



Billy Graham speaks at Madison Square Garden in 1957. Mainline Protestants and evangelicals alike took to “big religion” in the postwar years.

tions and four Eastern Orthodox patriarchies under one umbrella. What the NCC was to mainline and liberal American Christians, the Billy Graham Crusade was to evangelicals and conservatives. Though different in style and substance, the NCC and Graham’s institution were both large, bureaucratic organizations swarming with administrative professionals.

A fundamental marker of big science is its relationship with the federal government, which feeds it billions of dollars in exchange for research on military, communication, and energy technologies. The First Amendment prohibits government support for religion. Nevertheless, Zeller explains, during the postwar period, religion became increasingly enmeshed with public life—the words “under God” were added to the Pledge of Allegiance, the motto “In God We Trust” appeared on paper currency, and Presidents Harry S. Truman and Dwight D. Eisenhower routinely

linked America’s faith with the fight against communism in public speeches.

Like big science, which was criticized for its elitism and its commitment to research over teaching, big religion had its detractors, who established alternatives such as small nondenominational churches and Christian house meetings. Ironically, Zeller notes, some of the dissident currents grew to be so successful over time that they became part of the fabric of big religion themselves.

In some ways, big religion and big science are both products of the Cold War. Anticommunist sentiment fueled America’s participation in the space race, and at the same time gave rise to religious political rhetoric that contrasted Americans’ faith with “godless” communists.

Today, religion and science can seem at loggerheads, in opposite camps of an endless battle over truth. But it’s worth remembering that not too long ago, in the era of

the bigs, religion and science were unlikely partners in defining the American way of life.

RELIGION & PHILOSOPHY

Putting Free Will to the Test

THE SOURCE: “Experimental Philosophy and the Problem of Free Will” by Shaun Nichols, in *Science*, March 18, 2011.

DO HUMANS HAVE FREE WILL? The question is as old as dirt. Now experimental philosophers are trying to gain insight into the issue in a new way: by using techniques borrowed from the social sciences to uncover the intuitions that drive ordinary people to give different answers to questions about free will.

In one experiment, writes University of Arizona philosophy professor Shaun Nichols, participants are told to imagine a “determined” universe in which “every decision is completely caused by what happened before the

decision.” Study participants tend to respond that people in such a universe should not be held responsible for their actions. But if they are asked whether someone in such a world could be held responsible for killing his own family, participants say yes. “Concrete cases of bad behavior lead people to attribute responsibility,” Nichols observes. This pattern seems to hold true across cultures.

The answer also changes when the scenario is less distant. If told that

many scientists believe that our own world is determined, people are much less forgiving of wrongdoing than they are when the world under consideration is determined but imaginary.

Finally, human responses vary depending on the kind of wrongdoing being discussed. Imagining a determined world, people are less likely to hold a tax evader to blame than they are someone who has committed a more emotionally charged act, such as rape.

The divided responses people give in experimental philosophy tests pretty accurately reflect a centuries-old division among traditional philosophers. Some thinkers have argued that even a determined universe is “compatible” with the concept of moral responsibility, others that it’s not. Nichols says that the new philosophy will shed light on the “psychological mechanisms” behind each approach, and ultimately on the old-as-dirt question itself.

ARTS & LETTERS

Beauty, the Ultimate Survivor

THE SOURCE: “The Attack on Beauty” by Robert Boyers, in *Salmagundi*, Spring 2011.

BEAUTY HAS NEVER HAD AN easy time, whether under scrutiny from suspicious Puritans or picky Renaissance critics, but the attack on beauty over the last century by modernist artists is the “most serious and sustained,” writes *Salmagundi* founding editor Robert Boyers. They “have dismissed all things relaxing, easy to take in and enjoy, and therefore inimical to the spirit of an art intended to be rigorous, difficult, unpopular. To be impressed by what passed for beauty was felt by many modernist writers and artists to be philistine.”

In past generations, quarrels with beauty have mostly been concerned with what beauty was or how it ought to be valued, but the attack of modernists differs in kind, question-

ing whether beauty is anything more than a personal preference shaped by a particular cultural outlook at a particular moment in time.

Yet while there may be something to these arguments, beauty won’t go away. It crops up in the least likely places, the same pieces of art meant to repudiate the very notion. Marcel Duchamp’s 1917 urinal (which he titled *Fountain*), an early example in a long line of such modernist works, may even seem “beautiful by virtue of its form or the pristinity of its gleaming surface,” Boyers says. Duchamp “could not [have imagined] how inventive artists would be in clinging to improbable versions of the beautiful.”

Artists “have often found it useful to deny or to disguise their predilection for the beautiful.” Wassily Kandinsky, for example, said he sought to “apply the methods of music” and to

capture “the spiritual” in his abstract canvases. What could that mean besides beauty? Such evasions are just descriptions of beauty in “more acceptably sophisticated terms.”

The attack on beauty has been of a piece with a larger cultural assault on anything elitist, Boyers observes. Beauty required discrimination. In its place, “interesting” came into vogue, a more inclusive standard. “The interesting seems to us more reliable if only because it entails a verdict that regards issues of value as naive or spurious,” Boyers remarks.

Such evasions point to a basic concern: our limited ability to pin down what we mean by beauty. To get at that question, Boyers suggests turning not to masterpieces but to a sort of beauty “more modest in scale and ambition”: the aphorism.

A beautiful aphorism is “its own reason for being”—it is eloquent, it exhibits what the critic Denis Donoghue calls “the dancing of speech,” it carries a thrill. (Boyers cites Austrian writer Karl Kraus’s “My language is the universal whore whom I have to make into a virgin” as an example.) “Interesting” works, such as Du-