

dominating the media and the academy, have distorted our sense of American history. Going back to original sources, reading neglected texts, and rethinking old issues, he has refreshed our sense of ourselves and of our sense of nonsense. In doing so, he has stepped on many a toe, for there are a host of political reasons why convenient myths are broadcast today with religious fervor. The self-evident collapse of liberalism has exposed to everyone what a few have long known; the rationale of Big Government, if it was ever justified, no longer holds.

A primary rationale for Leviathan has been the warmaking power, which is why Kauffman has devoted much attention to the America Firsters of 1940-41. I think it is here that Kauffman, as a revisionist who has reconstituted the sense of *forgotten days*, has done his best work. He has revived some of the leaders of that movement as thinkers and as individuals, restoring them to our historical imagination. His treatment of Hamlin Garland and Amos Pinchot shows a background to isolationism that has roots both populist and patrician, and personal qualities that are appealing. His reconsideration of the literary side of isolationism is revealing, uniting in his view Robinson Jeffers, Kathleen Norris, Edgar Lee Masters, Edmund Wilson, John P. Marquand, John Dos Passos, Sinclair Lewis, and William Saroyan. His point is that before Pearl Harbor and Hitler's declaration of war, America First was a rational and respectable movement that had precedence in the best American traditions as sanctioned by Washington and Jefferson—and even Hamilton—among the founders, and by widespread and thoughtful opposition to the “splendid little war” of 1898. Kauffman has made his point, and in so doing he has examined the charges of anti-Semitism that have been leveled against the America Firsters. His conclusion, based on the evidence, is to dismiss most of those charges.

Was there indeed a movement to precipitate America's entry into the Second World War? Kauffman's look at Anglophile Hollywood reminds us of the celebration of the British Empire that was mounted by Hollywood, and shows us that subsequent revelations by William Stephenson and Michael Korda have literally vindicated the charges brought by Senator Nye. His amusing essay on Alice Roosevelt Longworth re-

minds us that not everyone was reverential about FDR. His book reminds us that neither was, or is, everyone reverential about the Popular Front mentality that seems to have rewritten the national history. In such pages, and others devoted to such individualists and rambunctious reformers as the late Edward Abbey and the alive and kicking John McClaughry, Kauffman is as entertaining as he is informative.

I must say that I am less satisfied with other aspects of Kauffman's presentation. His remarks on Ross Perot and Pat Buchanan have been already rendered obsolete by events, though I think Kauffman's sense that there is a national grassroots movement in the direction of isolationism has much truth to it. Application of theory is contingent at best, anyway. But I cannot share Kauffman's admiration for Gore Vidal, whose interminable rehashes of American history that everyone should know always recur to celebrating the ineffable wonderfulness of Gore Vidal, and whose fictions are either exercises in camp or, what is worse, boring historical novels that make Thomas B. Costain look like Shakespeare.

I cannot share either a related though unnecessary hostility to William F. Buckley, Jr., who, it must be said, has written the best column in this country for decades, who has been an indispensable leader of the conservative movement for those same decades, and who, more than any other prominent American in the last 40 years, has personified the once unquaint term *gentleman*. While I am at it, neither do I believe that there is any such thing as a “Catholic Right,” that “gay-bashing” is an adequate term for resistance to homosexual aggression, or that anticommunism was a pretext for imperialism.

On the whole, I think that Bill Kauffman's vision of a yeoman America that looks after itself is authentic and in the best tradition of our country. But we must admit as well that there are other, baser traditions that go deep in our history—in our national psyche. Washington was tough with the Whiskey Rebellion. Jefferson—Jefferson!—precipitated Manifest Destiny and empire with the Louisiana Purchase. Who, seeing such an opportunity, would have turned it down? Why did Vermont farmboys burn houses and steal chickens in Virginia? Why did Alabama farmboys fight for independence while their leaders

eyed Cuba, and more of Mexico? Americans have not resisted the masked temptation of power, and have always been contaminated by it—like the rest of humanity. Our biggest mistakes have been the subtlest ones, and insofar as they were inevitable, they were tragic.

One of Bill Kauffman's most powerful implications is that untruth is no basis for reform. Another is that now is the time to undo the damage that has been done at home. At the end of the Cold War, we have a chance to rethink our policies—and our national mythology as well. Toward that end, Kauffman has made an important and very readable contribution.

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Equal Time by Philip Jenkins

God: A Biography
by Jack Miles

New York: Alfred A. Knopf;
446 pp., \$27.50

The Origin of Satan
by Elaine Pagels

New York: Random House;
214 pp., \$23.00



If the best-seller lists are any guide, something odd is stirring in American attitudes toward religion, and specifically toward the Judeo-Christian tradition. For decades, it has been a commonplace that religious belief represents a critical demarcation line in class and intellectual belief, and that educated elites not only do not believe, they do not care. Recently, though, religious books of varying quality have been in vogue, and not just feathery items about obnoxious angels.

Far from suggesting an imminent religious revival, such works ostensibly rest on the assumption that we are now sufficiently removed from the religious dream to be able to revisit it with objectivity. God and Satan are not only dead, they are so far back in history that even their surviving relatives should not object to a frank biography. However, the two books reviewed here suggest a very

different picture: God, like Satan, continues to nag at our consciousness so tenaciously that people still feel the need to argue with Him, even denounce Him. For all their academic detachment, both Miles and Pagels are remarkably gripped by this supposedly extinct mythology.

Jack Miles' *Biography* (presumably unauthorized) is based on the view that "Many in the West no longer believe in God, but lost belief, like a lost fortune, has effects that linger. . . . [God's] image is living still within us as a difficult but dynamic secular ideal." If God has been reduced to a mere vestige of the Western consciousness, then He can be treated as a purely literary figure, whose character development and inner conflicts can be traced through the various works in which He appears. The book takes the form of a detailed literary reading of God's appearances in the Hebrew Bible (why not the New Testament also?). His studies of particular Old Testament books are often brilliant, reinforced by a broad range of cultural references and parallels. He makes no attempt to conceal his personal love for works like Job and Ruth, and the result is a stimulating meditation that makes us want to read or reread these and the rest of the Bible.

For Miles, God the character is by no means changeless: He demonstrates many flaws, He whines and rages, He is infuriatingly contradictory, but He also grows and matures, He "comes to full consciousness of His literal uniqueness." He differs radically from any human character, lacking as He does either parent or family, or any social relationships. This makes it hard to approach, still less comprehend, "the elusive weirdness of the Lord God." However, we never forget that the development of God is reciprocal with that of the worldly and human community of Israel, which is subject to conventional historical analysis: the notion of God flourishes alongside that of His nation.

This lengthy *Biography* is based essentially on the one quirky conceit of God the literary figure, and while this is done in a shrewd and literate manner, it would not hold our attention unless Miles were closely engaged with his subject. Though he makes no assertions of personal religious belief, the book is obviously the product of decades of internal debate and presumably argument, an attempt to relate the bizarre figure on the printed page to a cosmic reality. Miles concludes with a splendidly phrased

comment on the influence of this God in every aspect of our culture: "His is the restless breathing we still hear in our sleep."

Elaine Pagels has written a biography of Satan quite parallel to Miles' account of God, and she appears just as engaged both with her protagonist and with His vast influence throughout Western history. She is, however, far more explicit than Miles in using a scholarly exploration to advance a religious agenda, namely to condemn historical Christianity for an abundance of sins and flaws, most egregiously intolerance and anti-Semitism.

The Origin of Satan traces the historical evolution of the devil into what we might call the classical Miltonic sense of a Lord of Evil, master of a hellish kingdom in permanent rebellion against the Divine. She is undoubtedly correct in her assertion that this particular Satanic theme is virtually absent from the Hebrew Bible. The Genesis serpent is not originally diabolical, while the celebrated tester of Job is an official or state prosecutor of the Lord's court, a sort of supernatural Marcia Clark. The Satanic persona grows in what Christians term the intertestamental period, especially after the Maccabean Revolt: it emerges in mature form in the Dead Sea Scrolls often (but not universally) associated with the Essene sect, and in the New Testament.

In Pagels' view, the new idea of the diabolical flourished in response to social and religious conflict, especially within the branches and schools of Judaism. Jewish groups in controversy with powerful rivals painted them as servants of the forces of darkness, and quite literally as the children of Satan, tolerated by God for His own mysterious purposes until an imminent judgment (literally, "crisis") when they would be consumed like chaff. Though the Essenes certainly did this, the main culprits were that other fringe Jewish sect who followed Jesus of Nazareth. To quote the book's somewhat misleading blurb, it tells how "the writers of the four gospels condemned as creatures of Satan those Jews who refused to worship Jesus as the Messiah. . . . the evangelists invoked Satan to portray their Jewish enemies as God's enemies too." The anti-Judaic polemic of the Gospels was merely unsavory while Nazarenes remained a hunted minority, but, when they gained political power, these texts provided a charter for segrega-

tion, persecution, and ultimately for attempted genocide. The "Satanic" worldview later shaped the Christian approach to other opponents, including the Roman Empire, Christian heretics, and followers of rival religions like Islam.

There is much here that is correct and perhaps self-evident, and certainly gospel passages exist where the evangelists clearly meant to suggest that Jewish leaders opposing Jesus were directly motivated by dark forces. However, *The Origin of Satan* is also inaccurate on fundamental matters, most glaringly that of origin itself. One can read the book and see "Satan" as the product of internal Jewish debates without the slightest inkling of the vast and unquestioned influence of other Near Eastern cultures, above all that of ancient Persia, whose Zoroastrian religion had for several centuries posited an eternal conflict between God and Satan, the Lords of Light and Darkness, who are portrayed in terminology that would have been instantly familiar to a medieval Christian. Persian concepts were encountered at the time of the Babylonian exile, and subsequently permeated the thought of sectarian Judaism and mainstream

LIBERAL ARTS

THE END OF RACISM

"I single Jews out because their oppression of blacks cannot go unnoticed while they disguise their evilness under the skirts and costumes of the Rabbi. Lift up the yarmulke and what you will find is the blood of billions of Africans weighing on their heads. . . . How dare any Jewish person ask me why I am obsessed with Jews. I speak of Jews because of those from their race who are always on our backs sucking the blood from the black community then pretending to be our friends."

—from a column by Sharod Baker in the October 12 issue of the Columbia Spectator, a student newspaper at Columbia University.

Christianity. Dr. Pagels' failure to discuss these roots is remarkable.

Similarly, her book lays great emphasis on Jewish-Christian conflict at the time of the great Jewish-Roman war of 66-73 A.D., a pivotal event reflected in the Gospel of Mark, the "wartime" polemic with which Pagels begins her study. It would be embarrassing for her thesis to have a prewar Christian account which is thoroughly imbued with Satanic imagery, but which fails to associate the devil with the Jews or the Jewish leadership: probably what we possess in the hypothetical Gospel of Q, the reconstructed common source of Matthew and Luke. It is Q which shows us the devil offering Jesus the kingdoms of this world, of which he is master; Q shows Jesus being accused of exorcising through Beelzebub, prince of demons; controversially, Q may be the source of Satan falling like lightning from heaven. In Matthew's reading, the Q passage known as the Lord's Prayer ends with the often mistranslated petition to be delivered not from evil as such but from the Evil One (*ho Poneiros*). Q, in short, suggests an early Christianity thoroughly familiar with the diabolical and demonic, but absolutely not in the context of the Jews or the Jewish leadership. Only with a substantial dose of special pleading can Dr. Pagels sustain her "Satanic = Jewish" interpretation of the canonical Gospels.

There is a great deal wrong with this book, in its basic argument no less than its horrid editing. Quotations and ideas are generously repeated, as for example in the paragraph from Origen which makes a nice point on page 139, and returns like an old friend eight pages later. But for all its flaws, the book clearly meets a public demand: like *Miles' Biography*, it spent several weeks at the head of *Publisher's Weekly's* chart of best-selling religion books in hardcover, and it is likely to remain on the reading lists of church discussion groups for years to come. As with her earlier *Gnostic Gospels* (1979), this popular appeal is at least as interesting as anything in the book itself, and demonstrates the immense success of her own strong religious agenda. Pagels' readers seem hungry for a religion rooted in familiar Christian ideas and terminology, but lacking traditional constraints, and they believe they find it depicted in the work of a certified scholar willing to reject boring or difficult orthodoxies, and to rediscover the thought of those daring "radi-

cal Christians." *Origin of Satan* finds notions of absolute supernatural evil not only to be founded on the ephemeral controversies of the first century, but also associated with horrifying religious bigotry. Progress in religion is to be achieved by replacing the archaic concept that "otherness is evil" with Jesus' declaration that forgiveness is divine.

We might take Pagels' book to illustrate the exact opposite point. If she shows so convincingly that the very earliest Christian thought is so pervaded with notions of the diabolical, is it really possible to imagine a genuine modern Christianity which ignores the element of supernatural evil, which speaks of redemption and salvation without daring to imply what one is being redeemed or saved from?

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Highway Music

by Gregory McNamee

**A Thousand Miles from Nowhere:
Trucking Two Continents**

by Graham Coster
New York: North Point Press/Farrar,
Straus & Giroux;
275 pp., \$20.00



American literature, Wallace Stegner once observed, is not so much about place as motion: we are a restless people, and we write restless books that hurtle us from A to B with a blur to mark our passage. Discounting Stegner's own lovely evocations of place in books like *Wolf Willow* and *Crossing to Safety*, one has only to think of the *Pequod* and Huck Finn's raft, of Francis Parkman's horse and Neal Cassady's convertible, of Ken Kesey's magic bus and Tom Wolfe's chrome Spam-in-a-can rocket ship, even of John Muir's bunions, to see his point.

It is strange that in the catalog of contraptions and creatures that have propelled our literature, the semitruck should not figure more prominently

than it does. Why do we have no great novels about Macks and Roadmasters and Peterbilts, no epic poems about balling the jack doing double nickels on the dime? Country music would be markedly poorer without our native leviathans; where would Red Sovine and Hank Snow be without them? Transcontinental trucks have left scarcely a dent in our writing, although the image of them rolling down the endless highways of America is a ready-made metaphor, and the whine and hum of 18 wheels on asphalt is an authentically American idiom, as indigenous to these shores as jazz and popcorn.

That it should take a British writer to introduce the diesel-belching rig to us as an object of literary investigation is another curiosity. That is just what the novelist Graham Coster—the author, fittingly, of a book called *Train, Train*—does with *A Thousand Miles from Nowhere*, a good serious book of literary journalism that coincidentally marks the return of the North Point Press imprint.

The British have always produced fine travel writing, a body of work sometimes marked by a certain snotty disdain for the local subjects and a quickness to take credit where credit is not always due. Among American travel writers, only Paul Theroux seems to have imported these attitudes, but Coster will have none of them. He has an open humor and a pleasant way, as when he explains that in his own country, his interest in trucks is not widely shared:

In Britain we like trains. We invented them. Therefore we don't like trucks. Trains keep to their own neat ribbons of rail and stop at stations a mile out of town; trucks barge through half-timbered high streets and vibrate our Victorian sewage systems to pieces. A railway track says 'within limits'; the tidal wave of spray that smacks you sideways on a rainswept M4 says 'free for all.'

When Coster undertakes to learn something of how a big rig—"artics" they're called in Britain, misspelling included—is driven, he enters a world of power and terror. An instructor tells him, "You will be in charge of a very large killing machine," and he learns that in guiding 11 tons that stretch 50 feet behind the driver's seat, "you're an ocean-liner captain looking through your tele-