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God Talk: The Triteness and Truth in Christian Cliches (Book Review)

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of the heaviness of shame, the burden of unworthiness, is through the grace of God. Shame can not be forgotten, released, or conquered; it can only be lifted by the grace of unconditional acceptance and forgiveness.

The final part of *Shame and Grace* outlines the experience of grace and the process of healing our shame, both deserved and undeserved. Grace, we are told, "turns conventional moral wisdom on its head" (109). Our worth, our acceptance, our being good enough is not dependent on our own success, our potential, or even our skill in surviving dysfunctional families. Grace is a gift, a gift for the undeserving that enables us to be the persons we were created to become, and the peace of knowing that even when we fail to measure up, we are still worthy.

As in his other books, Smedes is well aware that merely stating (or reading) the truth doesn't automatically make

everything right. He goes on to provide specific suggestions for the healing of our shame. Smedes spells out a plan that includes the following: recognizing the core of our shame, living with our shadows, coming to terms with our shamers, and accepting ourselves. The gist of his suggestions are captured in a short statement of faith added as a postscript:

I believe that the grace of God heals the shame I do not deserve and heals the shame I do.

I believe that grace is the best thing in the world.
(168)

Shame and Grace is a book needed by many. In some places the reasoning is a bit thin, but the difficult task of being honest with our feelings of shame is made easier with Smedes's help and persuasive reminder of the power of grace.

God Talk: The Triteness and Truth in Christian Cliches, by Randall Vander Mey (Downers Grove, IL; InterVarsity Press, 1993). 193 pages, paperback, \$9.99. Reviewed by James C. Schaap, Professor of English.

That Norman Rockwell family with heads bowed serenely in the booth by the wall was mine. I was the one with my thumb in my eye, making like I had an itch as I put in my moment of silence. While the mom and dad took painfully long with their "Thine is the kingdoms and the power," I was the one looking around discreetly, rearranging my silverware.

No doubt. If Randall Vander Mey, who formerly taught at Dordt College, hadn't described this scene himself in his book *God Talk*, the reader might well create a similar picture of family devotions, years ago, as Vander Mey's family prayed at a restaurant: pious parents accomplishing their duties while a precocious son discreetly assesses everything—including his father's words—and, by slight of hand, makes straight the crooked furnishings of the table in front of him.

In fact; he's still doing it. His family is larger now, of course—his audience here is the family of believers. But there are moments in this book when one imagines him just as open-eyed, just as desirous of rearranging our lives' utensils as he was, years ago, at the restaurant booth by the wall. What he is after in this book is the way in which the Christian community arranges its language—specifically pat phrases such as "In God we trust," "Praise the Lord," "God bless America," and "Lord, I just want to pray."

The book has 42 selections, some of them essays of considerable length, some just a few lines long, some extended arguments, some narratives. In each case, however, the rhetorical posture Vander Mey takes is analysis because he wishes to unpack meaning from phrases we use, some of them so worn they have long ago lost their ability to communicate anything of substance. Vander Mey is after our foibles in this little book, the silliness in the verbiage we so often use to discuss our faith.

At his best, he performs brilliantly, his perceptions bright and vivid, his manner gentle and loving, his style marvelous, but apropos. Some of these essays are meditations in the best sense of the word—thoughtful discourses which bring us closer to God. In "God Told Me," Vander Mey examines the inspiration of a California man who spent five years gluing together a life-sized crucifix from toothpicks, after claiming the work was something God told him to construct. Vander Mey explains how "God told me" can become a license for any kind of eccentric behavior, but instead of ridiculing the toothpick builder he makes room for the man's own energy and inspiration by remembering the Lord's own largess.

"God has a wonderful plan for our life" is the title of another strong selection, this one a reminiscence in which Vander Mey tells the story of a short-lived spiritual revival in the Christian high school he attended many years ago. The story is told engagingly, with the kind of even mixture of earnestness and irony that gives Vander Mey's voice such expressive style. Just as in "God Told Me," he concludes his examination of that revival in a way that points humbly at God's mysterious ways. In meditations such as these, Vander Mey is most accomplished. When he steps back, astonished at God's might or love or power, his readers too are brought to their knees.

His dissection of the novels of Frank Peretti, in "Spiritual Warfare," should be required reading for the hosts of Peretti fans. Although Vander Mey is critical of the popular novelist, he knows very well that some of his students at Westmont College, where he teaches today, are ardent fans, just as are many, many young Christians. The care he shows in working through the problems he sees in Peretti's work is remarkable; his own sense of awe, again, at the end of the essay, is fitting and most

dramatically accomplished. When he opens himself as he does in essays like this one, Vander Mey is masterful.

The collection is somewhat uneven, however. At his worst, Vander Mey edges toward becoming tedious; and even though his analysis is always on the mark, at times he resembles the kind of person who is constantly picking threads off one's dinner jacket.

Vander Mey's undeniable strength is his often breath-taking style. He is a whirling performer, his sentences often taking wing. Here he is, again, describing his father's prayers:

In a sonorous voice reserved for praying and defining words, he would have enumerated the world's ills and the stages of God's redemptive plan, borrowing both structure and phraseology from the Heidelberg Catechism, would have risen on oratorical wings toward a quotation of lines from a favorite hymn and ended with a family health survey, as our gravy congealed and our peas puckered.

Vander Mey's often ironic wit is remarkable. He would not have written the book if he didn't love words. One can confidently open the book anywhere, place one's finger on the page, and be sure that the sentence beneath is a holiday. In "Amen," he lists amen-type conversation-stoppers from all kinds of cultures in the kind of catalog of words one finds frequently in this book. "It's possible to get the same effect without the word *amen*," he says.

Listen in. You'll hear a Maine farmer's "Yup." A Southside Philadelphian's "Absolutely." A Black Panther's, "Right on." A surfer's "Bitchin." A wise guy's "You got it." A Valley Girl's "Totally." A British barrister's "Precisely." A tough guy's "Yeah." A Pentecostal's "That's right." A Spirit-filled evangelical's "Thank you, Jesus." A yuppie's "Exactly." A bureaucrat's "That is correct." And a coffee drinker's "True."

Strengths overplayed often become weaknesses, and such is the case at times in the book. Let me try to give an example by quoting, at length, from one of my favorite selections, "Spiritual Warfare." In this passage, Vander Mey sorts the rather obviously outfitted heroes and villains of Peretti's *This Present Darkness*. Then he lists a huge catalog of New Age minutiae in an absolutely stunning sentence:

Everything that can be identified as "New Age"—and that includes Eastern mysticism, reincarnation, karma, mantras, divination, the occult, demon possession, witchcraft, hypnosis, cosmic consciousness, meditation, Science of Mind, psychics, seances, channeling, out-of-body experiences, altered states of consciousness, ESP, telepathy, auras, spirit guides, ascended masters, fortune telling, carnivals, holistic education, self-actualization, yoga, the lotus position, relaxation, concentration, even breathing—is conveniently lumped into one universal

Master Plan that looms like a thunderhead over the blond heads of Middle America.

Two aspects of that sentence are worth considering. First, the length. His decision to list 31 examples of behavior associated with New Age mysticism seems to have been done at the expense of the reader, most of whom, I think, find it impossible to follow without falling into exhaustion. It's the sounds of the words, the compilation itself that interests him here, more than their being understood. He wants to exhaust us; in some ways, that's his point. The tool is really sarcasm. But the decision to be exhaustive, is a decision made for style rather than substance, for sound rather than sense.

Secondly, observe the two separate ends of the sentence. This sentence is periodical in two ways: first, moving toward logical exhaustion in the long listing—from reincarnation to something as absurd as breathing. But its wonderful stabbing twist at the very end also makes it periodic: the thunderheads over "the blond heads of Middle America." Again, the reader's capacity to sustain Vander Mey's sharp sarcasm is almost exhausted by the end of this incredible sentence. There are times in this book when what interests Vander Mey more than the reader, or more than even his subject, is sound and style, performance. At those moments his work suffers.

One other example. In "Chapter and Verse," Vander Mey, not incorrectly, assaults those who wish to "proof text" their own work by a bibliography of scriptural references. Most of the essay concerns a course evaluation he once received from a student who indicated that he would have preferred more "chapter and verse" from a course Vander Mey taught. Obviously, the remark is one of those which, for whatever reason, will not disappear from Vander Mey's memory.

Most of the essay is something of a stiff arm at this student, or students like him; and although the argument Vander Mey lays out against "chapter and verse" documentation—and Bible use—is convincing, one soon begins to think that Vander Mey is simply holding a grudge. The essay has the tone of the kind of angry letter that perhaps needs to be written but might better be left forever unsent. Soon enough, however, he himself realizes he is venting spleen over three pages of essay: "When I read what I have written here," he says, "I think I sound a little defensive, like a guy who never got to answer back."

That line appears at the very end of the essay and in some way negates the effect of everything that precedes it. Given his realization, one can't help but wonder why the essay appears in the collection. It could well have been dropped since he recognizes his sin just as easily as the reader does. Why wasn't the selection simply dropped? Because, like every other selection in the book, it is remarkable for its style. In this case, I think a decision was made on the basis of style, not substance, of manners rather than truth, of entertainment rather than ideas.

Often, the power of Vander Mey's voice is almost overwhelming, not only for the manner by which he turns and spins words, phrases, and sentence parts; but also for the sheer number of voices he can generate. *Alladin*, Disney's recent blockbuster movie and record-shattering video, would not have been the success it was if it weren't for Robin Williams, whose incredible voices animate the film as remarkably as its cartoonists did. As one reads this book, one comes to realize that Vander Mey, in some ways, has similar powers. Few writers, Christian or not-Christian, write with so much sheer energy as Randy Vander Mey. Few can so delight with words. Within the world of Christian writers, one thinks only of Robert Farrar Capon as coming close.

But in this book of words readers may sometimes find themselves riding verbal surf so overwhelming they can too easily lose balance. When that happens we go under.

When Vander Mey attacks substantial enemies, as he

Groen van Prinsterer's Lectures on Unbelief and Revolution, by Harry Van Dyke (Jordan Station, Ontario, Canada: Wedge Publishing Foundation, 1989). x + 561 pages, paperback, \$29.95 Cdn. Reviewed by John C. Vander Stelt, Professor of Theology and Philosophy.

Why would H. Evan Runner, professor of philosophy at Calvin College, Grand Rapids, Michigan, in the 1950s become the founder and mentor of a voluntary and international student organization, called the Groen van Prinsterer Club? Why would James W. Skillen, a former professor of political science at Dordt College and now executive director of the Washington-based Association for Public Justice (APJ), include a section on "Groen van Prinsterer" in his doctoral dissertation at Duke University (cf. his "The Development of Calvinistic Political Theory in the Netherlands, with Special Reference to the Thought of Herman Dooyeweerd", 1974)?

Why would Donald Morton, a former instructor of history at Dordt College and since the middle 1970s associated with the International School in Amsterdam, invest a considerable amount of time to assist Harry Van Dyke in editing, translating and publishing Lecture XI in 1973 (68 pages) and Lectures VIII-IX in 1975 (87 pages) of Groen van Prinsterer's *Unbelief and Revolution*, published in 1847? Why would Harry Van Dyke, assistant professor of history at Redeemer College in Ancaster, Ontario, Canada, spend almost a decade studying, editing and translating the fifteen lectures Groen van Prinsterer gave in 1845/6 to some twelve to twenty-one civil servants, lawyers, professors, and physicians?

The answer is simple—because Groen van Prinsterer's *Unbelief and Revolution* contains a classical description of what it means to follow Christ while one lives in the center of culture and on the cutting-edge of life. As a little known but formidable reformer, Gallium Groen van Prinsterer (1801-1876) looked behind the mask of the dominant spirit of his age and clearly saw in his own life and

does, for instance, in "In God We Trust," he's brilliant because he's advancing upon foes worth his considerable skills. When he's going after other problems—"Special Music," for instance, or "Lord," or "Just"—he becomes, in light of his best work, less effective, somewhat petulant.

But when he's honest and forthright, when he's caring and kind, when his considerable talents are used to illustrate awe, even fear of God almighty, Randall Vander Mey turns out brilliant ideas in memorable adornment, great style carrying perceptive substance.

This is, bottom line, a wonderful book, full of insight and brimming with the kind of perceptions that will make it impossible for us to use some of the stock phrases of our lives as glibly as we've done in the past.

Rumor has it another similar book is already in progress. Here's hoping rumor is right. Those of us who care about our "God talk" are brighter and sharper for Randall Vander Mey's good sense.

the world around him the profoundly *religious* conflict between reality and myth, love and license, freedom and slavery, shalom and deception. As a perceptive historian and sensitive politician, he rediscovered something of the depth and scope of complete allegiance to God ('s revelation) and the practical implications of such a commitment for followers of Jesus Christ in such things as their study of history, concern for education, interest in justice, renewal of faith life, and wish to help the poor.

In the first part of his Ph.D. thesis in history at the Free University in Amsterdam, Van Dyke describes in the first three chapters the socio-economic, political, and intellectual aspects of Groen's world, as well as the general Dutch Reveil and the Secession of 1834 (which he did not join, in part because of its world-flight mentality). In the next nine chapters, he provides a detailed explanation of the purpose, sources, audience, style, main argument, editions, and translations of Lectures I-XV Groen delivered in his home in the winter of 1845/6 on the general topic of the nature of unbelief and revolution and the relationship between these two major historical forces.

In the thirteenth chapter, Van Dyke provides an excellent and critical discussion of the most important controversial issues in Groen's views, viz., his monarchical bias, Platonizing leanings, deterministic inclinations, and logicistic tendencies (pp. 217-270). The *first* part of this book ends with concise and clear summaries in Dutch (pp. 271-276) and French (pp. 277-285) and a helpful select bibliography (pp. 285-292).

The *second* part of Van Dyke's study consists of an accurate English translation of Groen's original lectures on "Ongeloof en Revolutie." Despite its abridged form—