagination than that of the Good Shepherd. But as a symbol it leaves something to be desired. The God of the Hebrew Bible is a fearsome God, leading His people out of the wilderness in a pillar of cloud to the lands they will conquer. A suffering Christian can surely identity with the suffering Lamb of God. But where is the solace, where is the guidance, where is the hope of gaining protection?

The other John, author of the Book of Revelation, provided one answer. As his revelation begins, we are introduced to a repulsive exterminating beast with seven horns and seven eyes who has been sent to settle every divine score. Like Oedipus solving the riddle of the sphinx, or King Arthur extracting Excalibur from the stone, the lamb confronts a challenge that others cannot meet: opening the Book of the Seven Seals, which will bring about the end times. As the lamb breaks the first four seals, the four horsemen of the apocalypse emerge, the first on a pure white steed, the last on a black one. With the fifth, those slain for the Word of God emerge from darkness, demanding vengeance against their killers, which they will soon have. The bloody work begins when the sixth seal is broken, revealing the rulers and the rich, who try to hide themselves from judgment and cry out, *Hide us from the face of him that sitteth on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb!* No one answers and they are doomed to eternal suffering. When the dust settles, John looks out and the destruction has been swept away. He sees a new heaven and

a new earth. The lamb is still there, though he has been cleaned up and is about to be given in celestial marriage to the New Jerusalem. *And the city had no need of the sun, neither of the moon, to shine in it: for the glory of God did lighten it, and the Lamb is the light thereof.* That, and its defense force.

The scene in the Christmas creche is so familiar that it takes some effort to realize how strange it is. The exhausted parents we recognize. But who are these silk-robed and turbaned men who bow and kneel before an infant? And what about the animals, who seem just as mesmerized as the visitors? Even the little lamb approaches and leans its head over the manger to get a closer look.

We are all Magi when it comes to children. Like other animals we are hardwired to protect our young. But the subjective feelings that accompany this instinct point to something beyond mere preservation of the species. How we imagine children to be really reflects how we imagine the world ought to be. This has not always been true for all peoples and societies, but of ours it is. The death of a child affects us very differently from the death of an adult. Even the death of other species' young disturbs some people. They will eat beef and mutton but wouldn't think of touching veal or lamb. In what sense grown animals are less innocent and worthy of protection than young ones is difficult to discern, especially given that the latter will face the same fate as the former if they reach maturity. One might even make a clever case that eating lamb or veal saves the animal from months or years of suffering in captivity. But that is really not what our feelings are about. They are about holding onto a world

picture. The child in the cradle has no idea what a burden it already carries for us.

We oscillate between two ways of thinking about the newborn before our eyes. One is to see it as a blank slate, knowing nothing, intuiting nothing, having neither moral nor immoral instincts (or weak ones). This can fill us with a sense of promise as we project its life into the future. Seeing an infant, Rousseau wrote, is like seeing nature in early spring:

> I see him bubbling, lively, animated, without gnawing cares, without long and painful foresight, whole in his present being, and enjoying a fullness of life which seems to want to extend itself beyond him. I foresee him at another age exercising the senses, the mind, and the strength which is developing in him day by day, new signs of which he gives every moment. I contemplate the child, and he pleases me. I imagine him as a man, and he pleases me more. His ardent blood seems to reheat mine. I believe I am living his life, and his vivacity rejuvenates me.

Rousseau was a pessimist who saw life as a trial, not only in his particular case but for everyone who is forced to share the world with others. Why then doesn't he foresee the grown child suffering in such a world? Because he, like most of us, is inclined to saddle children with expectations that their new lives might somehow redeem our own, or redeem life itself. We are always on the lookout for occasions to rejuvenate our hopes in rejuvenation, from wedding days to Inauguration Days. They are all opportunities to convince ourselves that this time it really will be different.

If the child's innocence is a blankness, an absence of pre-determined qualities, we can be hopeful about its prospects. But if we think of its innocence instead as the presence of something valuable, a kind of purity or moral perfection, then more melancholy thoughts might occupy us. Not because we see something dark in the infant's eyes, but because we imagine that its perfection can only be diminished or lost over time. On this assumption, infants are not starting a journey into a world they will make their own through experience. Rather, they stand as an alternative to our fallen world, a symbol of what we might have been had we not succumbed to it. Experience, which leaves permanent stains on the sheets of the soul, is their greatest enemy. And so it must be postponed, blunted, diluted. *Save the children!* This might mean that we must protect them from harm until they can protect themselves. Or it might mean that we should preserve the child-like within them, or within ourselves, or within our society. Or even that we should hold up innocence as a civilizational ideal and stave off knowledge about our intractable world, distrust it, and listen instead to the bleating of the lambs.

Ancient documents tell us that in the Mediterranean world of the first century BCE adults were using children as spiritual mediums in the theurgic ceremonies of mystical cults. A child would be selected for the job and blindfolded, and then the cult's adepts would begin secret incantations to entice the divine to make its presence manifest. This was one of them:

> Come to me, you who fly through the air, called in secret codes and unutterable names, at this lamp divination that I perform, and enter into the child's soul, so that it may receive the immortal form in mighty and incorruptible light.

This done, the blindfold would then be removed, and the child would be asked to look into a flame or a bowl of oily liquid and report to the adults whatever he or she saw in it. The assumption was that children, lacking experience and perhaps imagination, were less likely to be blocked by their own thoughts and feelings and illusions, and thus were purer conduits for unadulterated truth. We make the same assumption whenever we say *out of the mouths of babes*, unconsciously quoting the Psalms. It is a very old thought.

Americans are particularly taken with it, as we see in the movies they produce and flock to. Steven Spielberg is the great mythogogue of the wise innocent child, and in this domain his masterpiece is *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*. Aliens are coming, but before they arrive children begin to have premonitions of them, which they receive in complete serenity. When the time comes and spaceships begin to hover and emit a blinding light, the children giggle. When the mothership lands, they toddle up to it and are met by hairless, sexless aliens who look like stretched out infants with very large heads. The children grab their hands and enter the ship as if that were the most natural thing in the world. Grown-ups in the movie are portrayed as oblivious or resistant, their age and experience having closed their minds. Except, of course, for the one exceptional adult who has never really grown up. He has revelatory dreams and spreads the Good News despite being treated as a madman. In some films of this genre the news about the aliens delivered by the children can be bad, very bad. But no one listens to these little prophets until it's too late — and now *they're here.*

In the history of myth, children have been portrayed not only as prophets or mediums of a higher power, but as partaking of those powers by virtue of their youth. Tibetan Buddhists are

only one people to have searched for a child to lead them. The very fact that Jesus came as an infant and did not descend from heaven in adult form was long taken in the Christian tradition as a sign of the spiritual potency of innocence. In the Middle Ages there developed a myth, long taken to be historically accurate, about a supposed Children's Crusade that took place in the early thirteenth century. It recounted the exploits of a group of children who were said to have spontaneously marched across Europe and organized their own brigade to seize the Holy Land from the heathen Turk and to shame adults unwilling to make the ultimate sacrifice.

To take a modern example, consider *Heidi*, the nineteenth-century Swiss children's book that remains a perennial favorite. Its basic theme has been adopted and adapted in countless books and movies. In all these stories an innocent, preferably dimpled little girl is put into the care of a gruff old man or woman. This adult treats her abysmally at first, but little by little is transformed by the child's relentless, not to say tiresome, good cheer and good deeds. The cherub turns her cheek again and again until the adults begin to see how cruel they have been, but even more how they have darkened their own lives. How? By refusing to look on the sunny side. The story ends with a tearful embrace between innocent child and the now healed adult. And why not? If the Messiah came as a child, why shouldn't the psychotherapist?

At the age of seven, any child would throw the first stone.

MICHEL HOUELLEBECQ

Children are naturally good. They are honest, pacific, sympathetic, and wise. No parent of a two-year-old or a thirteen-

year-old will be taken in by this myth. The market for it is expectant couples, forgetful grandparents, and the childless. But innocence is not all we project onto children. We also express our fears about evil in the world, spooking ourselves with tales of demon-possessed infants and child killers. As if on cue, when Spielberg began making his movies in the 1970s Hollywood also gave us films such as *The Exorcist* and *The Omen*, reflecting the other half of our disassociated fantasies about the young. Both spawned popular movie franchises, and *The Exorcist*, which won the Academy Award for Best Picture in 1974, is one of the highest grossing films in history.

The first of the genre was *The Bad Seed*, released in 1956, an eerie film about a cute little blonde girl who kills friends and neighbors without the least trace of guilt. Soon she is revealed to be the granddaughter of a serial killer, therefore his "seed." On learning this her mother tries to kill the child, but fails. In the novel on which the movie was based, the mother then commits suicide, leaving the child free to continue murdering and haunting our imaginations. A brilliant ending. At the time, though, it ran up against the Hays Code, which dictated that onscreen crime could never be shown to pay. And so a more uplifting ending was written, in which the little girl is struck dead by lightning in the final shot. (Thus fulfilling a fleeting fantasy that all parents have had at one time or another.)

The ancient world seems to have had less trouble recognizing children's capacity for wickedness. Even the Hebrew Bible contains a story about it. In the Second Book of Kings we read of Elisha, who has just taken on the mantle of prophet after Elijah was taken up to heaven in a chariot of fire. One day, while making his way to the city of Bethel, Elisha runs into a large group of boys who tease him and mock his baldness. He does not turn the other cheek, nor does he use the episode as a teaching moment. Instead he curses the boys *in the name of the Lord,* the Scripture says. Immediately two bears appear out of the forest and maul them to death.

The infant-besotted New Testament, on the other hand, keeps children's capacity for cruelty at bay. Jesus suffers the children to come to him and exhorts his disciples to be like them. But in a classic example of the return of the repressed, a second century Christian author aiming to celebrate the supernatural powers of the Messiah left an apocryphal text, known as *The Infancy Gospel of Thomas*, that portrayed children in a much darker light. Its hero/anti-hero is the pre-adolescent Jesus, who is portrayed with an almost cinematic vividness. Straight away we are introduced to a young Messiah who curses a child found messing with something he built on the sand; the boy shrivels up like a tree. When another boy inadvertently bumps into Jesus while running, he drops dead on the spot. Seeing what a menace the young savior was turning out to be, parents of the other children in the village complain to Joseph and Mary, only to be struck blind. Finally Joseph stirs up his courage and confronts his son. *Why do you do such things?*, he asks. The child only stares at him stonily and replies, *Do not vex me*. A horror movie moment.

Perhaps in the early centuries of Christianity, when pagan realism was still a force, it was easier to confront the gap between the idealized image of Jesus in the manger and the actual children with whom adults have to cope. The most profound analyst of this gap was Augustine. He is rarely mentioned in books and anthologies on child psychology, no doubt because he rejected the Pelagianism that still undergirds our secular culture. We generally assume that human evil can be traced back to human action (early childhood traumas, social conditions) and that the damage can be undone by

human means: social reform, pedagogy, therapy. In other words: human beings are not born with evil propensities, we make them bad.

Augustine saw the logical flaw in this assumption. Of course, bad influences harm us. But we cannot explain the evil that children commit by pointing to the world created by evil adults, since those adults were once children. We face an infinite regress. The real difficulty is accounting for the fact that anyone is capable of evil at all. Augustine appealed to the Fall and original sin to solve the conundrum, a move that few are still willing to make. But we have been unable to come up with another concept to explain the conditions of the possibility of evil in children. We try to block out the thought that a young boy can pull on a ski mask, load his gun, walk into a school cafeteria and kill classmates he was joking with the day before. That among the children sitting at Jesus' feet were a few who preferred Barabbas.

Augustine saw such propensities within himself as a youth. As he recounts in the *Confessions*, one day he was playing with a group of friends and they decided to steal some pears from a nearby orchard. They weren't hungry and threw the pears away immediately. Why did they do it? This question plagued Augustine for many years, not as a matter of guilt but as a barrier to self-understanding. Only just before his conversion could he see why he had done it: *my pleasure was not in the pears; it was in the crime itself.* I loved my fall, he admits, I loved the shame. Tyrants and even murderers can have motives for their crimes; I did not. I am worse than they. Though the crime was petty, it was radically evil because it was gratuitous. Radical evil cannot be reduced to pleasure seeking or fear, nor can it be explained away as a reaction to previous harms. Radical evil we commit *just because*. And our capacity to commit it is innate.

Augustine's examples of ordinary child behavior, rather than adult crimes, gives his argument force. But of childhood crimes we also have plenty of examples. In a famous case dating back to the 1990s, two ten-year-old boys in Kirkby, England, abducted, tortured, and murdered a two-year-old by the name of James Bulgar. They had planned everything. They kicked and stomped on him, threw bricks and stones at him, crushing his skull, and mutilated the rest of him. Batteries were shoved into his mouth and he was placed on train tracks where his body was cut in two by a train. The internet will oblige you with countless similar stories if you are inclined to look for them. They serve to remind us that, on the map of the human psyche, Columbine is not far from Neverland.

Lovers slip home from trysts beneath the palm trees.

MARGARET MEAD

So how do we reconcile the Gospels' image of innocent children at the feet of Jesus with Augustine's image of sinful ones stealing a neighbor's pears? Without resorting to casuistry, it is not easy. Which is why even in our post-Christian culture we see educated opinion about innocence swing from one extreme to the other without finding a settled resting place. Nowhere is this more evident than in our thinking about the sexuality of children.

The revolution in Western attitudes toward sexuality that began in the early twentieth century is still misunderstood. It remains conventional to portray the intellectual and cultural transformation that followed as a glorious and uncomplicated release from the suffocating grip of Puritanism and an escape into an equally uncomplicated sexual freedom. Freud,

who did more than anyone to trigger the change, did not at all see things that way. His insight was that in not accepting children's sexual nature, their desires and their aggression, Christian societies were preventing them from integrating passions and experiences into a productive, autonomous adult life. Maturity, not liberation, was Freud's goal. The same is true of Margaret Mead, whose hugely influential anthropological study, *Coming of Age in Samoa,* which appeared in 1928, idealized Samoans' guilt-free attitude toward sex. She did not, however, prescribe these practices for Western societies, which she considered impossible; the point was to make her readers reckon the psychological costs of living with pointless, pervasive sexual guilt. Like Freud, she wanted to help us cope better with the adult world that we have built for ourselves, not escape it.

What neither Mead nor Freud anticipated was that their work would inspire educated adults in the West — and soon just about everyone else — to demand that the new stigma-free approach to childhood sexuality also be applied to themselves. With astonishing speed in the decades following the Second World War, free sexual exploration went from being considered an early stage in childhood development to being a life ideal for adults intent on offloading their hang-ups. In the 1960s Mead complained publicly that this was not at all what they meant, to no avail. It is hard not to see the sexual revolution that began a half-century ago as inspired in part by a kind of innocence-envy. What's good for the gosling should be good for the gander, no? If taboos are inherently bad (something Freud and Mead never asserted) and impulses are inherently good (ditto), wouldn't escaping the first and unleashing the second restore a lost innocence? Of course not. Instead we discovered that the pursuit of a second sexual innocence for adults could rob many children of their first.

Extravagant examples of this inversion began popping up in the 1970s. A well known one was a commune formed in Friedrichshof, Austria, by the artist Otto Mühl, a former Wehrmacht soldier who after the war fell under the influence of Wilhelm Reich. Mühl created a group called the Action-Analytical Organization, whose program was to liberate society from its psychological dependence on repressive bourgeois norms and consumerism through free love, group therapy (which mainly involved screaming), and a return to nature. He built an enormous complex in the countryside that housed dozens of children who slept communally in one area, and many more dozens of adults who slept communally in another. In the group's home movies we see footage of smiling long-haired men working the fields and women with closely-cropped hair running around topless, a baby hanging from each breast. We see naked children playing in the mud or smearing themselves with paint, to the delight of the grown-ups. And we see a room full of naked adults imitating the children by rolling around on the floor in a therapeutic group grope, sometimes jumping up to deliver primal screams before diving back into the scrum. It's hard to imagine such scenes delighting the unfortunate children who witnessed them. Inevitably, rumors of child sexual abuse began circulating, and, just as inevitably, they proved true. Adolescent girls, it turned out, were regularly taken to Mühl for sexual initiation, while boys would be taken to the woman he called his wife for the same reason. And parents let this happen, out of ideological conviction or studied ignorance. By the 1980s the law caught up with Mühl and he was finally convicted of pedophilia and spent seven years in prison.

But it was the subtler intrusion of images of sexualized children into Western popular culture that has had the most lasting effects. One cannot help thinking that the Gospel's image of children as innocent of sexual desire, pure little *putti*, had the boomerang effect of exciting a perverse adult desire to see that innocence violated, or at least toyed with. In 1976, a year before *Close Encounters* was released, Jodie Foster appeared as a fourteen-year-old prostitute in Martin Scorsese's *Taxi Driver,* and won an Academy Award for her efforts. Upping the ante, Louis Malle cast Brooke Shields as a twelve-year-old prostitute in *Pretty Baby* in 1978. Even more insidious, given its omnipresence, was the new blatant sexualization of young girls in advertising. In the 1980s pre-pubescent girls began to appear in billboard and magazine ads in absurdly tight jeans, topless with hands covering their half-developed breasts, blow-dried hair and makeup, looking knowingly into the camera. *Nothing comes between me and my Calvins.* At the same time beauty pageants were being organized where girls under ten years of age were transformed into wink-wink miniature seductresses, singing slightly risqué songs and making suggestive dance moves at competitions. (Today parents take home videos of their own children doing this and post them online for delighted friends and family.) Indecency was continuously and radically defined down. A former Miss Vermont Junior Queen, when challenged by a writer for putting her child in competitions, replied: *Do I put makeup on her? Yes. But I don't think I overdo it for a 5-year-old.*

And then, beginning in the 1980s, the mood swung wildly in the other direction and Americans found themselves gripped by a collective panic about their little lambs. It began in 1983 when a mentally unstable mother in Southern California went to the local police and began making bizarre claims that the childcare center her son attended routinely raped and abused children. After interviewing many of the children, overeager police and unscrupulous therapists using dubious "recovered memory" techniques began arresting members of the center's staff. The trials that followed, the longest and most expensive in American history to that point, were reported on breathlessly by the local and national press, and copy-cat accusations kept being made around the country for years, long after the original stories had been debunked and the accused were exonerated. One staff member spent five years in prison without ever being convicted of a crime. Not long afterward, of course, we learned about a genuine scandal, the massive global cover-up of systematic child abuse committed by Catholic priests, which only reinforced the fears.

Strangely, though, Americans remain strangely indifferent to the most obvious violations of children's sexual innocence all around them. Advertising firms still portray flirty, pouting pre-teen girls to hawk their products, and young Pretty-Baby actresses are still cast in movies which other children see. Young boys with internet connections can watch the sexual torture of women online without fear of the overweening state stepping in. And countless teen and pre-teen girls routinely post self-made videos of themselves stripping or masturbating for the pleasure of their boyfriends; or they upload the clips for free to highly profitable porn sites where pedophilicly inclined adults can enjoy themselves for free. Meanwhile, after having been driven to school by their frightened parents, adolescents are given lectures about obtaining explicit consent from the opposite sex before trying to hold hands or plant a first kiss. The result being that pleasure is the only thing American young people are still innocent of.

Innocence is like a dumb leper who has lost his bell, wandering the world, meaning no harm.

GRAHAM GREENE

Millions of adults around the world call themselves Christians. But can a Christian be an adult? It's a fair question.

The Hebrew Bible, overflowing with family sagas, *Bildungsromane*, and political intrigue, reveals the world and its ways even while bringing divine judgment down upon them. Adults marry, have children, educate them, cultivate land, seek and give counsel, get angry and are appeased, suffer and smite their enemies, get ill and die. There are good characters, evil characters, and many ambiguous ones such as King David, who swings from sin to repentance and back again, like a metronome. God, too, has his bad days, and the Hebrews never know quite what to expect of him. So they are forced to learn from experience and live with uncertainty. The characters of the Hebrew Bible mature before our eyes, and we mature as we read their stories.

Children and lambs get more than their due in the Gospels, but we learn next to nothing about adult life. Jesus is precociously wise and has nothing to learn, no capacities in need of development. Mary says hardly a word, and Joseph doesn't speak at all. The disciples are little more than stick figures. James and John have trouble staying up at night; Peter is something of a coward; and Thomas needs the evidence of his fingers to accept Christ's resurrection. Beyond that, we learn nothing about them, not even about the extraordinary Judas, who seems to have strayed in from the Old Testament. Jesus does not prepare his disciples for carrying the burdens of adulthood in their families and communities. Instead he admonishes them, *If any man come to me, and hate not his father, and mother, and wife, and children, and brethren, and sisters, yea, and his own life also, he cannot be my disciple.* A good disciple drops his nets and follows without asking questions. What his wife and children eat that night we are not told.

The early Christians were an apocalyptic sect that expected Jesus to return in their lifetimes, so it makes some sense that they were little inclined to plan for their own futures or their children's, or create anything durable in the world. But the longer Christ's return was delayed, the more Christians had to accustom themselves to living in a world they found alien. Discipleship turned out to be more complicated than being reborn as a child, or imitating a lamb, or washing the feet of the poor. It required a knowledge of life, of human psychology, of political necessity. This their new scriptures did not confer on them. And so, as time went on and the Church became a vast bureaucracy and a force in world affairs, it conformed more and more to the ways of that world and lost its soul.

That, in any case, was the view of the Protestant Reformers, whose alternative was to return to the unmediated words of the Savior, which now any believer could read in a vernacular tongue, and hold fast to them in the face of whatever challenges the world posed. One does not have to be a Counter-Reformation polemicist to recognize that however much this return to the sources enriched the inner spiritual lives of the Protestant faithful, it also induced a constriction in their conception of terrestrial life and its inevitable demands. Simple believers looked to the Gospels, then to the world, and the world looked pretty simple right back at them. *Be harmless as doves…consider the lilies of the field… love your enemies…whosoever shall smite thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also…forgive men their trespasses…take therefore no thought for the morrow: for the morrow shall take*

thought for the things of itself. That doesn't sound so hard. And the Old Testament, reread in light of the Gospels, seemed pretty straightforward, too. Under the klieg light of *sola fide*, Abraham, Jacob and Esau, Moses, even Job resembled ordinary Christians just like you and me. A rich tradition of Protestant systematic theology developed in the Reformation, beginning with Calvin's monumental *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. But on the ground every time a Protestant church's doctrine has been formalized, hierarchies of authority established, and centers of learning founded, there has arisen within its ranks little Luthers who denounced this betrayal, calling the faithful back to a more "primitive" Christianity (their term, not mine). Which is why the history of the Protestant churches resembles nothing so much as a child's game of leapfrog, where the point is to keep one step ahead of maturity.

Pure? What does it mean?

SYLVIA PLATH

Everyone needs experience with experience. Certain pious protectors of the innocent labor under the illusion that piety can only be preserved by waging a war against it. Life, they think, is a siege that can only be survived by retreating to the cloister, the yeshiva, the madrasa, the gated community, or the home school. The illusion behind their illusion is an old and crude psychology of mimesis, which holds that acquainting people only with good things will make them good and banishing all bad ones will keep them from turning bad. Even Plato may have believed this. But it is false: to guard ourselves against evil we must learn to recognize it, and to recognize the ruses people use to hide evil intentions from us. The more good one wants to do in the world, the more knowledge one needs of it, not less.

Historically the greatest victims of these prophylactic illusions have been women, who have been secluded and kept ignorant of life in many cultures and on many and shifting grounds. Young girls have been caged during menstruation to maintain their purity, then kept under surveillance to guarantee their virginity until marriage. The need to assure paternity has been invoked to justify this obsession with virginity; so has the symbolic need to maintain the sacredness of public rituals, as, for example, with the Greek Pythia and the Roman vestals. But the Christian convent is a unique institution.

In theory, convents were established to encourage spiritual contemplation and to relieve innocent Christian women of worldly cares so they could serve others. In practice, convents were often dumping grounds for poor families unable to afford dowries or even food, or for rich families wanting to park their daughters somewhere safe before marriage. The acts of charity accomplished by the sisters over the centuries are legendary in their modesty. But until recently young nuns received little formal education unless they managed to learn Latin (something few priests were willing to teach them), and no informal education on how to deal with men, property, politics, or much else in the outside world. And they certainly learned nothing about their own sexual desires, which could only be satisfied in illicit ways. By the eighteenth century, a large European literature had developed chronicling the misadventures of young girls sent to convents at an early age, where they either had a sexual awakening (proving the futility of seclusion), or were sexually abused (proving its perversity), or remained innocent, only to be preyed upon by unscrupulous men

when they left. The most influential of such tales was Diderot's *La Religieuse* (*The Nun*). Drawn from a contemporary true story, the book takes the form of a series of letters written by a young woman forced by her parents to take vows and enter a convent, where she is treated brutally. When her petition to leave the order is denied, she is transferred to a second convent, where the Mother Superior tries and fails to seduce her, and ends up killing herself. Under the shock, the young woman becomes anorexic and practices self-mutilation before finally managing to escape.

Much has changed for women in Western societies and many other parts of the world. But in the vast United States there are still pockets of radical religious believers who in the name of purity do their best to keep the minds and bodies of their children, especially girls, from developing. With predictable results. Consider the case of Elissa Wall, author of *Stolen Innocence: My Story of Growing up in a Polygamous Sect, Becoming a Teenage Bride, and Breaking Free of Warren Jeffs*, published in 2008. Elissa, or Lesie as she was commonly known, had the misfortune to be born in 1986 to a family that belonged to a break-away Mormon sect in the American Southwest. The tragedy begins with her mother, Sharon, who was also brought up in the Church's cloistered community. Sharon received no sex education, no preparation for marriage apart from learning that women belonged to men *body, boots, and britches* (as she put it), and that at every moment, without fail, they must *keep sweet*, an injunction that recurs with creepy regularity in this memoir. At an early age she was compelled to marry, then was "reassigned" to another man when that marriage broke down. Eventually six of her children would rebel against the strictures of the Church, and when she was ordered to permanently cut off

relations with them she complied, telling one of them, *I'd rather see you die than fight the priesthood.* Her greatest fear was not the priesthood, though. It was the outside world, about which she knew nothing.

Lesie's fate seemed sealed. She was molested at the age of two and her parents knew it. At the age of seven she was rebuked by the prophet's deranged, sex-obsessed son Warren for inadvertently holding the hand of a cousin during school recess, and at the age of fourteen she was made to marry a different cousin whom she loathed. Totally unaware of sexual relations or how children are conceived, she resisted her husband, who was equally ignorant about it all. Eventually he just raped her, after which she swallowed a bottle of aspirin and a bottle of ibuprofen, hoping to kill herself. Lesie became pregnant several times over the next few years, but mercifully miscarried every time. She celebrated her second anniversary joylessly at a local Denny's restaurant, in a rare trip outside the sect's camp.

The rest of Lesie's memoir is devoted to her escape, her discovery of "true love," and her brave and successful efforts to bring to justice Warren Jeffs, who is currently serving a life sentence for sexual assault of a child, among other crimes. But the memoir is much more than a conventional prison break story. The unforgettable scenes are not of cruelty and horror, though there are plenty of those. They are the scenes that evoke a suffocating, and in the end tyrannical, innocence that holds even the adults in its grip, creating an environment ideal for predators who are no more worldly than their victims. Lesie grew up in a Christian dystopia where the directive *keep sweet* was as effective a means of control as any police force.

Their singleness, their ruthlessness, their one continuous wish
makes the innocent bound to be cruel, and to suffer cruelty.
The innocent are so few that two of them seldom meet —
when they do meet, their victims lie strewn all round.

ELIZABETH BOWEN

In every life the license to innocence should expire. Societies with public rites of passage into adulthood mark this moment with ceremonies that put everyone on notice that it is time to put away childish things. Only in the United States, it seems, is the license valid for life. Appeals to history and expertise fall on deaf ears here because Americans are convinced that life belongs to the living, that anything is possible with enough effort, and that in a democratic society everyone's opinion ought to count and be weighed on the same scale — the scale of sincerity, not truth. Like members of the ancient Roman mystical cults that used children as spiritual mediums, Americans are more inclined to listen to their inner child than to scientists with their charts and graphs, who they believe probably have some secret agenda.

This prejudice is not happenstance. It flows naturally from the national myth of America as a new creation, brought into being in a self-conscious act of will after the Old World botched history up. Yet this birth was also, in a deeper mythical sense, a rebirth, the return of Adam to Eden after centuries of exile. The human race was granted its second innocence at Plymouth Rock. Consequently, the great fear is that Adamic America will bite the apple again and be cast out into the twilight world of skepticism, uncertainty, guilt, and compromise, where every other nation lives. Any backsliding into contaminating experience must be resisted or immediately forgotten. What is every American presidential election but a ritual for restoring the collective virginity? The country lives in what William James called a state of congenital amnesia, which is what makes American politics, domestic and foreign, so frustratingly predictable. Mr. Smith is always going to Washington and Mr. Deeds is always going to town, but they never learn anything and leave as proud of their redeeming ignorance as when they arrived. America saunters through history as the Neonatal Nation, the Playpen Upon a Hill.

Reinhold Niebuhr explicitly blamed this arrested development on the Christianity that he himself professed. Or rather, on the optimistic, dewy-eyed, whistle-while-you-work version of Christianity that Americans of every faith and non-faith practice when confronted with difficult political realities, particularly abroad. Niebuhr called for a return to the fundamental insights of Augustine, whose doctrine of original sin provides, he thought, a more realistic psychological foundation for understanding human political behavior. During the Great Depression Niebuhr was a minister in Detroit, and the experience of strikes and strike breakers turned him into a committed socialist engaged in improving conditions for workers and the poor. It also taught him that fallen people do bad things if they have the power to do them, and so a counter-power must be developed and exercised to turn the world right side up. Protestants, as he saw it, have rarely been good at that. They are torn between withdrawing from politics to keep their aprons clean, or self-righteously using it to establish God's moral kingdom on Earth without recognizing their own fallen nature. The harmless Lamb of the Gospels or the vengeful Lamb of Revelation: American Protestantism doesn't offer a third model.

During the Cold War, Niebuhr became an important voice in public debates about American foreign policy, which he saw

swinging perpetually between naïve isolationism, principled internationalism, and thoughtless brute force. He cannot be pegged into any conventional ideological category. He argued for the necessity of actively resisting Soviet expansionism, but also of discerning when and where to pick a fight, and for observing limits when engaged in it. He supported the building of a nuclear deterrent, but opposed the Vietnam War. He also understood why the United States came to be hated in many parts of the world, and why his fellow Americans could not comprehend this. *Nations, as individuals, who are completely innocent in their own esteem, are insufferable in their human contacts.* Niebuhr was, in other words, that rare thing, an American political adult. He knew from experience that innocence is the mother of political cruelty and that its wages are often death, usually for other people.

In the minds of many Americans we are the Billy Budd of nations, with only the loveable fault of believing that people are basically good and that all problems have solutions. In truth, we too often resemble Travis Bickle, the raging innocent who becomes an exterminating lamb in *Taxi Driver*. A Vietnam veteran with scars on his back to prove it, Travis returns home in the 1970s and finds himself driving a cab in New York, where every street corner is a cross between *Vanity Fair* and the *Inferno*, strewn with garbage and men in superfly outfits and women in hot pants looking for tricks. Travis loathes it and vows to clean it up. He is looking for a cross to nail himself to. And so he writes himself into a chivalry tale, choosing a random teen prostitute as his reluctant damsel in distress, and her two-bit pimp as his nemesis. Travis is no spontaneous naïf; he is a master of strategic planning worthy of a general's star. He chooses his weapons carefully; he eats right and works out; and every night he prowls the ill-lit streets waiting for his chance to set the world back in simple order. In a silent homage to the noble savage, he shaves his hair into a Mohawk and struts like a cowboy. One night he heads out on his divine mission, muttering *keep sweet and pass the ammunition.* And blood splatters the camera lens.

The America to which we came was wide open. It liberates us without restricting us to new spiritual limitations. For this America we shall fight against any groups working for American provincialism, and we shall work for an America in which every provincialism is resisted and conquered.

PAUL TILLICH

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