

ular consumption items among Soviet rock fans across the country, writes Sergei I. Zhuk, a historian at Ball State University in Indiana.

The Biblical story behind the opera triggered interest in the history of Christianity, and, while the Bible was officially banned from Soviet libraries, books debunking the stories of the Gospels suddenly became best-sellers and were put on waiting lists. Attendance at Orthodox Church services in Dnepropetrovsk increased, especially at Easter. In 1973, police had to chase crowds of devotees of the opera from the Cathedral of the Holy Trinity.

Oversized metal crosses began dangling from young necks. The KGB reported an upsurge in the smuggling of religious items. More than 60 percent of all residents accused of smuggling silver crosses, Bibles, and icons into Dnepropetrovsk mentioned *Jesus Christ Superstar* as the inspiration for their interest in religion. In the 1970s, a quarter of evangelicals in the region were under 25 years old.

An upsurge in the performance of indigenous music in the West was matched in Dnepropetrovsk by a passion for Ukrainian folk music. This was a welcome development for Soviet officials, but the KGB soon accused local bands of seizing on religious compositions, choosing “Ukrainian nationalistic songs of a Christian character.”

Despite the KGB’s best efforts, Jesus mania survived. The interest in popular religiosity and Western mass culture in Dnepropetrovsk, Zhuk says, highlights the failure of the Soviet system to protect the youth of even an isolated and heavily policed city from “ideological pollution.”

RELIGION & PHILOSOPHY

Forgive Me Not

THE SOURCE: “Pinning Your Own Tail on Someone Else’s Donkey” by Wilfred M. McClay, in *In Character*, Fall 2008.

ANOTHER POLITICIAN SWEEPED up in a tawdry sex scandal, another celebrity nabbed for driving drunk—then cue the ritual of redemption: the mea culpa media confession, the promise to repent or check into rehab, the teary plea for forgiveness. “Even when we cannot ourselves forgive a transgressor,” Wilfred M. McClay writes, “we usually credit the generosity of those who can.” Indeed, forgiveness is being touted in self-help books for its therapeutic effects: “It makes us, the forgivers, *feel better*.” Forgiveness, McClay contends, is in danger of “being debased into a kind of cheap grace,” a state in which it will have “lost its luster as well as its meaning.”

To McClay, “forgiveness can’t be understood apart from the assumption that we inhabit a moral universe in which moral responsibility matters, moral choices have real consequences, and justice and guilt have a salient role.” It is—or ought to be—a serious business. In ancient Jewish society, transgressors performed sacrificial acts to wipe away their sins, and “in the Christian context, forgiveness of sin was specifically related to Jesus Christ’s substitutionary atonement.” In our time we retain “Judeo-Christian moral reflexes without Judeo-Christian metaphysics,” and discharging the weight of sin becomes more problematic and confusing, especially when the process is complicated by the guilt

many feel about not being able to “diminish my carbon footprint enough, or give to the poor enough, or otherwise do the things that would render me morally blameless.”

Our awareness of our own moral shortcomings, says McClay, a historian at the University of Tennessee, Chattanooga, makes us all too prone to forgive the failings of others, and also explains today’s odd spate of popular “phony memoirs” such as *Love and Consequences*. “The putative autobiography of a young mixed-race woman raised by a black foster mother in gang-infested Los Angeles,” it was actually written by Margaret Seltzer, a white 33-year-old raised in a prosperous suburb. What Seltzer and other writers of forged memoirs are marketing, McClay writes, is “stolen suffering, and the identification they are pursuing is an identification with certifiable victims.” In a world without a religious route to the absolution of sin, making such an identification “offers itself as a substitute means by which the moral burden of sin can be shifted, and one’s innocence affirmed.”

McClay points to other areas in which moral sensibilities have careened out of control: the public apologies for the institution of slavery, such as one by the U.S. Senate, for instance, or the “faculty and administrator watchdogs” in academia who pounce on even the slightest slips by those who fail to “observe the regnant pieties regarding race, class, or gender in their public statements.” Attacking someone who falls short of perfection, he says, allows the condemners to “displace their guilt onto him, and prove to all the world

their own innocence.”

Is there a way out of this confusion? McClay thinks we may have to “concede that forgiveness is an example of a virtue that may not be extensible beyond its religious war-

rant.” Maybe we need another name for our therapeutic absolutions. In any event, it seems we need our foundational moral understandings more than ever. Recalling the true meanings of guilt and forgiveness, McClay

believes, may help us remember that they are concerned with “the soul of the transgressor and the well-being of society, and not merely with the forgiver’s good health and his sweet psychological revenge.”

SCIENCE & TECHNOLOGY

The Research Boomerang

THE SOURCE: “Be Careful What You Wish For: A Cautionary Tale About Budget Doubling” by Richard B. Freeman and John Van Reenen, in *Issues in Science and Technology*, Fall 2008.

BETWEEN 1998 AND 2003 THE Clinton administration started and the Bush administration finished doubling the budget of the National Institutes of Health (NIH), the primary source of governmental funding for biomedical research. The result of this historically abrupt largesse, according to one of the affected researchers, has been a “completely new category of nightmare.”

Instead of producing twice as many jaw-dropping breakthroughs as before, the suddenly enlarged research corps plodded ahead at the same steady pace. And the rapid buildup from

\$14 billion in 1998 to \$27 billion in 2003 seemed to suck dry the government’s enthusiasm for science—resulting in a near freeze of the NIH budget. As a result, the NIH is on track to spend 13.4 percent *less* on

biomedical research in 2009 than it did five years earlier. Young researchers who hurriedly ramped up their labs to handle new grants have been pressured to cut staff as they face longer and longer odds of having the grants renewed. “Young people who build their skills as graduate students or postdocs during the acceleration phase of spending bear much of the cost of the deceleration,” write economists

Richard B. Freeman of Harvard and John Van Reenen of the London School of Economics. A glut of newly trained graduate students is competing for a shrinking number of jobs.

During the doubling, the NIH increased both the value and the number of grants. When the available funds shrank because the annual appropriation failed to keep up with inflation, the number of grants had to be cut by a fifth. With poorer odds of getting funded, researchers submitted many more applications, making competition fiercer. The cuts may also have led to “conservative science, as researchers shy away from

EXCERPT

Naps for Invention

[Thomas Edison] solved many problems by going to sleep and letting an otherwise inaccessible part of his mind work on the challenge. He would lie down on his couch in his laboratory and place a steel ball firmly in his right hand. At the start of his nap his right hand would grip that steel ball, with his arm extended out, over the floor on the right side of his couch. After he went to sleep his hand would gradually relax. The fingers would open, and at some point the ball would fall to the floor, making a sound that would awaken him. Sometimes, he said, the answer to what he was working on would be right there in his mind.

—JAMES OPIE, a writer and businessman in Portland, Ore., in *Parabola* (Winter 2008)