

# Accepting Our Lives as Gift: Hospitality and Post-Critical Ethics

Elizabeth Newman

ABSTRACT Key Words: hospitality, post-critical ethics, Alistair MacIntyre, Walter Miller, *A Canticle for Leibowitz*

*This essay explores the practice of hospitality as a resource for thinking about ethics post-critically. How might the practice of hospitality — rooted in the conviction that our lives are fundamentally constituted by receiving and giving — challenge a modern, critical ethic centered in the autonomous self?*

To describe ethics as post-critical indicates that this approach is distinct from one that is “critical.” Speaking generally, I define a critical approach to ethics as one that flows from certain modern or Enlightenment assumptions. These include 1) a focus on the priority of the subject, 2) the elevation of doubt as the key means to deeper knowledge, and 3) a search for universal foundations, both in order to gain true knowledge and as the way to secure peace in the midst of difference. From the standpoint of a critical ethic, the individual and tradition exist in inevitable tension. Doubting the particularity of tradition and authority, the individual appeals to a rational foundation, both to gain genuine knowledge and to obtain peace between differing parties. While these modern assumptions have been subjected to criticism many times over, they nonetheless continue to live on in our imaginations. As William H. Poteat notes, “Cartesianism as an explicit philosophical doctrine is virtually without effect in this culture. It functions, however, at a tacit level like a repetition compulsion; it is ubiquitous and pervades the atmosphere in our life like chronic depression.”<sup>1</sup> Shaped by modern, critical assumptions, our contemporary culture often assumes that obedience to something outside of oneself negates personal freedom. Even more, we are tempted to ask, “Isn’t a too strong adherence to tradition ‘fanatical’ and the source of much violence in the world?” (a common assumption made concerning the terrorist attacks on September 11). Furthermore, we wonder, “If we have no common rationality, or at least no common understanding of tolerance, how do we resolve difference?”

A post-critical ethic will not only respond to these objections but also provide a radically different starting place, one in which the modern prejudice against faithfulness, obedience and authority will not appear. From a post-critical standpoint, the dichotomy between the individual and community, freedom and authority, or faith and reason makes little sense. In order to develop this “post-critical dwelling place,”<sup>2</sup> I will focus on one key theme, namely *the recognition of our lives as gift*. Such a recognition is not derived from “anywhere” but from those traditions that acknowledge our lives as the gifts of a good Creator such that a certain “givenness” constitutes who we are, how we know and how we live. This means that our ways of knowing and being are always “fiduciary,” as Polanyi well knew. As I hope to show, inasmuch as the practice of hospitality trains us to see our lives as gifts, and teaches us how to receive from and give to another, then we can call this a post-critical practice.<sup>3</sup>

## The Critical Refusal of Gift

First, however, let us cast a fuller light on a critical ethical approach. I will do this by turning to Alasdair MacIntyre, one of a number of contemporary thinkers who has helped us understand how deeply problematic

is the ethos of our modern world. MacIntyre begins his well-known analysis in *After Virtue* with a “disquieting suggestion.” Imagine, he says, that the natural sciences have suffered a great catastrophe so that all we have left are fragments of scientific knowledge but no context which might help us make sense of these fragments. Perhaps we might continue to use certain scientific terms, but such use appears arbitrary since the speakers are ignorant of the larger stories and standards. As MacIntyre himself has acknowledged, he draws this disquieting suggestion from the opening scene in Walter Miller’s *A Canticle for Leibowitz*, where a nuclear war has destroyed most of “civilization,” especially its scientific and technological knowledge.<sup>4</sup> In Miller’s tale, the monks of the Order of St. Leibowitz see it as their calling to preserve these scientific fragments, trusting that some day they will make sense and benefit the world. MacIntyre compares this opening scene to our modern situation. We, too, are left with fragments in our contemporary context, only the fragments are moral ones: “[The] language and the appearances of morality persist even though the integral substance of morality has to a large degree been fragmented and then in part destroyed.”<sup>5</sup>

It is not my intention to recount the whole of MacIntyre’s well-known and groundbreaking argument. Rather I wish simply to lift up one of his defining characteristics of modern ethics, namely its inevitable degeneration into emotivism. As MacIntyre defines it, emotivism “is the doctrine that all evaluative judgments and more specifically all moral judgments are nothing but expressions of preference, expressions of attitude or feeling insofar as they are moral or evaluative in character.”<sup>6</sup> For those formed by modernity, who have lost sense of the ways in which particular contexts and histories generate certain convictions, emotivism often seems to be the only alternative. Such emotivism, as MacIntyre indicates, is parasitic upon a sharp distinction between moral and factual judgments: a moral judgment, in contrast to a fact, is neither true nor false, but rather the expression of a criterionless choice. Thus values become primarily personal choices.<sup>7</sup>

Examples of the kind of ethical thinking MacIntyre describes abound, as anyone who has taught ethics to undergraduates well knows. In fact, most of the time the language of “values” is used, “choice” will predictably follow. To take one of many examples, the University of North Dakota recently claimed that:

Education concerning values is important in general education – not seeking one right way to behave, but recognizing that choices cannot be avoided. Students should be aware of how many choices they make, how these choices are based on values, and how to make informed choices.<sup>8</sup>

While rightly seeing a problem with the ethical void in many educational curriculums, this approach fails to see how “values as personal choices” continues to underwrite this void. Once the dichotomy between facts and values shapes the terms of the debate about education, then “facts” will be seen to have an unchallenged place in the curriculum while the place of values will be more contentious.<sup>9</sup> Should values be taught? If so, then whose values ought to prevail? Does moral instruction even belong in the classroom? Isn’t attention to values best done in the extracurricular spheres of the institution, or, even more, in the private sphere of the home?

Theologian Rowan Williams rightly warns against what he calls this “nostalgia for values.” While he acknowledges that this nostalgia is understandable given “diffuse discontent” with consumer pluralism, he warns that “values language” easily becomes “a kind of window dressing [that] echoes the individualistic and facile language of moral retrenchment that often accompanies a further intensification of administrative control and the attrition of participatory politics.”<sup>10</sup> That is, talk of “values” easily ends up presupposing rather than challenging a market, consumeristic framework. Even more, when we come to believe we simply “choose” our personal values, we then fail to see how this whole framework relies upon a set of assumptions that we did not

explicitly choose. As exemplified in the North Dakota statement, “values education” all too often trains us to think about ethics in terms of individual choice, not unlike going to the mall and choosing what to buy.<sup>11</sup> Indeed, we might say that “values” talk today more often than not forms us to believe that “our choices” constitute *the essence of our identity*. Again, as MacIntyre observes, “choice” today is not taken to be revelatory of character, but rather of identity, which is entirely self-generated: “I am what my choices have made me.” The individual has no alternative other than that of now choosing what is to become good or bad for her. To criticize one’s choices is to take a negative view of the individual making the choices, and more often than not the response is a retreat into solidarity with those with whom one agrees.<sup>12</sup>

Thus while our modern discourse often links freedom of choice to a celebration of “pluralism,” the fact is that more often than not we are left with fragmentation. In a well-known passage, William James enthusiastically compares our contemporary situation (especially in the university) to a kind of hotel:

Innumerable chambers open out of it. In one you may find a man writing an atheistic volume; in the next someone on his knees praying for faith and strength; in the third a chemist investigating a body’s properties. In a fourth a system of idealistic metaphysics is being excogitated; in a fifth the impossibility of metaphysics is being shown. But they all own the corridor, and all must pass through it if they want a practicable way of getting into or out of their respective rooms.<sup>13</sup>

As indicated, James intended this to be a positive description of our modern “pluralistic” context. In light of a post-critical posture, however, we can see this metaphor as deeply problematic. The common space is the hotel corridor through which “all must pass,” but what constitutes this space? As George Marsden rightly notes, the corridor in James’ vision is open to those who can “readily share basic standards of evidence and argument. These standards work in separating good arguments from bad...”<sup>14</sup> The difficulty with such an account, however, is the failure to see that “standards of evidence” or what counts as a good argument cannot be separated from the larger mythos or story that forms one’s assumptions about the good. Thus, a kind of hegemony rules the “corridor” as one must accept a particular mythos (which more often than not its endorsers fail to fully acknowledge) in order to get in or out of his or her respective room.<sup>15</sup> James failed to see how this foundationalist account would eventually lead to the enervating pluralism we have today, where multiple values simply co-exist with no way to adjudicate among them.<sup>16</sup> Communities are easily reduced to like minded individuals, who have no way to resolve differences, and even more, no reason why to interact with someone who is not like minded.<sup>17</sup> William Cavanaugh makes the further point that such “pluralism” really exists only at the private level. “In the public sphere, the State itself is the ultimate good whose prerogatives must be defended coercively... the liberal State is by no means neutral. It defends and imposes a particular set of goods – e.g., the value of the market, scientific progress, the importance of choice itself – which excludes its rivals.”<sup>18</sup>

To summarize my all too brief account, our modern/postmodern situation has produced an ethic rooted primarily in the individual and his or her choices. This is problematic at a number of levels. First, while it assumes that it frees the individual from authority and tradition, in reality it binds the individual to one particular tradition, and a narrow one at that that emphasizes the individual as the creator of his or her identity. Secondly, this tradition of modernity, while advocating pluralism actually suppresses it; James’ image of the supposedly neutral “space” in the corridor can only be entered by those who share certain foundationalist presuppositions, and thus certain assumptions about the good. Since the corridor is a deceptively coercive space, this “modern hotel” (an interesting image in and of itself as it suggests an abstract and rootless place) cannot offer genuine

hospitality. It is my argument that the inability to offer hospitality is related to the refusal to see our lives as gifts. It is to this point that I now turn.

### A Post-Critical Turn: Our Lives as Gifts

As indicated, MacIntyre points to the necessary givenness of all ethical and philosophical inquiry when he states that “There is no standing ground, no place of inquiry, no way to engage in the practices of advancing, evaluating, accepting and rejecting reasoned argument apart from that which is provided by some particular tradition or other.”<sup>19</sup> Thus, following MacIntyre, we could say that we are not “free” simply to choose our morality. We cannot, in other words, abstract ourselves from our own context to reach a place where such lucid choice would be available. Nor even, we might add, would this make us “free” if it were a possibility. Some tradition or other always informs “freedom,” and thus we deceive ourselves if we imagine freedom lies in abstraction or escape from our particular context.

Polanyi adds to MacIntyre’s post-critical approach by analyzing even more fully the ways in which all our knowing is fiduciary; our knowing involves a relying upon or a “faithfulness” to what is given. What does Polanyi mean by this description of knowledge? First, like MacIntyre, Polanyi points to the fact that our knowing calls for and, in fact, requires immersion in a tradition, a particular community where we are able to become apprentices of other persons. Thus, for example, “to be trained as a medical diagnostician, you must go through a long course of experience under the guidance of a master.” A doctor comes to recognize certain symptoms “only by repeatedly being given cases for auscultation in which the symptom is authoritatively known to be present, side by side with other cases in which it is authoritatively known to be absent, until he has fully realized the difference between them and can demonstrate his knowledge practically to the satisfaction of an expert.”<sup>20</sup> Secondly, the fiduciary aspect of knowledge reveals itself in the tacit dimension of all knowing. As is well known, Polanyi describes in rich detail how we tacitly rely upon some “givens” in order to arrive at more explicit knowledge. In a sense, we absorb or know tacitly by indwelling a given “place,” whether this is before a telescope, on a bicycle or while making an esoteric philosophical point. Thus, as those familiar with Polanyi well know, for Polanyi, knowing is irreducibly personal, where “personal” does not mean subjective but the immersion of our whole persons in that which we are seeking to know. Or, better stated in Polanyian terms, we immerse ourselves in that to which we are called. Faithfulness to our calling yields certain truths; those truths with heuristic depth (those that reveal more to later eyes) show that our antecedent faithfulness was indeed warranted.

So understood, we can claim, as does Poteat, that all our knowing is a bonding, and that “our *ultimate* relation therefore all of our *derived relations* to existence are fiduciary.”<sup>21</sup> Poteat can thus make the claim that our “modern derangement” results from a kind of “infidelity.” Such language contrasts sharply with the modern emphasis on the choosing self, the self that achieves “freedom” by standing apart from all those “bonds” that constitute its identity. As Poteat notes, “even though *de facto* we exist amidst a plexus of bonds, *de jure* all the gnostic images of our being in the world can only see these as a *bondage*, a falling into a worldly prison from which we can alone be saved by the *gnosis* of our *in principle* ecumenic doubt. By contrast, only when we remember that nature is our mother can we embrace and affirm these bondings as the very substance of our incarnate existence.”<sup>22</sup> Poteat thus interprets our incarnate place not as a kind of bondage and imprisonment from which we must stand apart, as a gnostic would, but as essentially gift. From such a post-critical posture, the image of the choosing self is inadequate because it blinds us to all we are that we did not explicitly choose. In other words, it blinds us to the givenness and giftedness of who we are.

One might easily object, “Not everyone can see their lives as ‘gifts.’ Certainly, the terrible suffering of some would seem to be clear evidence that the language of ‘gift’ misdescribes some lives.” These observations are certainly true; many of us, probably most of the time, fail to think about our lives as gifts. Even more, we would not want to advise the one suffering from physical abuse, for example, to simply see this as gift. This is rightly described as an injustice. The point I am making, however, is a *logical* one: we can only come to know, come to hold certain convictions, come to see certain things in a particular way through our bondedness to the world. It is through our reliance upon a tradition formed place that we are able to see and name something as an injustice. This place is not a place of bondage but a place of fidelity. As Nicholas Lash rightly notes, “Whether in physics or in politics, in psychology or prayer, to grow in knowledge is to grow through trust: trust given, trust betrayed, trust risked, misplaced, sustained, received, and suffered.”<sup>23</sup> A post-critical ethic then rests in the conviction that trust, faithfulness and obedience, and therefore a reception to that which is given, *precede* and *necessarily form* our ethics.

### **Election and Hospitality**

To develop this point, I will now turn to a fuller examination of the theology that sustains a post-critical ethic in which the practice of hospitality is central. As MacIntyre, Polanyi and Poteat all in various ways indicate, all approaches to ethics are sustained by some kind of tradition. I would add to this that all ethics are sustained by some kind of theology or *mythos*.<sup>24</sup> In my analysis of hospitality, I will describe hospitality primarily from within the Christian tradition; this is because I believe our Creator’s own hospitality is most fully displayed in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. This does not, of course, negate the fact that hospitality is practiced well in a variety of traditions and cultures nor that Christians have much to learn from others about hospitality and how to practice it.<sup>25</sup>

Just as a more gnostic ahistorical theology sustains the critical approach to ethics, Christian theology, rightly understood, sustains a post-critical approach because it is rooted in the conviction that our lives and calling, indeed our very identities, are gifts. Augustine even went so far as to claim that we do not choose our friends; God does. The language of “election,” as well as that of “calling,” serves to remind Christians (as well as Jews and Muslims) of the gift nature of their lives. God is the One who elects or chooses us, not the other way around. Yet, the language of election has been met with numerous objections. Why does God choose some rather than others? Is chosenness simply a category invoked to justify or privilege one’s particular self or tradition? Doesn’t our response to God involve some choice on our part?

First, it is important to note that “chosenness” or election is not intended to point to moral superiority, a misinterpretation that has no doubt been invoked at times by Christians and Jews. Even so, Jewish theology is careful to deflect this misinterpretation. For example, in one *midrash* the Jews do not even want to be chosen; in another, God has gone to other people but was turned down.<sup>26</sup> Similar to Jewish self-understanding, the Christian claim that God is the electing God rests not in the fact that Christians are somehow better than others. The lives of the saints often repeat the *midrash* insight, namely the saints do not want to be “chosen,” or set aside as saints. Rather “election,” first and foremost, is a conviction about who God is, a conviction that points to God’s deep desire to be embodied and enfleshed in the world. Thus, the notion of “election” radically affirms creation and our humble creaturely status. God Himself enters history and becomes a body, i.e., the body of Israel and subsequently the body of Christ for the sake of drawing the whole world back to God’s own self. (For gnostics, the notion of God becoming a body is distasteful; creation, flesh, and bodies are simply places of limitation from which we must escape.)

Jews and Christians, of course, differ in important ways in understanding the embodiedness of God. For Jews, God himself does not become a body but rather, through the covenant with Abraham, calls forth the body of Israel. Jewish theologian Michael Wyschogrod reiterates this conviction when he observes that Nazi antisemitism had a theological dimension, namely, “It was the assault by evil on God *through the body of Israel*. This is the only interpretation of the Holocaust that even begins to do justice to that inexplicable mystery.”<sup>27</sup> Wyschogrod’s claim reflects the Jewish self-understanding that identifies God with the very body of Israel. So also, of course, Christians identify God with the Body of Christ - “For in him (the Beloved Son) all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell...” (Colossians 1: 19) – an identification later extended to the church as Christ’s body. Despite their differences, both Jews and Christians speak of election in order to affirm the essential goodness of creation; God himself desires to enter our time and space.

All this is to emphasize that the language of “election” rests upon a radical affirmation of our creaturely status and of a God who “gifts” us with His presence in and through creation. In other words, the fact that God chooses us and that we are to receive our status as creatures (who inhabit a particular time and place) as gifts are interconnected. To understand our own place as gift contrasts sharply with a modern view that can only imagine our particular place in terms of bondage and limitation. To receive the gift of ourselves from others, and ultimately from God (rather than imagine we have to generate our own identity) enables us to become faithful recipients and practitioners of God’s own hospitality.

### **Hospitality and “Christian Homelessness”**

If it is true that our lives are not our own but are given to us – by our places, by others, ultimately by God - it is also true that we are not entirely “at home” in the world. For early Christians, in fact, hospitality is linked to a certain kind of homelessness. Thus early Christian writers refer often to God’s command to the Hebrews to welcome strangers because they too were once strangers and aliens in the land of Egypt. As Augustine writes: “You take in some stranger, whose companion in the way you yourself also are, for we are all strangers. This person is a Christian who, even in his own house and in his own country, acknowledges himself to be a stranger.”<sup>28</sup> Hospitality then appears to rest on a paradox: Christians are called to welcome the stranger even though they have no home, even though they are a diaspora people with no fixed place to call their own.<sup>29</sup> Christians are called even to give up their fixed place in the world –their land, their country, their family (Luke 14: 24-33)– for the sake of the kingdom of God.

We seem to be left with an apparent contradiction. Henri Nouwen reminds us that it is inhospitable to welcome others and then leave. He reminds us, rightly, that good hosts need to have a place from which to extend hospitality.<sup>30</sup> How can Christians really practice good hospitality if they themselves are also displaced and homeless? How can strangers and sojourners offer hospitality?

Yet Christians (and Jews) are only “homeless” or “displaced” in a sense. They are called to turn from identifying themselves primarily by their nation or their family or their position in society in order to draw their identity from God, where God is understood as a purposeful actor who acts in and with a *people*, for the sake of the world. Thus God calls Abraham to leave his home in Ur of Chaldees for the sake of the newly established covenant between God and Israel, and Abraham follows. God calls Moses to lead his people out of Egypt and Moses follows. God the Father calls Jesus to establish and embody a new community, one characterized by enemy love and Jesus follows to the point of death. In each instance, the particular “home” of the individual is in a community that understands itself, however dimly, as living before the “face of God.”

How does such participation in what God is doing, in God's purposeful activity relate to our earlier question: namely how to practice hospitality when we are strangers and sojourners in the world, when we are called to have no place, as Jesus had no place to "lay his head"? The resolution lies in understanding our "place" or identity as resting in God's purposeful activity with a particular people. We are called to be strangers to all that denies or negates God's purpose. Thus, for example, we are called to be strangers to the idea that our families or our nations are our primary identity-givers. We nonetheless find our "home" in the world (and thus can become good hosts) because our home or place is before God, in God's own kingdom which, Christians believe, is now present but not yet fully realized.

Thus hospitality is parasitic on first being guests in God's house; we must first receive the truth of our lives as gifts in order to become good hosts to others. If who we are is primarily self-generated, if our choices constitute the essence of our identity, then the practice of hospitality will quickly atrophy as we will see no *need* to truly receive from another. As others have noted, however, such hoarding (refusing to give and receive) paradoxically leads to scarcity rather than abundance. If it is true that who we are is a gift of others and ultimately God, then by refusing to receive from another, we are denying ourselves and others a certain abundance.

We can say, then, that the "home" from which Christians offer hospitality, God's household or *oikos*,<sup>31</sup> reflects an economy that differs from our market economy, which operates on assumptions of scarcity and savings. God's *oikos* rather rests on the assumption of superabundance, one in which there is no need to hoard and save. This abundance is reflected in the well-known biblical stories where God provides daily manna in the wilderness, and loaves and fish for the multitudes. Gerhard Lohfink argues in fact that the fish and loaves parable, in the way it orders the people in groups, recalls the manna in the wilderness story.<sup>32</sup> The abundance of God's provisions in these biblical stories points not only to the continuity of God's hospitality across time, but also proleptically to the abundance of life itself, which becomes reality after Easter. Even death cannot make of life a scarce commodity. Thus Lohfink rightly claims, "Excess, wealth, and profligate luxury are thus the signs of the time of salvation – not economy, meagerness, wretchedness, and neediness. Why is that so? – because God is overflowing Life itself, and because God's whole desire is to share that life. God's love is beyond all measure, and God's gifts to human beings are not measured by their good behavior or deservingness."<sup>33</sup>

Such extravagant hospitality draws people together without obliterating their differences. Indeed the uniqueness of each person is necessary so that there will be a fuller abundance, a genuine giving to another and receiving of what we do not already have. To refer back to James' analogy, a hotel with a common corridor through which people merely pass fails to grasp the extravagance and abundance of this hospitality. It is perhaps best captured by a household (*oikos*), the heart of which is a large common table, where strangers are welcome, and food and wine are generously shared.<sup>34</sup> Since such hospitality is parasitic on an understanding of our lives as gifts, the proper end or *telos* of hospitality is imitating and participating in God's own hospitality to us. As is well-known, of course, early Christians enacted, and continue to enact, this participation in God's hospitality through the celebration of a common meal, the Eucharist.

### **The Hope of Hospitality: A Possibility in Our Current Context?**

To relate this practice of hospitality more fully to a post-critical ethic in our current context, it would be instructive to revisit MacIntyre in light of the practice of hospitality, as described above. As indicated earlier, MacIntyre's profound description of our modern moral dilemma, his disquieting suggestion, was influenced by the beginning of Miller's *A Canticle for Leibowitz*. But what about the ending of Miller's novel? How does

MacIntyre's resolution compare? I shall suggest that the ending of Miller's tale provides us with important insights into the practice of hospitality, resources that even MacIntyre himself does not fully take into consideration.

MacIntyre ends *After Virtue* with a chapter titled, "After Virtue: Nietzsche or Aristotle, Trotsky and St Benedict." In this chapter, MacIntyre asks whether we can recover a shared conception of the good and of the narrative unity of a moral tradition *or* whether we must accept Nietzsche's conclusion that morality is simply a disguise for the will to power? Given the fact that, as MacIntyre argues, advanced capitalism lacks the political and economic structures to sustain an Aristotelian understanding of the moral life, it would seem we have little hope for the recovery of such a tradition. MacIntyre maintains, however, that his solution does not commit him to a "generalized social pessimism." We must now cease to shore up the *imperium*, our current political structure, and instead foster new forms of communities "within which civility and the intellectual and moral life can be sustained through the new dark ages which are already upon us."<sup>35</sup> Since MacIntyre does not elaborate on whether these communities exist or, if not, how one might develop such a community, his solution might well sound utopian. Elsewhere, however, MacIntyre defends himself against such a charge. In *Three Rival Versions of Moral Inquiry*, he states that his proposal for a new form of community, a postliberal university of constrained disagreements,<sup>36</sup> is not utopian because, first, something like this has already existed (the University of Paris in the thirteenth century). Secondly, the charge of utopianism is "sometimes best understood more as a symptom of the condition of those who level it," of their failure to imagine a genuine alternative to the current predicament, or even to see this as a predicament.<sup>37</sup>

While MacIntyre defends himself against utopianism as well as pessimism, he does not fully extricate himself from these charges, it seems to me. At a recent conference at the University of Notre Dame on the "culture of death," MacIntyre again insightfully diagnosed our modern dilemma, repeating many of the important themes in his published works: moral belief is construed purely in terms of personal choice, the self-created "individual" has replaced character formation as constitutive of identity, and compartmentalization has fragmented our lives such that adaptability is the new virtue and inflexibility the new vice. Further, MacIntyre noted that whereas earlier debates took place in societies that shared standards and attitudes, since we now lack these our modern forms of public debate are generally *counter-productive*. When asked whether or not the public participation and intervention of someone like Pope John Paul II had been counter-productive, MacIntyre responded that Pope John Paul's service had been to provide "those who were lacking it an idiom," a rhetoric for those who were already in agreement with him. While this has been an important task, MacIntyre noted, it has not significantly altered our impoverished forms of public conversation.<sup>38</sup>

An emphasis on our public efforts to engage another as generally counter-productive would seem to make the public practice of hospitality – the possibility of a genuine giving and receiving from the stranger – unlikely. It might well be that MacIntyre's philosophy is more focused on analyzing our current situation (certainly a crucial task) than it is on proposing or developing alternatives. Even so, if hospitality is to serve as a "post-critical dwelling place," we need to consider *how* such a practice might be a possibility in our current context. *What* might it look like?

To respond to these questions, let us now turn to the powerful ending of Miller's *A Canticle for Leibowitz*. In Part Three of Miller's novel, *Fiat Voluntas Tua* (Thy Will be Done), we discover that the scientific fragments have been recovered and placed into a coherent schema so that once again science makes sense. Civilization, no longer "barbaric" (Part One), has not only passed through a renaissance (Part 2) but has now

“advanced” to the point where atomic destruction has become a real threat once again. The story that clearly dominates the culture in Part Three is the “scientific story”: understandings of the good are read in light of scientific technological solutions. So, for example, local authorities have set up euthanizing centers to extend “mercy” to those suffering from radiation poisoning due to the nuclear fallout. In one telling exchange, the euthanizing Doctor Cors confronts Father Zerchi, the abbot of the order:

“Listen Father. They sit there and they look at you. Some scream. Some cry. Some just sit there. All of them say, ‘Doctor, what can I do?’ And what am I supposed to answer? Say nothing? Say, ‘You can die, that’s all.’ What would you say?”

“Pray.”

“Yes, you would, wouldn’t you? Listen, pain is the only evil I know about. It’s the only one I can fight.”

“Then God help you.”

“Antibiotics help me more.”<sup>39</sup>

Clearly, the narrative embodied in the person of Doctor Cors – one that witnesses to the triumph of death rather than life – appears to have won the day.

We need to remember, however, that Miller has titled this section “Thy Will Be Done,” an indicator that Doctor Cors will not get the final word. As the nuclear war is about to destroy civilization, Miller has two significant things happen. First, the Church carries forward with its plan to send a spaceship into outer space to preserve a small human colony. Those who are to make the trip include bishops, priests, monks and children.

But secondly, and I think more importantly, Miller develops the strange character of a certain bicephalous woman, Mrs. Grales, a grotesque reminder of the effects of an earlier nuclear fallout. Throughout the final section of the novel, Mrs. Grales pleads with Father Zerchi to baptize her other lifeless head, which she has named Rachel. He declines, claiming it a matter for “your parish and diocese.” In the final scenes of the novel, as Father Zerchi is hearing Mrs. Grales’ confession, a nuclear bomb strikes. As Father Zerchi lies dying, the buzzards circling, he discovers that while Mrs. Grales’ “head” has died, Rachel has come to life, watching him “with cool green eyes and [smiling] innocently.”<sup>40</sup> He makes an effort to baptize her but she leans “quickly away from him. Her smile froze and vanished. *No!* her whole countenance seemed to shout.” Then, Rachel offers him, despite his initial refusal, the wafer and wine. Miller continues:

She used no conventional gestures, but the reverence with which she had handled it convinced him of one thing: *she sensed the Presence under the veils*. She who could not yet use words nor understand them, had done what she had as if by *direct instruction*, in response to his attempt at conditional baptism.

He tried to refocus his eyes to get another look at the face of this being, who by gestures alone had said to him: I do not need your *first* Sacrament, Man, but I am worthy to convey to you *this* Sacrament of Life.<sup>41</sup>

Father Zerchi, as he draws his final breath, weeps in gratitude that “he had seen primal innocence in those eyes, and a promise of resurrection. One glimpse had been a bounty . . . ,”<sup>42</sup> a passage that recalls Simeon’s seeing the baby Jesus before his death (Luke 2:25-32).

What are we to make of this mysterious ending? Theologian Ralph Wood notes that Rachel “seems thus to be a figure of the remnant church that God raises up even when the world collapses. This Rachel is indeed a dispenser rather than a receiver of grace, as she places the final viaticum in the dying abbot’s hand...this new Rachel embodies the hope that can save the world because it is the hope that dissolves all bitterness...It comes whenever the saving words are pronounced...They will be done.”<sup>43</sup> Wood is right to note that the hope that presents itself at the end of the novel, in the person of Rachel, lies not simply in human action (we do not know the final outcome of the spaceship) but in the purposeful action of God with a concrete people: Rachel and Fr. Zerchi.

How does this ending compare to MacIntyre? MacIntyre, of course, puts forward a philosophical analysis that in some ways does not lend itself to a neat comparison with a piece of creative fiction. Even so, we can see that the formation of the spaceship community is a possible example of what MacIntyre has in mind when he states we need new forms of community that no longer shore up the *imperium*.<sup>44</sup> At the same time, however, we might note that the spaceship has to *leave* the world, thus lending some credence to those who would call such communities utopian.

Yet what about Miller’s bicephalous woman? It is clearly in the story of Rachel that Miller’s tale unfolds as one of hope in the midst of despair, rather than one of utopianism or pessimism. And the hope Miller describes is rooted in God’s own hospitality. As Miller recounts, Rachel has been *given* the preternatural gifts of Eden, “those gifts which Man had been trying to seize by brute force again from Heaven since first he lost them.”<sup>45</sup> It is through Rachel, a fellow creature, that God offers Father Zerchi his presence in the bread and wine – the body and blood of Christ – and in the promise of resurrection. Father Zerchi gratefully receives God’s abundant hospitality: “one glimpse had been a *bounty*, and he wept with *gratitude*.”<sup>46</sup>

In comparing MacIntyre to Miller at this point, it seems as if the narrative of which MacIntyre himself bemoans the loss does not *fully appear* in MacIntyre’s own thinking.<sup>47</sup> As MacIntyre himself acknowledges, even if we are able to “out narrate” our opponents, it often does not seem to matter, i.e., public debate seems counter-productive. Others continue to be aesthetic Nietzscheans, or Enlightenment emotivists, and people retreat into solidarity with those who already agree with them. Even Miller’s tale registers this dark pessimism as the priest’s attempt to “out-narrate” the doctor does not work. Civilization continues on its same destructive path.

At this point, however, we can turn to the Jewish theologian Michael Wyschogrod who reminds us of a key point central to both the Jewish and Christian tradition: “...the redeemer whom God sends is not a brilliant orator but a stutterer who seems least fit to persuade the tyrant to let the people go... it is God and not the talent of his messenger that deserves praise.” In the novel, hope rests not in the “rational” people but appears in the least likely of places, the bicephalous woman, who stutters and who to all appearances seems irrational. What is the relation between this hope and the practice of hospitality? Wyschogrod continues: “The deepest sign of the presence of God, the fundamental reason for the wonder that is evoked by all contact with the spirit, is the occurrence of the unexpected. Salvation comes from unexpected quarters, at unexpected times, and through *unexpected agents*...”<sup>48</sup> Wyschogrod rightly reminds us that genuine hospitality always involves welcoming the *stranger*, someone who may not be able or inclined to reason as we do. Such hospitality is sustained not by human ingenuity but by the promise that through this practice the “hosts” will encounter the presence of God, a presence which might well be as discomfiting and it is comforting.

Such hospitality does not fit on the pessimism/utopianism grid. Certainly in our welcoming of the stranger we seek to engage her in debate, to have discussion about the good, etc. In fact, as Reinhard Hütter importantly notes, hospitality and honoring the truth are practices that require each other.<sup>49</sup> Such hospitality is admittedly difficult and might even be painful. The guest or host (roles which are fluid when hospitality is rightly practiced) might refuse the truth and even seek to annihilate it, as in the case of martyrdom. Even so, wherever and whenever we live with the conviction that our lives and callings are gifts from a gracious God, we have no “choice” but to practice hospitality. This is because the “fiduciary” framework is not the solitary individual, nor is it our human effort to achieve peace. Rather the dwelling place that sustains genuine hospitality is the life of God. Thus while I agree with MacIntyre on the need for “new forms of community within which the moral life could be sustained,” I would add that these need to be communities of hospitality sustained by faithful worship of God.<sup>50</sup>

In conclusion, the post-critical practice of hospitality enables us to turn from the modern autonomous choosing subject, and not only turn but see this subject for what it is: a modern piece of fiction that has blinded us to all of the giving and receiving that constitutes our lives. Hospitality thus enables us to truly engage others, not by means of some abstract foundation, but in and through our particularity, even as we trust that God’s grace is present in the “stranger.” Such a post-critical dwelling place calls for us to rely upon our incarnate place in the world, just as God relied upon the incarnation to make Himself more fully known. It also calls for us, again in imitation of God as Trinity, to have the courage to be willing to give and receive from another.<sup>51</sup>

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> William H. Poteat, *A Philosophical Daybook, Post-Critical Investigations* (Columbia: University of Missouri, 1990), p. 5.

<sup>2</sup> Poteat uses this term throughout his published works. See especially *Polanyian Meditations, In Search of a Post-Critical Logic* (Durham, NC: Duke University, 1985).

<sup>3</sup> My turn to practices as a way to understand ethics “post-critically” is influenced by the work of Stanley Hauerwas, James McClendon and Ludwig Wittgenstein, among others, though I do not cite them specifically.

<sup>4</sup> For a discussion of the connection between MacIntyre and *A Canticle for Leibowitz*, see Ralph Wood, “Lest the World’s Amnesia Be Complete: A Reading of Walter Miller’s *A Canticle for Leibowitz*,” in *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 27:1 (Spring 2000), pp. 83-97. Wood also provides an excellent theological analysis of Miller’s novel.

<sup>5</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame, 1984), p. 5.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 12.

<sup>7</sup> Murray Jardine nicely summarizes the impact of an Enlightenment epistemology as follows: “The application of the Enlightenment model of acceptable knowledge has thus had the effect of progressively shrinking the domain of intelligible human experience. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, what is now called ‘religious belief’ conflicted with the model of exact, impersonal knowledge and was relegated to the realm of mere opinion; by the late nineteenth century, morality, which the Enlightenment philosophers had thought could be placed on a firm, secular footing by skeptical rationalism, was in serious danger of becoming a matter of subjective value; and by the mid-twentieth century it had become an open question whether even the hardest sciences could meaningfully be described as objective,” in *Speech and Political Practice, Recovering the Place of Human Responsibility* (New York: SUNY, 1998), p. 2.

<sup>8</sup> Cited by Dennis O’Brien, “The Disappearing Moral Curriculum,” *The Key Reporter* 62:4 (Summer 1997), p. 4, my emphasis.

<sup>9</sup> In saying this, I do not mean to obscure the fact that how we understand which “facts” should be taught today is a hotly contested issue.

<sup>10</sup> Rowan Williams, *On Christian Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), p. 35.

<sup>11</sup> As Nicholas Boyle observes, “The market does not concern itself with whether my choice is rational, whether

it is identical or consistent with choices I made yesterday or may make tomorrow, nor does it concern itself with any purposes I may have in making my choice, or any consequences of my choice insofar as these do not themselves involve further market decisions,” in *Who Are We Now? Christian Humanism and the Global market from Hegel to Heaney* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame, 1998), p. 153.

<sup>12</sup>Alasdair MacIntyre, Lecture, Culture of Death Conference, University of Notre Dame, October 13, 2000. A video tape of this lecture is available from the Notre Dame Center for Ethics and Culture.

<sup>13</sup>As quoted by George Marsden, *The Outrageous Idea of Christian Scholarship* (New York: Oxford, 1997), p. 45. Marsden at this point is not criticizing James, but finds his image “quite congenial.”

<sup>14</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 47.

<sup>15</sup>Stanley Hauerwas makes a similar point when he notes that James assumed “that the hotel corridor he imagined could be maintained nonviolently. Yet we have learned that no such corridor exists, even in universities,” in *With the Grain of the Universe, The Church’s Witness and Natural Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2001), p. 86.

<sup>16</sup>As Murray Jardine notes, pluralist cultures are not really pluralist anyway. They have been characterized by the dominance of scientific rationalism in early stages and watered down Nietzschean aestheticism more recently, representing the Enlightenment model both in its prime and decadence (in Jardine, personal correspondence).

<sup>17</sup>As Nicholas Boyle again insightfully observes, “Those who speak different idioms in the (post-) modern pluralist academy cannot talk to each other, and usually do not want to. No wonder the spokespersons in the administration buildings find it difficult to explain to the inquiring outsider why they are all *there*, and that is the most literal sense: why these windowless professional non-communicators need to be housed side by side on the same, no doubt expensive, humanities campus,” in *Ibid.*, p. 150.

<sup>18</sup>William T. Cavanaugh, “‘A Fire Strong Enough to Consume the House’: The Wars of Religion and the Rise of the State,” in *Modern Theology* 11 (October, 1995), p. 409. Cavanaugh is discussing Kant’s philosophy of the State as the guarantor of peace.

<sup>19</sup>Alasdair MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame, 1988), p. 350.

<sup>20</sup>Michael Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge, Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1962), p. 54-55.

<sup>21</sup>William H. Poteat, *Recovering the Ground, Critical Exercises in Recollection* (New York: SUNY, 1994), p. 193.

<sup>22</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 210.

<sup>23</sup>Nicholas Lash, “Contemplation, Metaphor and Real Knowledge,” unpublished paper, delivered at “Knowing God, Christ and Nature in the Post-Positivistic Era,” Symposium, University of Notre Dame (April 14-17, 1993), p. 4.

<sup>24</sup>From this perspective, even the Enlightenment (its condescension of myth to the contrary) feeds off of *myth* and relies upon a *liturgical reenactment*. See especially William H. Poteat, *A Philosophical Daybook*, p. 89.

<sup>25</sup>Reinhard Hütter notes that hospitality as well as honoring the truth “are practices held in high regard by many people. Indeed, one might claim that they are - if not universally practiced - at least widely acknowledged as central to human life.” He locates this observation theologically in “the distinction (*not* dichotomy) between God’s economy of creation and God’s economy of salvation.” See his “Hospitality and Truth: The Disclosure of Practices in Worship and Doctrine,” in Miroslav Volf and Dorothy C. Bass, eds. *Practicing Theology, Beliefs and Practices in Christian Life* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2002), p. 206. I return to Hütter’s fine analysis later in this essay.

<sup>26</sup>In the first *midrash*, only when God threatens to drop Mount Sinai on the Israelites if they refuse the Torah do they respond, “All that the Lord has spoken we will do and we will hear.” In the second interpretation, God offers the Torah to many other nations, but they all refuse. As recounted in Stephen J. Einstein and Lydia Kukoff, *Every Person’s Guide to Judaism* (NY: UAHC, 1989), p. 10.

<sup>27</sup>My emphasis. The fuller context is as follows: “...I do attribute to Hitler the insight that killing Jews drives God out of the world. Hitler’s hatred of the Jews was not rooted in the ‘normal’ criminal’s desire to obtain the land, property, or personal service of his victim. History is full of conflicts over property and territory and of the enslavement of one people by another. In all such conflicts, surrender yields peace. Slaves were exploited and not murdered as long as they were useful. Nazi murder of Jews was not driven by any interpretation of self-interest - however distorted - but by the desire to achieve a world without Jews, who were seen as the embodiment of evil. Nazi antisemitism therefore had a theological dimension,”

in Michael Wyschogrod, *The Body of Faith* (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson Inc., 1996), p. xxix.

<sup>28</sup> As quoted in Amy Oden, ed., *And You Welcomed Me, A Sourcebook on Hospitality in Early Christianity* (Nashville: Abingdon Press), p. 45.

<sup>29</sup> For a fuller discussion of Christians as a diaspora people, see Barry A. Harvey, *Another City, An Ecclesiological Primer for a Post-Christian World* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity, 1999), especially Chapter 5, “Madness, Truth and Diaspora: The Post-Christendom Form of the Church as *Altera Civitas*,” pp. 135-165.

<sup>30</sup> Henri Nouwen, “Hospitality,” in *Monastic Studies* 10 (Easter 1974), p. 26.

<sup>31</sup> For the connection between economics and household see Sharon Daloz Parks, “Household Economics.” She notes, “Like the words *ecumenical* and *ecology*, *economics* is rooted in the Greek word *oikos*, meaning household, and signifies the management of the household – arranging what is necessary for well-being,” in Dorothy Bass, ed., *Practicing Our Faith* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1997), p. 44.

<sup>32</sup> Lohfink states that “they sat down in groups of one-hundreds and fifties” clearly refers to Exodus 18:25, which “describes the order of the camp of the people of God on their way through the wilderness,” in *Does God Need the Church? Toward a Theology of the People of God* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1999), 147.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 149. Lohfink importantly adds that the superabundance of God’s grace appears precisely in the “weakness and distress of the faithful in order that it may be clear that the overflowing fullness of glory comes not from human strength, but from God alone,” p. 150.

<sup>34</sup> The common meal is, of course, a practice that crosses traditions and cultures. In analyzing 1 Corinthians 11:20-22, a passage about early Christians failing to celebrate the Lord’s Supper truthfully, Lohfink notes that in antiquity “there was a well-known form of the common meal called *eranos* at which the host only provided the space but not the food. Each brought to the meal what she or he had and ate of what all had brought. We have the same practice; it is what Americans call the potluck,” in Lohfink, p. 256.

<sup>35</sup> *After Virtue*, p. 263.

<sup>36</sup> Such a university, MacIntyre maintains, will support systematic debate about standards of rational justification among rival traditions, such as the Thomistic and genealogical. The “winner” of such debate will be the tradition that can resolve problems posed by a particular tradition which that tradition is unable to resolve within its own system of thought.

<sup>37</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre, *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame, 1990), pp. 234-235.

<sup>38</sup> MacIntyre, Culture of Death Conference, op. cit.

<sup>39</sup> Walter M. Miller, *A Canticle for Leibowitz* (New York: Bantam), p. 275.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 309.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 311.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 312.

<sup>43</sup> Wood, p. 97.

<sup>44</sup> Wood draws this connection, p. 85.

<sup>45</sup> Miller, p. 312.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, my emphasis.

<sup>47</sup> It might well be that the full implications of Christian theology do not appear in MacIntyre’s thought because of the kind of distinction he draws between philosophy and theology. MacIntyre argues that the integrative tasks of philosophy, rightly understood, “can be carried out only by rational enquiry, independently of faith and revealed truths, enabling enquirers to understand how the specialized disciplines contribute to, but cannot themselves supply an understanding of the overall order of things... And there is a second set of tasks that can be carried out only by enquiry into the bearing of revealed truths, truths to be acknowledged only by faith, on the work of the university. These are the tasks of theology, rightly understood,” in “Catholic Universities: dangers, hopes, choices,” Lecture delivered at the University of Notre Dame, October 13-14, 1999, p. 5. I find it misleading, however, to talk about an intellectual space, or a space of inquiry, that is independent of faith and revealed truths. All philosophy draws, even if not explicitly, from some kind of theology. My concern with MacIntyre at this point is that his philosophy fails to draw as fully as it could from a Christian future or eschatology, a future which is as present to us as is our past, which MacIntyre so hopes to reclaim

<sup>48</sup> Wyschogrod, p. 231, my emphasis.

<sup>49</sup> In discussing C.S. Lewis’s *The Great Divorce*, Hütter observes: “..acknowledging and therefore receiving, the

truth of who and whose one is liberates one for genuine hospitality. Yet because the inhabitants of Twilight City lack this truth, they are intensely absorbed in themselves – the self-absorption of a void in search of a substance. They want to grasp and own what can only be received as a gift: the gift of a self transparent to the truth that it owes its existence not to itself, but rather to the Giver of Life. Honoring this truth in its constant reception is what makes the self open to the other, to genuine hospitality,” in “Hospitality and Truth,” p. 209.

<sup>50</sup>Examples of such communities of hospitality include, among others, the Catholic Worker Houses of Hospitality for the poor and homeless (founded by Dorothy Day and Peter Maurin); Brother Roger’s ecumenical Taize community in France; and the L’Arche communities for mentally handicapped (founded by Jean Vanier). In addition, a number of people (myself included) are exploring the relevance of hospitality for higher education. See Aurilee Hagstrom, Richard Kyte, Scott Moore, Elizabeth Newman and Amy Oden, *Hospitality and the Christian College* (forthcoming).

<sup>51</sup>I am grateful to Paul Lewis for his insightful comments on an earlier draft of this essay.

## Notes on Contributors

**Mark Discher** (MRDISCHER@stthomas.edu) teaches in the Philosophy Department at the University of St. Thomas in St. Paul, MN. After completing his M.Div. at Fuller and his S.T.M. at Yale, he took a D. Phil. at Oxford. The essay included in this issue was given as a paper at the 2001 Polanyi Conference at Loyola University, Chicago

**Paul Lewis** (lewis\_pa@Mercer.EDU) has recently joined the faculty of Mercer University in Macon, GA as an Assistant Professor in The Roberts Department of Christianity. He teaches introductory and interdisciplinary courses, as well as upper level electives in Christian Ethics. He has published several articles in medical ethics as well as numerous book reviews. His latest research project explores the intersection of evolutionary biology and Christian Ethics.

**Charles S. McCoy** (aenglert@psr.edu) is Robert Gordon Sproul Professor *emeritus* of Theological Ethics at the Graduate Theological Union and Pacific School of Religion. He is the founder and senior fellow of the Center for Ethics and Social Policy, Berkeley, and author or coauthor of many books and articles, including *The Transforming Cross*, *When Gods Change*, *Management of Values*, and *Fountainhead of Federalism*, all drawing on the thought of Michael Polanyi. His most recent publication is *Promises to Keep: Prospects for Human Rights*, of which he is editor and coauthor.

**Elizabeth Newman** (bnewman@btsr.edu) is Professor of Theology and Ethics at the Baptist Theological Seminary at Richmond. Her dissertation (Ph.D. from Duke) was on the Russian Orthodox theologian Alexander Schmemmann. She has published in the areas of theology and science, and Christian identity and higher education.

**D. M. Yeager** (yeagerd@georgetown.edu) is an associate professor in the Department of Theology at Georgetown University in Washington, D. C. (20057-1135). She has, at various times in her life, been mistaken for a secretary, a Roman Catholic, a deluded “true believer” in “a fringe cult figure” (the figure was Polanyi and the author of this mistake was a member of an NEH review panel), and (when she was editing the *Journal of Religious Ethics*), a “language Nazi,” a magician, and “a true bodhisattva.”