

Books worth wrestling with

We asked writers to tell us about a book that they disagree with—but that they also see as important enough to argue with.

Books in the [May 20, 2020](#) issue



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Stuart Murray's *The Naked Anabaptist* is a book I should love. It's a book that was written for me: a Mennonite by choice, raised Episcopalian in the suburbs of Washington, D.C., with no claim on the ethnic heritage that binds together the people who make up the majority of Anabaptists in the United States. It aims to offer Christians a wider appreciation for what is often conceived as an ethnically clad tradition that chooses to separate itself from the world.

Murray came to Anabaptism not through family lineage but through theological conviction. He was instrumental in founding the Anabaptist Mennonite Network—an affiliation of churches in the UK and Ireland that are invested in the neo-Anabaptist principles he pulls out in his book.

I love to argue with Murray, and I have ample opportunity. People who want to understand Mennonites ask me about *The Naked Anabaptist* more often than any other book.

My primary argument with Murray is that his book does exactly what he claims to mitigate against. The direct line he draws between 16th-century practices and his own “core convictions” skips over the relational and spiritual work that communities of Anabaptists have engaged in together over centuries. These core principles mean very little without living churches working them out as we face ever new questions.

I came to the church not through ideas but through a church body made up of human bodies. The first of those was a doctoral student named Peter Dula, who spoke one night at a small southern Mennonite church about his time teaching with the Mennonite Central Committee in Iraq at the height of the US invasion, around 2004. Peter’s father is Ethiopian, and his mother is an ethnic Mennonite from the US. The Dulas’ story is the story of Mennonites.

The story of Mennonites also includes Vincent Harding, a black civil rights activist who helped pen Martin Luther King Jr.’s famous “Beyond Vietnam” speech. It includes James and Rowena Lark, black church workers who founded Dearborn Street Mennonite Church in Chicago. It includes the Hinojosas, who first encountered Mennonites while working as migrant workers in the tomato fields of Ohio and later went on to birth the first Latino Mennonite churches in Texas.

Murray doesn’t have space for the ways these Mennonites are a part of the clothing of the church. He gives only a passing nod to most of the 1.75 million Anabaptists in 58 countries across the world. By pulling out theological claims from the 16th century, Murray misses how generations of Anabaptists were re-formed through embodied struggle, migration, renewal, and reform. *The Naked Anabaptist* erases the real church bodies, those that are formed not by attention to selected principles but by intersecting relationships that also intersect with our past.

But Murray is a worthy interlocutor. He’s invested in the thriving of the church through renewal that he sees in Anabaptism’s central attention to Jesus. He offers a clear and concise early Anabaptist history. He answers questions that are often among the first I’m asked when I share that I’m a Mennonite.

And yet, Murray and I find ourselves in disagreement on where these questions lead. For him, they lead to theology that can be applied here or there, in any church

tradition. For me, they lead back to communities, to the lives of people. For me, there is no naked Anabaptist. As a friend once put it, our church tradition is “borrowed clothes, the whole way down.”

—*Melissa Florer-Bixler, pastor of Raleigh Mennonite Church in North Carolina and author of Fire by Night*

I first started to think about aesthetics at church. We were fundamentalist Baptists, and I’d rejected the aesthetics of our kind of worship—treacly, manipulative music in an undistinguished building—before I knew words like *treacly* or *undistinguished*, or for that matter *aesthetics*. My rejection existed as a vast number of irritations awaiting names. But the things that gave my life joy all came from outside the church, and I felt weird about that.

I have gone on feeling weird about it. The questions that my church experience implicitly asked me were: Why should it matter if the song seems terrible to you, as long as the message is good and it means something to people? And, conversely: If it has a bad message and is made by a bad person, why allow it into your life?

People who aren’t fundamentalists also ask those questions. In an adult life spent among angry young leftists and liberal-to-centrist university people, I am surprised how often they still arise. Liberals, and some leftists, tend to see art preeminently as a form of self-expression, so its value has to do with that of the selfhood expressed. These folks like (and tell me to like) tremulously sincere folk singers, doctrinaire nth-generation punk bands, conscious rappers unconscious of how boring they are, writers who bear witness but don’t bear scrutiny. One might as well be at a Christian bookstore, circa 1995.

It would be wrong to say that the political right does a better job making sense of art and its claims on us. After all, the right is where I started out, in my fundamentalist childhood, watching end times horror movies and asking myself why *Alien* was so much better.

But the first writers I found who took the integrity of aesthetic experience seriously all tended to lean right. While I find a lot of things about them frankly disgusting, I expect to keep reading **Hugh Kenner** and **Guy Davenport** for the rest of my life. The two are paired in my mind now, like Plato and Aristotle, Bonnie and Clyde,

starfish and coffee.

The best introduction to these writers and their thought—which is so often a shared thought, a set of preoccupations that winds through both their oeuvres—is ***Questioning Minds***, a collection of their correspondence published in 2018. It is a volume of correspondence in another sense, as the two writers discover various motifs, ideas, and gestures that appear in the painting and poetry of various eras. They talk together of Aristophanes, John Ruskin, Homer, James Joyce, and most of all Ezra Pound. Reading them constitutes an education in how to pay attention.

But Kenner's and Davenport's ability to pay attention has tragic limits, as does anyone's, and *Questioning Minds* teaches us about the meaning of their particular limits. They can't always view other people with the tender solicitude they bring to paintings. They share the classical satirist's inability to imagine altruism as anything other than a pose. They show far more tolerance for Pound's lapses into fascism than they do for students who do not want pointlessly to risk death in and, worse, bring death to Vietnam.

Art worship can tend toward authoritarianism: you start wanting the society to be as intolerant of formlessness and sloppiness as the sculptor is. But art can also be, aside from the satisfaction it offers in itself, a place to learn to attend to things carefully. Kenner and Davenport are peerless among teachers of that skill. One needs only to remember to practice it in morals and politics as well as aesthetics.

—*Philip Christman, who teaches English at the University of Michigan and is the author of Midwest Futures*

During a period of bonafide social and political correctness, or what the younger generations are proclaiming as “wokeness,” it can be easy to take for granted the dramatic ways our culture has become so liberated. With that shift, we have also become more careful, conscious, and reactive.

But the way we navigate subjects of race, sexuality, and gender has made a 180 degree turn in less than 30 years. In 1992, George H. W. Bush was the president of the United States, Whitney Houston's “I Will Always Love You” was at the top of the charts, and **John Gray's *Men Are from Mars, Women Are from Venus*** was the highest ranked work of nonfiction. The self-help book, which spent 121 weeks on the

best-seller list, vowed to share with readers the vital secrets to maintaining a successful relationship. This promise was predicated on a clear premise: women and men are different.

Based on this thesis, the book was marketed as a primer for understanding the opposite sex. It claimed that not only are men and women entirely different, but each must learn to speak the other's language to have healthy relationships. Gray amplifies this idea with the metaphorical notion that women and men are so different they might as well be from different planets.

When it was released, *Men Are from Mars, Women Are from Venus* helped many people by addressing one of the most significant issues in relationships: communication. Gray named the reality that women and men react differently to situations and that our biological differences regularly incite us to behave in certain ways.

Looking at it now, it's obvious that the book only offers small fragments of the truth. Communication in a relationship cannot be simply relegated to roles prescribed by biology or gender. Putting gender at the pinnacle of interrelational dialogue oversimplifies the dynamic between people, to the detriment of the relationship.

The danger of Gray's premise is that it leads women and men to fall into the habits of stereotyping one another and detaching themselves from their shared humanity and experience. For women, it becomes easier to derogate the nuances of men's emotional intelligence and individual vulnerability. For men, it becomes easier to undermine women's emotions by regarding them as irrational and subject to intense, incessant change.

Men Are from Mars, Women Are from Venus created unnecessary false variances by sweeping over the complexity of gender roles. It also swept over the LGBTQ community during a critical time when many were chastised and feared because of the AIDS epidemic. Gray was also blind to the concept of intersectionality. Women of color in particular have multiple sites of identity—racial, socioeconomic, cultural, intergenerational, and religious dimensions of self—that further complicate the relationship between genders.

Despite its poor aging, I still believe Gray's book is an important read. Its mainstream success shows how closely it represents the sentiment around gender that was widespread just a few decades ago. Although some people now dismiss

them as antiquated, many of the ideas in *Men Are from Mars, Women Are from Venus* are still broadly upheld.

Gray offers a reasonable voice for some of the most popular, albeit regressive, concepts by which people view those of the opposite gender. An influential mouthpiece for the flawed logic that loyally adheres to heteronormative gender performances, *Men Are from Mars, Women Are from Venus* recalls a generation that prepared us to be ready for big change.

—Grace Ji-Sun Kim, who teaches theology at Earlham School of Religion and is the author of *Embracing the Other*

In his 1930 book, ***Christus Victor: An Historical Study of the Three Main Types of the Idea of Atonement***, Gustaf Aulén sketched three options for the meaning of Jesus' death and resurrection, creating a typology that has become standard for theological conversations: Anselm's satisfaction theory, Abelard's moral influence perspective, and his own "Christ as victor" approach. Aulén's focus was to establish *Christus victor* as the definitive explanation for the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

"The Atonement is the triumph of God over sin, death, and the devil," he wrote. With Irenaeus as his exegetical guide, Aulén found biblical warrant for this theme mostly in Pauline texts. He argued that the influence of Anselm's theory upon Christianity diminished the eschatological power of resurrection, the cosmic shift that occurred at the empty tomb. "What was lost was the note of triumph."

Key aspects of Aulén's book have proved unhelpful. His caricature of Anselm's argument has been exposed as an inattentive reading of *Cur Deus Homo*. He's reckless in his stark depiction of Jewish and Christian differences. "Redemption in the New Testament shows how radical the breach between Judaism and Christianity is," he claims. "Law cannot give salvation."

Those parts of Aulén's book are easy to refute. The harder task is to come to terms with the pitch of his theology, his triumphalism: "The victory of Christ over the powers of evil is an eternal victory, therefore present as well as past."

It's true that Jesus is the victory of God, a statement that has been reformulated in book after book. I know I've preached more than a few *Christus victor* sermons. Like Aulén, I'm attracted to a triumphant message, a gospel that puts me on the winning side of history, a cosmic frame that assures me that everything will come out alright for me in the end—despite the losses now, deaths in this pandemic, the neglect of the president, the selfishness of senators who adjusted their stock holdings before the economy collapsed, the hedging of investors whose first purchase after the crisis will be a new yacht.

Christus victor seems like cheap comfort when we need a solidarity movement here and now, an organized political struggle to provide for the safety of hospital workers and the financial health of the sick, to demand the release of prisoners in jails and immigrant detention centers before a virus takes their lives. Every life is precious now, regardless of who has won a cosmic war against powers and principalities.

I was born in Los Angeles and grew up on the theology of Tupac Shakur. "My music is spiritual," he said once, "except for the fact that I'm not saying 'We Shall Overcome.' I'm saying that we are overcome. . . . My raps are a decision, rabble rousing, spiritual, like gospel music." Because, he went on, "we have so many things to deal with, we need to talk straight up and down."

A theology of Christ's redemption starts here, not with Aulén's call to imagine an eschatological victory as motivation "to meet the evil with a battle-song of triumph." With Tupac's lyrics in my head and his beats in my pulse, in a world overcome by the violence of power brokers who hoard the earth's resources, my Christology returns to the words of Blaise Pascal: "Jesus will be in agony until the end of the world. There must be no sleeping during that time."

This is not an explanation of God's redemption. It's a call to vigilance as we locate ourselves *en la lucha*, in the struggle, as Ada María Isasi-Díaz puts it in her *mujerista* theology, to "affirm that the redemptive reality of which our Christian faith speaks is not something apart from our daily reality." Christ's redemption happens *en la lucha* of daily realities, in the grace of ordinary solidarities, like the provision of masks for overwhelmed hospital workers and ventilators for patients and meals for hungry schoolchildren.

—Isaac S. Villegas, pastor of Chapel Hill Mennonite Fellowship in North Carolina

In his recent book *Judaism: The Genealogy of a Modern Notion*, **Daniel Boyarin** develops the argument of his 2007 essay “Semantic Differences; or, ‘Judaism’/‘Christianity.’” There he argues that one cannot speak of a Jewish religion in the Greco-Roman world.

He offers two reasons for this claim, both based in the Greek language. First, the Greek word *loudaios* likely meant “Judean” rather than “Jew,” and the Greek word *loudaismos*, which we might translate as “Judaism,” was rarely used in the Second Temple Period and likely meant “to act like a Judean.” Second, no ancient Greek word existed that is equivalent to the modern English word *religion*.

Boyarin concludes that speaking of a “Jewish religion” can lead to profound misunderstandings about Jewish life in the Greco-Roman world. Before the rabbinic period, Jewish life (or Jew-ish life, as Boyarin would have it) was less external to Greco-Roman culture than we tend to assume.

How did the concept of Judaism arise, then? When the early church fathers began to write *Adversus loudaios* texts for their Christian audiences, Judaism as a religion was inadvertently created by its own opposition. *Judaism* was used as a descriptor of heresy, which in turn led to the rabbinic establishment of a bounded, normative Judaism.

Boyarin bases his argument on the presumption that the emergence of a word correlates with the emergence of an idea. A concept of Judaism, therefore, could not have existed before the term *Judaism* existed.

He engages with philosophers such as Wittgenstein, but he not does not substantively engage with language theorists. Many of these theorists rely on a semantic-cognitive approach, which considers how thought and language interact with one another.

Having read some of this scholarship, I am fairly certain of one thing: a toddler cannot call a spoon “spoon” until she develops a perception of the spoon. Nor will a toddler say “I love you” to her mother until after she is conscious of her long-existent bond to her mother. Once language is established, it informs those who use it, and these users can change and subvert the meaning of words over time, until they reach a certain degree of stabilization.

Jews in the Greco-Roman world, moreover, believed in certain key ideas without sharing a common vocabulary of words with which to label these ideas. One example is the notion of covenant. The word *covenant* barely appears in the writings of Josephus, but the idea that God established a covenant with Israel is dominant in his work. Another example is the idea of martyrdom. That one could willingly sacrifice oneself on behalf of one's ideals was discussed and debated among Greek-speaking Jews, but the word *martyr* was not used until the second century.

While I disagree with Boyarin's conclusions, I appreciate his book because it challenges readers to mine other academic disciplines—philosophy, language theory, and philology—and to consider the complex ways the history of ideas can be explored. Boyarin's book does what all great books should do: it challenges us to look at familiar words and old concepts in new ways.

—*Malka Z. Simkovich, who teaches at the Catholic Theological Union in Chicago and is the author of Discovering Second Temple Literature*

Several recent books by leading economists have critiqued the capitalist worldview and its structures as inherently flawed. **Branko Milanovic's *Capitalism, Alone: The Future of the System That Rules the World***, offers a slightly different take: it's complicated. While capitalism needs major corrective measures, he argues, it is the only viable option. He brilliantly frames structural deficiencies and articulates goals, but many of his proposed measures fall short.

Milanovic traces the emergence of capitalism as the globally dominant socioeconomic system and distinguishes a Western form of capitalism—"liberal meritocratic capitalism"—from the "political capitalism" prevalent in authoritarian regimes. He attributes growing inequality in countries like the US to a concentration of wealth at the top, higher dividends on wealth, and marriage patterns. Milanovic posits "people's capitalism" as an alternative that can grant everyone an equal share of income.

It's a noble idea, but how do we accomplish it? Some of Milanovic's suggestions, like tax breaks for the lower and middle classes or more investment in public schools, might help. But he pays insufficient attention to the massive wage gap, the lack of guaranteed universal income, and the way factors like race and gender accentuate meritocratic capitalism. He suggests incremental shifts that would keep poor people

alive but without leading to major structural changes.

Milanovic is right that capitalism has prevailed over other economic systems, but its political triumph cannot be construed as proof that it is viable for everyone.

Capitalism is built on the backs of vast sections of people who are treated as expendable. COVID-19 has yet again exposed major flaws in a system that fails those who have no safety net. Unless we enact long-term policies to guarantee a livable minimum wage and universal basic income, any stimulus packages become patchworks that will eventually come apart.

A central part of Milanovic's book is the interaction of capitalism and globalization. He calls for increased immigration but wants to reconcile the desires of migrants with the economic concerns of citizens. He proposes a tiered access to citizenship rights, whereby wealthy immigrants can purchase citizenship at a premium. Less privileged migrants are welcome if they do not seek the full economic benefits reserved for citizens. The rationale is that citizens would accept more migrants if most of them are granted fewer economic rights.

Milanovic's approach—welcoming more migrants but denying long-term benefits to most—posits appeasement of xenophobia as a pragmatic move, purportedly to help the very immigrants who are discriminated against. While he aptly observes that populism employs immigration as a bogeyman, there is ample evidence that poor immigrants contribute more than they receive and have become the backbone of several economic sectors in the US.

Western meritocratic capitalism fosters xenophobia by pitting poor immigrants in a zero-sum competition with poor citizens for the crumbs it leaves behind. Asking immigrants to settle for crumbs—even if it were morally tenable—would do little to address the economic concerns of poor citizens.

Given the complex intersection of capitalism and immigration, we need visionary economists who can clarify that there is enough bread for everyone and policy makers who can implement structural changes to ensure that the bread is distributed justly across various economic strata. We also need a paradigm shift that celebrates all immigrants as assets who contribute to the nation economically, socially, and culturally. Milanovic is deeply insightful on many of these issues and seeks to suggest lasting solutions. He offers a right diagnosis but an inadequate treatment that attenuates the symptoms and leaves underlying causes largely

intact.

—*Raj Nadella, who teaches New Testament at Columbia Theological Seminary and is the author of Dialogue Not Dogma*

I don't so much read books by **Joan Didion** as gulp them. Her voice, in her fiction and her essays, is both diffident and bewitching. She is always saying things perfectly, and yet she is saying less than I want. ***Slouching Towards Bethlehem***, her 1968 essay collection, is no exception.

Much of the book is about California, and much is about the moments, people, and places that contributed to the sense of cultural upheaval in the 1960s. The title essay is about the dropout and runaway youth culture in the San Francisco area in 1967. Didion enters this burgeoning demimonde as a square but nonthreatening observer and then subjects it to a brutal examination. Drugs, squalor, and ridiculous ambitions feature prominently in her innovative, influential hybrid of misery tourism and cultural criticism.

The most shudderingly prescient moment comes when Didion observes a group of mimes in blackface surrounding a black man and taunting him in a way that seems meant to be political. This mood of enthusiastic cluelessness—in which what is real and what is a show, what is earnest and what is a joke, can merge and switch places to dreadful effect—has become an influential force in modern America.

As the eponymous reference to Yeats's "The Second Coming" suggests, the book mostly adds up to a story of cultural decline. The title essay was "the only one that made me despondent," Didion writes. "It was the first time I had dealt directly and flatly with the evidence of atomization, the proof that things fall apart."

A writer can master observations and still end up missing the story. It's not so much that Didion's sometimes apocalyptic tone goes wrong. It's that there needs to be more behind the details, which seem meant to persuade without making an argument.

Though still reading eagerly, I started turning against the author during the essay "Notes from a Native Daughter." Didion narrates the story of her hometown, Sacramento, in which her pioneer farmer forbears are the genuine and original

spirits of the city (and, by extension, of California). These farmers were, even then, on their way out as new people and industries moved in and “the voice of the aerospace engineer would be heard in the land.”

In Didion’s story there are no Spanish or Native people and no official policy or collective action backing the hardy pioneers. One may well lament the arrival of defense industries, but as with so many laments of decline, Didion locates the apex at an arbitrary moment and ignores everything before it.

And yet she’s not wrong. Many good things died or changed beyond recognition in postwar America, and we need writers like Didion to remind us not to be complacent about taking the good with the bad. If the rough beast slouching toward Bethlehem has, in fact, been born at last, it’s not in the form Didion seemed to envision. But what she saw was real, and it’s still worth straining our eyes to see it too.

—*Benjamin J. Dueholm, pastor at Christ Lutheran Church in Dallas, Texas, and author of Sacred Signposts*

This article was corrected on May 6, 2020.