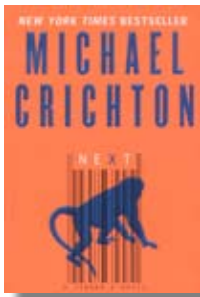


# Editorial Reflections



*Next, a Novel*, by Michael Crichton (New York: Harper, 2006, 560 pages). In this book, Crichton takes on the entire potential nightmare of commercial gene splicing and genetic modification, and weaves together a racy novel that helpfully reveals many technical facts about what could happen. One of the interesting comments comes up

on pages 262–263. An American naturalist goes to Costa Rica, where his job is to take care of enormous 200-pound sea turtles that come in to lay their eggs on the beach. He is out watching for them at night, and “then came the Jaguar. The black streak in the night. And suddenly last summer everything changed for Mark Sanger.” Earlier it had said,

the image burned in his mind of that poor animal stranded on the beach, helpless, as the jaguar pounced, bit off her head, and proceeded to eat the flesh off her legs while she kicked feebly. With the sound of crunching bones, the bones of her head, the brutality of the attack, its speed and viciousness, shocked him profoundly. It confirmed his suspicion that *the natural world had gone badly wrong*. (Italics mine)

This scene is not the main theme of the book, and is employed for another purpose than would appear. For me it is a vivid reminder of the massive and pervasive suffering in nature for which Evangelicals have no good explanation—if they do not believe in a Satan. This problem was highlighted in a recent debate at Biola University between an Evangelical scholar and Peter Singer, a highly controversial bioethicist at Princeton University. The question that stumped the Evangelical scholar had to do with why there is suffering in nature. The passage just mentioned makes that question quite poignant, even though it is not the book’s message.

However, those who are not interested in wading through hundreds of pages of fiction can find a terse nine page summary at the end of the book, giving the five major points Crichton is trying to make as he looks into the future with a keen scientist’s vision plus his M.D. background. There is much in this book to be thought about seriously in terms of the complexities of the future he envisions, and this book gives an interesting introduction to that future.

*The End of Biblical Studies*, by Hector Avalos (New York: Prometheus Books, 2007, 400 pages). The author of this book is a former Pentecostal minister who is now a professor of religious studies at the University of Iowa. His thesis is that the Bible is so outdated and describes such a different world existing so long ago that there is really no use in studying the Bible at all. And so the book, as it is titled, speaks apparently of the termination of Biblical Studies. The only reason Avalos himself feels called to study it, he says, is to be enabled to make that case.

The book is not in any case just a brief, superficial thesis. It is a meticulous book, going over many passages of the Old Testament in an attempt to show how useless they are for today. A really curious blooper is a chapter on translations of the Bible which starts out by saying that “nothing maintains the relevance of the Bible more than translations . . . if it were not for the translations that made the Bible accessible to countless millions of people over the centuries, it would probably have been forgotten.” It seems very likely also the opposite, that if the Bible had not been a book of great value and influence, it would not have been translated so many times. But this kind of foolishness is apparently blind to a man who lives, I feel sure, in a world in which anyone with an Evangelical background is suspected of insanity, and the only way you can get along in that environment is to quietly and vigorously renounce that background and somehow try to make clear that you are no longer beholden to the religious confusion of your earlier Evangelical orientation.



*Reasons to Believe: One Man’s Journey among the Evangelicals and the Faith He Left Behind*, by John Marks (New York: Ecco, HarperCollins, 2008, 382 pages).

John Marks spent a number of years in Young Life ministry, and grew up in the large Highland Park Presbyterian church of Dallas, a very strongly Evangelical church. His credentials

were amplified by spending two years going around the country interviewing Evangelicals of many different stripes, and honestly presenting a very fair and I think appreciative picture of Evangelicalism today. His transition, I am guessing, began when he married a Jewish girl while working in Europe. It seems obvious that he would find it difficult if not impossible to continue to be an Evangelical if that required him “to believe his wife is going to hell.” But his additional shift of not just losing his faith in Evangelicalism, but his faith in God, is perhaps due to the fact that he

worked in the world of CBS as a professional photographer and cameraman in the work of 60 Minutes.

That world, as with the world of Hector Avalos, is a world in which anyone with Evangelical faith is obviously greatly handicapped socially. I'm sure it seems quite easy in such an environment to assume that it would be easier to decline to have religious convictions than to try to hold on to them in that fierce and acerbic environment. I can recall shortly after leaving the Navy being asked by a lady if, during the War, I habitually knelt by my bed at night in a dorm room of 30 double-bunk beds. I did not do that before or after the Navy but I must say I cringe inwardly at the thought of what would have happened if I, Daniel-like, had done so. In the Russian army I would not have even survived.

The reason Marks wrote the book is in part that CBS downsized and left him out in the cold and he had some time on his hands. He then spent two years on his own, traveling, interviewing, and writing this book. For the record, it has got to be one of the fairest and most appreciative treatment of Evangelicals. For example, he praises avidly, almost without limit, the outstanding work of churches coming in to rescue the Katrina situation, where he went physically to interview people on the spot. He considers federal government efforts to be worth nothing compared to the incredible outpouring of love and usefulness on the part of churches.

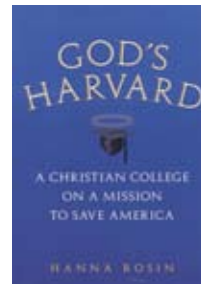
He actually lost his faith in God perhaps not directly due to the CBS folks, but when he was assigned a job in Bosnia and discovered that thousands of Serbian Christians had slaughtered tens of thousands of Bosnians with genocidal efficiency. He says, "I was not unable to imagine why nominal Serbian Christians would do that"—because, I suppose, he was already well aware of the limitations of a mere cultural Christian tradition. He adds, "But my problem, and why I stopped believing in God at all, is the question, why did God not stop it?"

He ends his book by referring to the photography he did for CBS on the *Left Behind* authors. He was asked right there in the studio if he was going to be left behind or not. That question must have burned into his memory. He ends his book with this statement:

The 20th century, my century, asks its own terrible questions. Bosnia, Hiroshima, Rwanda, Armenia. So many people, and so many Christians looking away when the Jews of Europe were led to their deaths, so many people and so many Christians embracing racist policies around the world during the colonial era, policies that led to murder and catastrophe on a cosmic scale. One species allowed its

full unfettered measure of violence for so long. A god has overseen this nightmare? A god whose divine plan accounts for all the torment, horror, and loss. It's not over yet surely. Someone else, some other nation is already preparing itself for the next slaughter in which I do not want to voluntary and unnecessarily implicate myself. A god who can't stop it has no right to my loyalty and my belief.

This is a very readable but heavyweight book. It is probably one of the best descriptions of the wide range of Evangelical characteristics that I know of, and very respectfully written. It also is a book that gives insight into why people lose their faith.



*God's Harvard: A Christian College on a Mission to Save America*, by Hanna Rosin (Orlando: Harcourt, Inc, 2007, 304 pages). This book, giving a startling, perhaps chilling, insight into the Evangelical world as seen from the outside, is the work of a relatively friendly outsider. It focuses specifically on the inner and outer life of Patrick Henry

College in Virginia, a school designed to facilitate previously homeschooled young people through the college level. You can't be a member of the student body unless you have been homeschooled.

Rosin is actually very well impressed by the high quality of intelligence, alertness, and optimistic aggressiveness of the students at Patrick Henry. Many have gotten a perfect score on the SAT. She never gives up on that. At the same time she finds a great deal of what you would call "cultural baggage," the Evangelical cultural baggage in the small world of young Patrick Henry College. In general she describes meticulously the students, the professors, the president, and the founder. She's really in the mode of admiration, and at the same time, being a Jew, she of course can't swallow their constant, somewhat blithe, statements to the effect that if you don't know Jesus you are going to go to hell, and things like that.

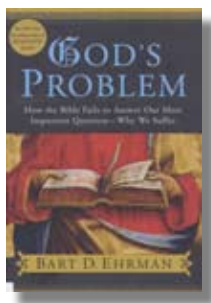
At the same time, she seems, after a year and a half of exclusive focus on her journalistic assignment, relatively well impressed by the quality of the people she is dealing with, even though she can't agree with them in every respect. She visits their homes, she sits in faculty meetings (some of the most tense meetings when 4 or 5 faculty left the institution), and she goes to Montana, to Seattle and to Los Angeles to visit the homes of some of the students.

But she is not just concerned about Patrick Henry College. She's not just interested in the homeschooling movement.

She's not just interested in Evangelicalism. One of the things that hangs over this book like a shadow is *her fear of what would happen if Evangelicals gained political strength in this country*. That of course may be the main reason for the *Washington Post* giving this year and a half assignment. It is no accident that Patrick Henry is only an hour's driving distance from Washington D.C. It turns out that over 100 graduates of Patrick Henry are already in key positions in Congress as aides and things like that. Three students of Patrick Henry are speaking openly about seeking to become president of the United States. There's an incredible degree of triumphalism in the student body of high achieving students who want to get in there and save America, so to speak.

Hannah Rosin truly admires the competence and even the self-confidence of these homeschooled students, and their dynamic initiative in their studies and prognostications for their own future. Nevertheless, she gives many clues to a dread of the possibility of such people actually running the country.

This reflects a significant turning of the tables, a reversal of roles for Evangelicals. For much of the 20th century Evangelicals were non-college socially powerless people. Things began to change once they began turning their Bible Institutes into Bible Colleges and then into "Christian" colleges and universities. Carl F. Henry's *The Uneasy Conscience of Modern Fundamentalism*, which came out with a jolt in 1947, and Timothy Smith's *Revivalism and Social Reform*, 1957, proved that the 20th century polarization between good news and good works was both recent and artificial, mining massive and incontrovertible data from the 19th century. Then came David Moberg's *The Great Reversal* in 1967, which further described an enormous groundswell already in progress, highlighting it as a significant depolarizing reversal.



*God's Problem: How the Bible Fails to Answer Our Most Important Question—Why We Suffer*, by Bart D. Ehrman (New York: HarperOne, 2008, 304 pages). This book is written by one of the most widely known and respected Bible scholars in the United States today. His credentials are in some ways impeccable. He grew up in an Episcopal church,

in high school he was won over by Evangelical students who told him he ought to go to Moody Bible Institute, which he did. After finishing Moody he went on to Wheaton, and after Wheaton he went on to Princeton Seminary. There he studied under one of the most godly professors on the faculty,

the world renowned Bruce Metzger, and gained his doctorate under him. He is at present a professor of religious studies at North Carolina University, Chapel Hill. He is noted for the fact that he is a specialist in early New Testament literature, the background of the Bible itself, the various competing non-canonical writings, and the early Christian movement, which he makes clear was by no means a single thing, but a wide variety of differing offshoots. His book on the *Da Vinci Code* is probably one of the most competent condemnations of Dan Brown's nonsense.

On the other hand, working as he does in a harsh secular university environment where even the departments of religion are rarely populated by believers, he proclaims his inability to see that the Bible gives an answer to the most important question of all—why people suffer. At one point in the book he describes an experience during a Christmas Eve service in Cambridge, England. He says since he was always excited by Christmas Eve services, and since he wished to be with his wife, he went to the service. During the service, a layman got up and read a prayer that was written out. The part of the prayer that caught his interest was "you came into darkness and you made a difference, come into the darkness again." And he goes on to say, "Yes, I wanted to affirm this prayer, believe this prayer, commit to this prayer, but I couldn't."

I find it curious that, although the Bible reflects a growing awareness on the part of the children of Israel of an antagonistic archangel called Satan who seeks to destroy and bring disrepute to God's name, this famous Bible scholar gives no credence to such an explanation for the evil and darkness of this world. This makes me believe that he is one more person who finds it almost impossible to work within the stridently anti-religious environment of a secular university department of religion. Actually over a period of time he has decided he'd better withdraw into an agnostic position saying he would like to believe in God but can't. The one thing I don't understand is how even if you didn't believe in God for the reason of rampant evil in the world, suffering, heartache, why would your own efforts not include some definite attempt to ameliorate that kind of hardship? This I don't see in his book. But, maybe in some way he is active, I'm not sure. **IJFM**