

From the Editor

A recent *New York Times* article on the lack of respect shown in the workplace to caregivers began with a punch in the gut: “For many Americans, life has become all competition all the time.” And the diagnosis of our cultural situation went downhill from there: “This model of winning at all costs reinforces a distinctive American pathology of not making room for caregiving. The result: We hemorrhage talent and hollow out our society.”¹

This is Charles Taylor’s “buffered self” on steroids, and it’s a chilling indictment. It’s Charlie Sheen (“Winning!”), Donald Trump (“We will have so much winning if I get elected that you may get bored with the winning”), and the Prosperity Gospel rolled into one and projected not only across the American workplace but throughout American life, reconceived as a developing dystopia. It is 180 degrees from religious exhortations of care and concern for others and for God—for example, Pope Francis’ emphasis on mercy as “the fundamental law that dwells in the heart of every person who looks sincerely into the eyes of his brothers and sisters on the path of life,” and “the bridge that connects God and man, opening our hearts to the hope of being loved forever despite our sinfulness.”² If “all competition all the time” is indeed the default lens through which our students format their experience, then what chance does a professor of religious studies or theology have of communicating the depth and richness of religious life and practice?

Here is one answer: present religion’s realistic and liberating opposition to the default view (“Winning!”) in as unvarnished a way as possible. One might start with the late philosopher Leszek Kołakowski’s definition of religion (in its own way a punch in the gut): “A religious world perception is indeed able to teach us *how to be a failure*. And the latent assumption behind such teaching is that on earth everybody is a failure.”³ The religious

¹ Anne-Marie Slaughter, “A Toxic Work World,” *New York Times*, September 20, 2015, Sunday Review, <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/09/20/opinion/sunday/a-toxic-work-world.html>.

² Pope Francis, *Bull of Indiction of the Extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy (Misericordiae Vultus)*, April 11, 2015, §2, https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_letters/documents/papa-francesco_bolla_20150411_misericordiae-vultus.html.

³ Leszek Kołakowski, *Religion: If There Is No God . . . On God, the Devil, Sin, and Other Worries of the So-Called Philosophy of Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), 40; emphasis in the original.

worldview alone is the realistic view, he argues, because it reminds us that the world and human experience have essential limits and achieve only degrees of perfection, never any totality or perfect fulfillment of our desires. “Religion is man’s way of accepting life as an inevitable defeat. That it is not an inevitable defeat is a claim that cannot be defended in good faith One can accept life, and accept it, at the same time, as a defeat only if one accepts that there is a sense beyond that which is inherent in human history—if, in other words, one accepts the order of the sacred.”⁴ Autonomy is by its very nature theonomous; anthropology is oriented to transcendence—or, in Thomistic terms, nature finds its fulfillment only in grace.

Blaise Pascal underscores this paradox in a succinctly brilliant analysis of both the problem and the solution:

Men despise religion. They hate it and are afraid it may be true. The cure for this is first to show that religion is not contrary to reason, but worthy of reverence and respect.

Next, make it attractive, make good men wish it were true, and then show that it is.

Worthy of reverence because it really understands human nature.

Attractive because it promises true good.⁵

My Catholic theological perspective makes me read this as combining a transcendental anthropology and a theological aesthetics. In other words, what is recommended here is an irresistibly attractive sacramental imagination where God, person, and culture are implied together, and where one is in contact with the divine not in spite of one’s humanity but because of it. What makes the religious worldview the most realistic is not only its recognition of life’s inherent “failure,” but also its commitment to a vision of participation in divine life that gives us a taste of fullness beyond the inescapable limits of self-sufficiency.

My experience in class of offering this challenge to the default competition narrative—Augustine’s “restless heart” in a contemporary key, so to speak—is that most students take notice of the challenge to the default competition narrative. With a bit of discussion, they realize that we are talking about the points where religion and everyday life intersect. Nodding heads signal that some accept it, skeptical questioners take issue with it, but the course participants become more aware that the “all competition all the

⁴ Leszek Kołakowski, “The Revenge of the Sacred in Secular Culture,” trans. Agnieszka Kołakowska and Leszek Kołakowski, *Modernity on Endless Trial* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 73.

⁵ Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*, trans. A. J. Krailshaimer, rev. ed. (London and New York: Penguin, 1995), 4 (no. 12).

time” narrative is not really that much of a consensus, nor can it claim to be the only realism. Leaving the classroom with questioning that points in the direction of God is at least a small start in shifting the view from cutthroat dystopia to seeing what Thomas Merton called the *point vierge*, “the most wonderful moment of the day . . . when creation in its innocence asks permission to ‘be’ once again” and to know that “here is an unspeakable secret: paradise is all around us and we do not understand. It is wide open.”⁶

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This issue is my last as editor of *Horizons*. Elena Procaro-Foley (Iona College), the journal’s current associate editor, will take over as editor starting with the June 2016 issue. She will be joined by associate editors Chris Denny (St. John’s), one of our former book review editors, and my Villanova colleague Gerald Beyer. I want to thank them heartily for their willingness to continue the tradition of excellent scholarship that appears in the pages of *Horizons* and is a reflection of its sponsor, the College Theology Society. The journal’s role in that tradition relies on the firm foundations laid by the founding editors, Rodger Van Allen and Bernard Prusak, and on the long and fruitful editorship of my predecessor, Walter Conn. I hope that I have helped develop that tradition for an ever-changing academic and ecclesial context.

I owe the greatest debt of thanks to the editorial assistants who have staffed the journal during my tenure and kept day-to-day operations moving smoothly: Irene Noble, Sarah Glaser, and currently Christine Bucher, whose expertise and good humor are invaluable. I also want to thank the graduate assistants who took on important tasks, especially those dealing with book reviews and reviewers: Denise Pimpinella, Elise Italiano, Rena Black, Siobhan Riley, Ben Winter, and currently Luke Hopkins. I am immensely grateful to our friends at Cambridge University Press, especially Martine Walsh (in the main UK office), and Kelly Loftus and Susan Soule (in the New York City office). I offer my sincerest thanks to those at Villanova University who continue to provide the journal with its institutional home, especially Fr. Peter Donohue, OSA, the University President, and Dr. Adele Lindenmeyr, the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences.

Finally, my thanks to our authors, who have trusted *Horizons* with their scholarship, and to our readers, whose academic and ecclesial work I have been privileged to serve.

⁶ Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday/Image, 1968), 131–32.