

Biblical lens helps sharpen our focus

FOCUS ON THEOLOGY



REV. RONALD P. BYARS

Have you run across the word "postmodern" yet? A few years ago, I began to see this word here and there and didn't have the faintest idea what it meant. I know what "post" means, and I know what "modern" means, but the combination is mystifying! After a good deal of instruction, I think I get the drift. "Postmodern" is just a fancy word to describe something that most of us already know intuitively. It means that people in our society don't all see the world through the same lenses anymore. "Once upon a time," everybody in North American society saw the world more or less through the lenses of the Biblical story. This was the perspective society offered us from infancy on. It was natural to speak of God, and of the world as God's creation. One could speak publicly about God's guiding providence without needing to explain or defend such speech. Through the lens provided by the Bible, people looked forward in confident expectation that God was preparing a good destiny for us. Of course, in society there have always been those who doubted the Biblical story, or who clearly and firmly did not believe it. But even the atheist defined himself or herself against the background of this story.

"Postmodern" means that society no longer provides us with a set of lenses through which to view the world. The Biblical story is no longer the story that provides a frame of reference for the whole society. In fact, there is no longer any story, or any set of lenses — through which everybody learns to see the world. There are instead many stories — some of which complement each other, and others which flatly contradict each other. We have lost confidence in sorting out these many stories. We have no standard by which to evaluate them. So, the easier course is to say that everything is relative. In other words, to avoid an argument, we are likely to say that what's true for somebody else may not be true for me; and what's true for me may not be true for my neighbor. The next step is

to say, "What does it matter, anyway?"

Though there are, in fact, many lenses through which we view the world, the most commonplace lens may be the lens of popular culture. Whether you read the "National Enquirer" or not, whether you watch "Oprah" or not, whether you read "Lives" or not, chances are that popular culture has influenced the way you see the world around you. This became evident in observing the astonishing response to the death of Princess Diana. The British public has made it perfectly clear that they want their queen to be the Princess of Wales to "get real" — that is, to exhibit their emotions in public, just the way people do on TV.

We live in a time when news and entertainment overlap and sometimes merge. The Disney corporation owns the ABC network, but it's getting harder and harder to know whether entertainment stops and news begins on any channel. The virtue of popular culture is that it's intensely democratic. The queen is a media star, not so very different from Shirley MacLaine or Olympia Dukakis. Of course, it's also the popular culture that gorged itself on Princess Diana — often exposing her to public judgment in her lifetime, and elevating her to sainthood in her death.

The old lens through which we viewed the world — the Biblical story — remains in use only for some of us. We may lament the loss of that "master story," or celebrate our liberation from it. There is a risk, however, that the lenses provided by popular culture may displace not only the Biblical way of framing reality, but every other serious way as well. In popular culture an adequate replacement? I suggest that most of us — even those who only watch "Masterpiece Theatre" — find ourselves immersed in the popular culture that our critical faculties have been suspended. Granted that the Biblical story is not the only lens through which we can view the world, but are we ready to live in a society in which everybody has been shaped primarily by paparazzi, talk shows, therapeutic jargon and Miss America pageants?

Ronald P. Byars, Ph.D., is pastor of First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham.

BELIEFS Values

Cantor returns after hiatus

BY RENA FULEA
SPECIAL WRITER

Cantor Earl Berris expressed his musical talents in Birmingham's coffeehouses in the '60s before diverting his focus from the secular world to the spiritual one.

It was a journey that led him to New York and back, and later to Israel, before he planted himself for a dozen years in Kansas.

Last month, Berris came full circle when he bid farewell to the Kansas City suburbs for the opportunity to reconnect with his Oakland County roots.

"As soon as I saw there was an open pulpit in Detroit, immediately my antennae went up," recalled Berris, who assumed a full-time cantorial role at Cong. B'nai Moshe on Aug. 1. "For me, this is a return home. I knew of the congregation before coming here. And though it is a new congregation for me, I'm coming back to something I'm familiar with."

At the Saturday morning Shabbat service on Sept. 13, the West Bloomfield congregation officially welcomed Berris, his wife Liana, and the couple's two daughters, Daron and Doron, who have settled in just three miles from Berris' former Farmington Hills home.

"The congregation and myself found him to be somebody we like to be around," said Rabbi Elliot Pachter of West Bloomfield, who took the pulpit four years ago. "It's been a good balance of our traditional historic melodies



STAFF PHOTO BY LAWRENCE R. MCGEE

Coming home: Cantor Earl Berris (left) settled in with his family just three miles away from the Farmington Hills home where he was raised. An ordained cantor, Berris now works in conjunction with Rabbi Elliot Pachter at Cong. B'nai Moshe in West Bloomfield.

with the bringing in of new things. Among the skills we recognize in Cantor Berris is that he is very knowledgeable of Judaism."

"I've done a lot of my own writing and introduced some of my own songs," said Berris, who officiated services and musical events in conjunction with Pachter. "Services are not a performance. I'm leading a congregation to a better relationship with God."

A formal installation will be held some time after the High Holidays of Rosh Hashanah (Jewish New Year) and Yom Kippur (Day of Atonement) in October.

Born into a religious family in Detroit, Berris moved to the Oakland County suburbs when he was 15 and continued his affiliation with Adat Shalom Synagogue in Detroit, which relocated to Farmington Hills in the 1970s.

The young vocal student enrolled at Wayne State University in Detroit and earned a bachelor's degree in music therapy. He then left the secular circuit to pursue a bachelor's degree in sacred music from the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York, where he was later ordained.

After a one-year cantorial stint on Long Island, Berris returned to Detroit for five

See CANTOR, B10

B'Jazz Vespers mixes jazz and worship

Dr. James Dapogny, a highly acclaimed jazz pianist, will help kick off the second season of B'Jazz Vespers, "a lot of sweet jazz and a little worship interlude," at First Baptist Church, 300 Willits at Dates, in downtown Birmingham. Show time is 6 to 8 p.m. Sunday, Sept. 21.

The free, nonsectarian, professional music program is open to the public.

Dapogny is professor of music at the University of

Michigan. His James Dapogny Chicago Jazz Band, founded in 1976, has recorded eight albums, most recently "Hot Club Stamp," an album of small-band swing.

"The jazz groups, mostly from Detroit, are quite professional. The worship occurs in a 20-minute interlude between two jazz sets," said the Rev. Stephen Jones, pastor.

"Our understanding of what it means to be a downtown Chicago is a public gathering

place for all kinds of events, such as B'Jazz Vespers," he added.

Growing up in Chicago sparked a lifetime love of and career in traditional jazz for Dapogny. It was in Chicago that he first heard, met or played with some of that city's older jazz pioneers.

"As a kid, I was interested in all kinds of jazz, but meeting these early jazz masters, players who had helped to make the music's history during

Chicago's jazz heyday, made a powerful musical and personal impression on me."

Dapogny is a member of the editorial board of the Southwestern Institution and produced an album of The Collected Piano Music of Jelly Roll Morton, the first great jazz artist.

B'Jazz Vespers is held the third Sunday of each month (except December) from 6 to 8 p.m. in the gothic sanctuary of

See B'JAZZ, B10

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