

ROBERT HUDSON



*The*  
BEAUTIFUL  
MADNESS  
*of* MARTIN  
BONHAM

*A Tale about Loving God*

## PRAISE FOR THE BEAUTIFUL MADNESS OF MARTIN BONHAM

Only rarely does a novelist appear like Robert Hudson with a voice that is singularly distinctive in style and ravishingly absorbing in subject matter—in this case the difference between knowing God and knowing about God. *The Beautiful Madness of Martin Bonham* is an accomplished and seductive book you will never forget.

—Leonard Sweet, best-selling author, professor, publisher, and founder of SpiritVenture Ministries

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Whether it's nonfiction, poetry, technical writing, adaptations of Renaissance texts, or (now, wonderfully) fiction, Bob Hudson can take the obscure and somehow turn it into a universal parable of the good, true, and beautiful. In this instance, a small religious college becomes the backdrop for exploring whether or not you can truly love God with all your mind if you fail to love your neighbor as yourself. Hilarious, thoughtful, and thought-provoking: a true delight!

—Sarah Arthur, author of *A Light So Lovely: The Spiritual Legacy of Madeleine L'Engle*

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Hollywood has mastered the art of dramatizing the tropes that play on repeat in our mundane, modern lives. But what might it look like to live today the drama that has captivated the attention of the spiritual masters of the Christian

tradition? *The Beautiful Madness of Martin Bonham* answers that question in a way that's both invigorating and refreshingly down to earth—a theophany that you can imagine happening in your own town, with the people who populate your everyday life.

—Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove, spiritual writer, preacher, and community cultivator. He serves as Assistant Director for Partnerships and Fellowships at Yale University's Center for Public Theology and Public Policy

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Hudson tackles a religious topic as relevant in our world today as any other, orthodoxy (beliefs) versus orthopraxy (practice). Or in this case, theology (the study of God) versus theophily (loving God). Hudson's approach is thoughtful and full of its share of shenanigans. A good reminder for all of us, don't take yourself too seriously, but humbly seek to get things right.

—Traci Rhoades, Bible teacher and author of *Not All Who Wander (Spiritually) Are Lost* and *Shaky Ground: What to Do After the Bottom Drops Out*.

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OF MARTIN BONHAM

A TALE ABOUT LOVING GOD

ROBERT HUDSON

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THE BEAUTIFUL MADNESS  
OF MARTIN BONHAM

CUPPERTON  
UNIVERSITY



Apocryphile Press  
PO Box 255  
Hannacroix, NY 12087  
[www.apocryphilepress.com](http://www.apocryphilepress.com)

Copyright © 2023 by Robert Hudson  
Artwork copyright © 2023 by Mark Sheeres  
ISBN 978-1-958061-42-8 | paper  
ISBN 978-1-958061-43-5 | ePub  
Printed in the United States of America

Published in association with the literary agency of Credo Communications,  
LLC, Grand Rapids, MI 49525; [www.credocommunications.net](http://www.credocommunications.net).

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*In memoriam*

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*Clarence Hogeterp and Dennis J. Kopaz*

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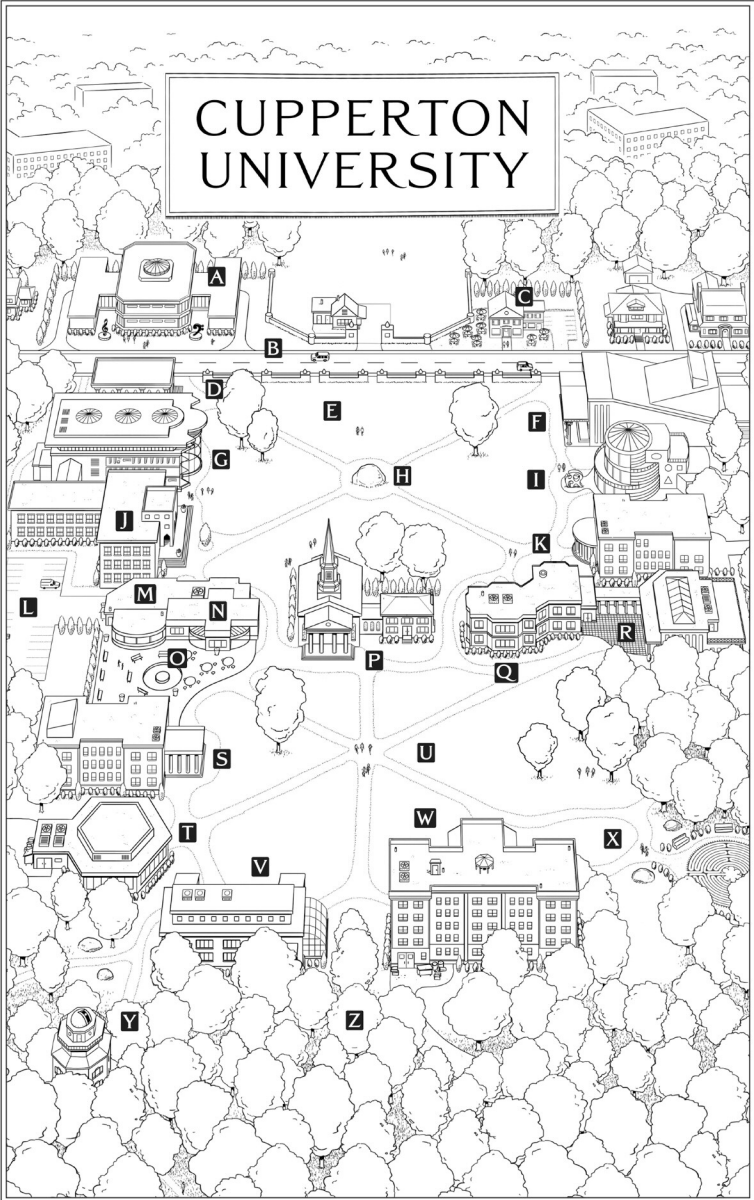
*Book friends*

At the University ... I saw that there were things  
in this world of which I never dreamed;  
glorious secrets and glorious persons past imagination.

—Thomas Traherne, *Centuries of Meditations*, III, 36

- A** WHITTEMORE MUSIC BUILDING
- B** NORTH STREET
- C** CUPPERTEA CAFÉ
- D** ROMANCE LANGUAGES
- E** NORTH QUAD
- F** PHIPPS AUDITORIUM
- G** UNDERGRADUATE LIBRARY
- H** BOULDER
- I** SHEERES ART MUSEUM
- J** BEETHAM HALL
- K** WARNERS FINE ARTS BUILDING
- L** FACULTY PARKING
- M** STUDENT STORES
- N** CUPPERTON STUDENT UNION
- O** THE CUSS
- P** MURPHY CHAPEL AND RECTORY HOUSE
- Q** ADMINISTRATION BUILDING
- R** BANQUET HALL
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- T** CAFETERIA
- U** SOUTH QUAD
- V** GARDNER-VAN HOUTEN LIFE SCIENCES CENTER
- W** ERICKSON HALL
- X** ARBORETUM AND LABYRINTH
- Y** OBSERVATORY
- Z** SOUTH WOODS

# CUPPERTON UNIVERSITY



# INTRODUCTORY NOTE

Sources of quotations are provided at the back of this book  
—see “*Notes on the Text (by Dr. Martin Bonham)*.”

CHAPTER I  
THE DEPARTMENT OF  
THEOPHILY

In the valley of this restless mind  
I sought in mountain and in mead,  
Trusting a True Love for to find:  
Then to a hill did my way lead ...  
—*anonymous, 15<sup>th</sup> century*

“Bonham! Are you a complete idiot?”

The Rev. Dr. Cornelius C. Dunwoody, PhD, ThD, DD, chairman of the Cupperton Seminary and School of Theology, stood in the doorway of my office in Beetham Hall, looming like a diminutive colossus. His clenched fists were planted firmly on his hips, his stance wide and the top of his bald head turning Fuji-apple red. Even though I’d been expecting such a visit that gloomy January evening, his abrupt appearance startled me nonetheless. I knew how Poe must have felt when buttonholed by that raven atop the pallid bust of Pallas just above his chamber door.

“C-come in,” I stammered. “Have a seat.” I pointed to the well-worn leather chair on the opposite side of my desk.

Without budging from the doorway, he barked, “Have you lost your mind? Have you *completely* lost your mind? You’d better explain, Bonham—*now!*”

I’m not sure when in life Cornelius Dunwoody, renowned man of God, developed this penchant for indignation and imperiousness, for which he is known across campus, though I’ve long conjectured that it must have something to do with a childhood spent trying to convince his playfellows to call him Neil rather than Corny. That would sear the soul of even the most stouthearted, and it’s a lesson to parents everywhere to consider well before choosing names for their offspring.

“Have a seat,” I repeated. “We’ll talk ...”

But none of this makes sense, I realize, without at least a brief recital of the events that precipitated this encounter, which proved to have so much import in the months and years to come.

---

I, Martin Bonham, am a gray-haired, single, bookish male of a certain age, of the species *Homo sapiens sapiens*, who is also a tenured professor of English at Cupperton University (a top third-tier Midwestern college, according to *US News and World Report*) and cofounder of the school’s Department of Theophily ... but more about that later.

Decades ago I did my graduate work in Middle and Early Modern English, writing my dissertation on Florio’s translation of Montaigne, the version Shakespeare read, and as far as dissertations go, a greater work of academic puffery than mine does not exist. I once joked that there were only ten pages of value among its two hundred, but that was a pompous overestimation. The whole affair casts book-burning in a strangely attractive light. I have since written two other works, an over-

view of Middle English grammar and an annotated anthology entitled *Religious Poets of the Fifteenth Century*, both mercifully out of print.

At Cupperton, I teach English lit, Chaucer through Milton, along with the usual battery of survey, grammar, and composition classes, though my greatest joy has been my two-semester senior seminar on the “Writings of the English Mystics”: “401 (Fall)—Fourteenth to Sixteenth Centuries” and “402 (Spring)—Seventeenth to Nineteenth Centuries.” Despite the complaints of the professors in the graduate Seminary and School of Theology who sneeringly refer to my seminars as the “Writhings of the English Misfits,” a small but steady parade of curious students—graduate-level seminarians among them—files through my classroom.

Case in point: Ms. Westcott.

One cool, sunny September morning, right after Mystics 401, I was, like Wordsworth, wandering lonely as a cloud along the path that angles across North Quad, between the much-repainted memorial boulder and the Sheeres Art Museum, when I became aware of a presence at my side. It was Katie Westcott, a third-and-final-year seminarian and one of Dr. Dunwoody’s favorites. For two weeks now, dressed perennially in black, she’d been attending my 401 class, and I don’t believe I’ve ever encountered a more earnest or intense student—so intense, in fact, I suspected she could light matches by staring at them. At the far end of the classroom’s oblong conference table, amid a half dozen bright-eyed senior English majors, she would sit silently, absorbing everything and twitching almost imperceptibly, like a puma in horn-rimmed glasses ready to pounce.

“Dr. Bonham,” she said to me on this day, “can we talk?”—more of a demand than a question.

“Of course,” I said and suggested that we wander in the



direction of the CupperTea Café, our local dispenser of latte and other equivocal beverages. Few places are more amenable to intimate conversation than a crowded coffee house buzzing with the low roar of small talk and the high scream of espresso machines. The day was bright and the semester young, so, I thought, what could be better? “My treat,” I added with paternal indulgence. Little did I know that my entire life was about to be upended.

“Well, it’s about seminary,” she began as we took our seats in a high-backed booth by the front window, she with a triple espresso and I with an iced chai. With a penetrating look, she peered at me over the heavy rims of her glasses, and her severely cropped black hair seemed suddenly more severe. Feeling uneasy, I studied the many initials carved in the wooden tabletop. “Or, well, not seminary exactly,” she said. “It’s about me. There’s a problem.”

“Oh?” I said.

“I’m giving up,” she said.

“Hmm,” I said.

“I think I need professional help,” she said.

“Huh,” I said.

Whenever I hear the first halloos of an incoming confession I tend to respond in monosyllables. Though comfortable with complex early English orthography and syntax, I’m less so with complex people, and Katie was beginning to feel complex. My problem is that I’m highly empathic by nature, so that rather than easing sinking souls from their spiritual sloughs of despond, I tend to settle myself by degrees, as if in quicksand, into the same boggy place. I’m suggestible that way. None of my friends catches a cold without my thinking I’ve caught it too.

“You see,” Katie continued, “all my life I wanted to go into the ministry. I read the Bible twice through in middle school,

went to Christian high, double-majored in religion and Greek at Carleton, and minored in Latin and classics. I've read many of the Church Fathers and major theologians. After working for a year to save money, I came here ... where I realized something is terribly wrong."

Feeling myself slipping toward the slough, I asked, "Which is ...?"

"I don't love God."

Suddenly the CupperTea seemed to grow quiet. Seeing how serious she was, I knew enough to remain expressionless—pleasant but inscrutable, like Mona Lisa in a tweed jacket.

"Really," she said. "I don't think I ever have, and maybe I never will."

"Are you angry at God? It's okay if you are."

"No, no, it's not that, and it's not that I don't believe ... I do. It's just that I ... I don't *feel* anything. No awe or passion. No emotion at all. The Great Commandment says we're to love God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength ... I can't imagine what that's like."

I pondered for a moment. "What about church?"

"I hate it. They sing all these goeey 'Jesus-we-adore-you' songs, like he's some sort of cosmic boyfriend ... like we're supposed to have romantic feelings or something ... and everyone gets so worked up. It's creepy! And the people who claim to love God the most quite often seem to show it the least."

I wondered how many triple espressos she'd already had that day.

"What do your profs say?"

"Well, that's the kind of thing you just *don't* talk about in seminary. They'd quote things at me like 'we love God because God first loved us,' which would only make me feel worse. The

guilt's overwhelming. My minister at home told me just to *act* like I loved God ... and eventually I would."

"Fake it till you make it," I said.

"Something like that ... though Nietzsche called it the 'religious pantomime.'" Katie is the kind of student who, when you serve up a weak cliché, is likely to volley a well-placed Nietzsche back at you.

She said, "I understand the basics of salvation and grace ... and gratitude, but the feelings just aren't there." She gazed out the window as a long-boarder clacked past on the pavement. "It's like this. My sister dated a guy in high school. They went skating one winter, and she fell through the ice. The boyfriend pulled her out, wrapped her in his coat, and carried her a mile back to our house. He saved her life. The problem was that everyone, forever after—including the boyfriend—kept reminding her. Over and over. She was grateful, but eventually the obligation—the weight of it—sort of swamped everything else. They broke up. You can't oblige someone's feelings."

"What about Dr. Dunwoody ... you talk with him?"

She flashed a caustic eyeroll in my direction that seemed to say *puh-leez*. "Look, that's why Ms. Lambert in the library suggested I take *your* class. I was hoping the mystics would have some answers, but they just make things worse."

"How so?"

"Well, they've got feelings for God all right, but their feelings are all so severe and huge and incomprehensible—"

"Ruskin called it their 'beautiful madness,'" I said, which I only quoted to pay her back for the Nietzsche.

"Whatever," she snapped. "I obviously can't go into the ministry now. I'm sick of the whole thing."

"I'm so sorry," I said, after which came a long pause. She sipped her drink. I sipped mine.

Then she caught me by surprise. "So, tell me this"—her

incendiary eyes burned into mine—“can *you* honestly say that you love God, right now, this moment, with all your heart and mind and soul and strength?”

I paused ... and pondered. There are triumphant moments in life when one rises to the occasion, when one speaks words that are “as an honeycomb, sweet to the soul, and health to the bones.”

This was not one of them.

I felt hollower than a bass drum and shallower than a tambourine, neither of which was making any noise at the moment. After thirty years of relishing old mystic texts with titles like *The Fire of Love* and *The Doctrine of the Heart*, I had to face facts. “No,” I said at length.

“So, do you ever *feel* like you love God ... deeply and passionately?”

“I’m sure I must ... sometimes—”

“But when? *When* do you most feel like you love God?”

A fair question, but to my shame, all I could think of was Katie’s grammar. Should I tell her that it should be *as though you love God* rather than *like you love God*? Honestly, I’m not proud of myself sometimes.

Katie didn’t wait for an answer. She stared hard at me. “With no ‘beautiful madness,’” she said, “how do we know we’re not just part of the ‘religious pantomime’?”

---

I BELIEVE it was Jean-Paul Sartre who, in one of his perkier moods, compared our life to being adrift in a rowboat ... on an endless ocean ... at night. It is in choosing a direction and rowing that we find meaning. And so it was, after meeting with Katie at the café after 401 the rest of the week, that we discovered something interesting: we had started rowing.

First, we sensed the need to broaden our field of inquiry. Why not pose Katie's questions to a few of the brightest *non*-seminary types who attend church? Although the university is more than an hour's drive from the nearest large city, it's nestled among three smallish, rural Midwestern towns in close proximity—Cupperton, Palmyra, and Ware, called the Tri-Communities, or Tri-Comms—which means we were able to conduct a series of field trips to the back row of nearly every religious establishment within a fifteen-mile radius, even including a mosque, a gurdwara, and a synagogue, to see which faculty members we recognized—an undercover operation, you might say. And we discovered quite a few. In the weeks that followed, we talked with Catholics, Baptists, Jews and Bible churchers, Muslims and Mennonites, a Buddhist, and more. We asked them, "Can you *honestly* say you love God with all your heart, mind, soul, and strength?" and "*When* do you most feel like you love God?" (I never corrected Katie's grammar.)

One of our first visits was to St. Athanasios Greek Orthodox, the home church of Cupperton University president Sirena Costa, whom, out of deference, we decided not to approach. But at St. Athanasios we also recognized Dr. Alice Mears, chair of the Psychology Department, to whom Katie posed her questions. Dr. Mears said simply, "I think I most love God when I love others ... and when I love myself. Remember, that's the other part of the commandment."

Another Sunday, we spotted microbiology professor Dr. Bill Fredericks at Word of Life Pentecostal, who stood out because he was the only person who didn't sway, shout, or raise his hands. Soft-spoken and reserved, he didn't fit the mold. But as we walked from the gathering that morning, Katie asked her questions, and he became rapturous about "oxidative phosphorylation," "unicellular protozoa," and "photosynthetic

prokaryotes.” As he prattled on, Katie caught my eye and mouthed the question, “Glossolalia?” Delving into the microscopic world, the professor told us, is like peeking into the workshop of the Divine, and it fills him with awe and an almost crushing love for God’s inventiveness.

Then there was Dr. Graciela Rojas of the Romance Languages Department, who I knew attended the small storefront Catholic Iglesia de María de la Paz in Palmyra. She’d arrived at the university two years earlier, and I’d had the privilege of being her faculty mentor. Graciela pondered for a moment and then said with sweet simplicity, “Katie, I know what you mean. I feel that too. I have so many doubts. But somehow, just knowing that God loves *me* gets me through.” Katie stared at Dr. Rojas, then reached out for a hug.

We even managed to infiltrate a mysterious private meeting of the Assembly of Devout Planetarians, which we excitedly expected to be a UFO cult, but it turned out to be the monthly wine-and-cheese gathering for student volunteers at the planetarium. Still, it was there that we encountered Dr. Josh Fields of the Astronomy Department, who, as you might expect, had some interesting things to say about the “starry welkin” and the “the Bowl of Night” (referencing Shakespeare and FitzGerald respectively—always trust scientists who read literature). He had once toyed with the notion, he said, of teaching a January term on “God in the Universe” but dismissed it on account of his not being particularly religious. He’d been raised in, and escaped from, what he referred to as the “Implacable Church of Wednesday, Saturday, and Twice on Sunday.” Still, despite himself, he couldn’t resist the uncanny sensation that a Cosmic Top Dog of some sort was playing hide-and-seek around every corner of astrophysics.

And so it went. We talked with Carl Evans, my friend from the Theater Department, who attends St. Timothy’s Episcopal;

and Dr. Soo-jin “Sue” Park in Biology, who’s a deacon at the First Baptist Korean Church of Palmyra; and Dr. Naazim el-Atar at the Islamic Center in Ware; and Tom Fouchee of the Art Department, who worships at St. Linus Catholic; and my dearest friend in the world, Ms. Lambert, our head librarian, whom I occasionally accompany to the local Friends Meeting. Katie and I talked with people from nearly every department who told us stories of how their studies filter into their spiritual lives, who shared their thoughts and wisdom and the many ways they experience God’s love and seek to return it, and who were grateful even to be asked such questions. As Katie grew a bit more hopeful, so did I.

Perhaps our only misjudgment was in approaching a street evangelist—somewhat of a fixture in the Tri-Comms area, known as Brother Jonas—on a whim one Saturday afternoon in October after Katie and I had attended synagogue. He was preaching as usual in the CUSS—an acronym for the large brick courtyard in front of the Cuppertown University Student Stores. It’s an appropriate moniker because the locale is a popular student hangout and a magnet for spontaneous expression ... like Speakers’ Corner at London’s Hyde Park without as many anarchists with Cockney accents.

This gentleman had perched himself atop one of the benches and, surrounded by a small crowd of curious onlookers, was delivering an emphatic preachment, denouncing those of us present as a “perverse and crooked generation,” while punching his Bible into the air as if it were a first-place trophy. Like the children of Israel, we waited for him to descend from Sinai so Katie could ask her questions. His descent was soon hastened by a group of inebriated frat boys who sang a spirited rendition of “Onward, Christian Soldiers” as a way of compelling the preacher to conclude.

We approached. No sooner had the words left Katie’s lips

than Brother Jonas declaimed (loudly, though we were no more than two feet away), “Yes, praise God, with every ounce of my being. No one can claim to be a Christian who does not feel that love burning inside them like a furious, holy volcano, for ‘the Lord thy God is a consuming fire, even a jealous God’ and will not tolerate those ‘who have forsaken the right way and are gone astray,’ and Jesus himself says in the book of the Revelation, ‘If thou art lukewarm, neither cold nor hot, I will *spew* thee out of my mouth!’ Amen and amen. And James, the brother of our Lord, says ...”

Somewhere Kierkegaard tells the story of a man who smiles and bows politely and waves hello, even as he’s backing away from his interlocutor. That was precisely what Katie and I did.

---

ONE EVENING, the week of Christmas, Katie and I were huddled over espresso and hot chai in our regular booth at the Cupper-Tea. As snow sparkled under the streetlights outside and Andy Williams, on the overhead speakers, was crooning, “It’s the most wonderful time of the year ...,” we took stock of our research. At one point, I absentmindedly remarked, “You know what would really be wonderful? If we could somehow get all these people together in one place ...”

Katie’s eyes got large.

Mine got large back.

“Do you think ...?” I said.

“I do think!” she replied.

“I think so too!” I said.

And that’s how it began. We talked and talked, talking over each other as often as not, and the more we talked, the more excited we grew. We gabbled like teenagers forming a rock



band, though in time we would feel more like saboteurs chucking our sabots into the machinery of the university.

The gist was this: what if there were an interdisciplinary curriculum devoted to the idea of loving God and better understanding God's love in return? What if there was an undergraduate religion department that studied wonder and awe and mystery *instead* of theology? Students could learn about seeing and sensing and knowing God in everyday, diverse, practical ways—in Nature, poetry, and music ... in science and art and in other people. Dr. Fields could teach about God in the universe, and Dr. Fredericks could share his spiritual passion for single-cell creatures. A trained psychologist like Dr. Mears could coach us in overcoming the obstacles to loving ourselves—which is often heavy lifting even for the most devout.

“Katie ... *theophily* ... that's the Greek word for ‘the love of God,’ right?” She nodded. “So, what if we called our department”—I was already referring to it as *ours*—“the Department of Theophily?”

Even as I asked the question, we knew the obstacles. The graduate Seminary and School of Theology had long opposed the establishment of any competing religion curricula—asserting that their graduate-level classes were open to undergraduates and already offered everything a student curious about religion could dream of: biblical languages, systematic theology, ecclesiology, church history, homiletics, ethics, patristics, and so on, to say nothing of brilliant professors with long strings of letters after their names.

“But, you know,” I said, “that's why the university needs a Department of Theophily; it would cover all the spiritual territory that the seminary doesn't—literature, art, drama, history, philosophy, sociology, science, psychology—and even the writings of the English misfits! In fact, it would deal with about ninety-five percent of the rest of human experience. It

would be the perfect minor or even a second major for students in music and nursing and social work and creative writing and poli sci and ...”

Katie’s usually dour face now beamed. On the overhead speakers Burl Ives was singing, “Have a holly-jolly Christmas ...”

“Katie,” I said, looking her straight in the eye, “if you’re still not planning to go into the ministry, what *are* you doing after you graduate this spring?”

She caught my drift. “Dr. Dunwoody’ll blow a gasket,” she said.

“Well, the university would have to have a full professor like myself act as academic chair, but we’d need an administrative director. Let’s face it—you’ve got all the knowledge and skill ... you’d be the cofounder of an academic department if we can pull this off!”

Katie’s smile, like the Cheshire cat’s, almost eclipsed her face.

“Listen, I know it’s a long shot,” I said, “but if we put our minds to it, I think we could sell this to the university. They need it. *We* need it! What do you think?”

Squinting a little as if summoning a stray thought, she quoted: “‘We are only as strong as we are united, and as weak as we are divided.’”

“Nietzsche?” I asked.

“No. Dumbledore.”

---

So, with all the assiduity of a beaver colony on a tight schedule, we set to work. After obtaining and completing the necessary paperwork, not a small task, by the way, and talking with the department’s potential faculty members, the next

item on the agenda was to arrange a meeting with Dennis Kinealy, a solemn, stately Irish Catholic with a hook nose, who, were he not already the university provost, could have had a career as a somewhat haughty archbishop in a Victorian novel. He agreed to meet with us over the holidays.

Rumor had it that a certain *froideur* existed between the provost and Dr. Dunwoody, precipitated no doubt by Dunwoody's aforementioned imperiousness, and I hoped this might work to our advantage. I was right. No sooner had Katie and I outlined our plan than a hint of a smile crossed Kinealy's thin face. With his pencil he tapped the papers on his desk.

As we sat on the squeaky leather chairs in his drab but tidy office on that overcast December afternoon, the provost glanced down at our forms and requisition. He perused our list of nearly two dozen professors who had committed to teach one or more courses in the new department. "Hmm," he murmured, "Mears and Fredericks ... Rojas, Fields, Lambert ... Park in Biology, Evans from Drama, Fouchee ... and I see you list a couple of recommended adjuncts from the community ... like Rabbi Rachel Zeller." He tapped his pencil on the papers again. Without looking up, he said, "Quite, quite impressive, but ... no one from the seminary ..."

I waited till he caught my eye. I pursed my lips and shook my head. He understood.

"Well, I'll be frank ...," he said, "I like it. The university's tried in the past to establish an undergraduate department of religious studies, but we've always met with resistance from a certain quarter. But your approach is fresh, imaginative, nontraditional. Its core mission doesn't overlap with that of any other department, not even the seminary's. You're drawing from existing faculty—interdisciplinary—a broad spectrum, which is good, and anyway, it's the only way the university could afford it. Obtaining the course releases

shouldn't be difficult. And I like it because I believe this was the university founders' original intention way back in the 1830s—a down-to-earth, every-person's approach to religious education. And this comes at a good time because we've recently received several endowments earmarked for the undergraduate school, and one donor even specified 'spiritual enrichment.' So, funding for an administrator and the extra courses should be no problem. I think we're covered."

Katie and I could hardly restrain our joy.

Kinealy then outlined the process, which was more byzantine than I'd anticipated. First, he would have to consult with his vice provost and the Provost's Council, who would in turn present a recommendation, with any emendations, to the Faculty Senate and the Academic Program Committee for discussion. Assuming no red flags were raised, Kinealy would then seek formal approval from the academic dean and the Dean's Council, the Executive Officers' Board, and then, finally, the University Council. If they all approved, the Finance Office would review everything and, if Fortune favored the bold, allocate the required funds. Then President Costa would rubber-stamp the proposal and draft a formal letter of declaration.

"But know *this*, however"—there was a sudden, distressing chill in Kinealy's voice, as when a messenger in a Shakespeare play enters from stage right to announce the king's death—"before any of that can happen, I'll have to meet in person with the heads of all the affected departments to obtain signoffs ..."

And we knew what that meant.

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IN THE DAYS that followed I had forebodings of the unpleasant tête-à-tête that I knew was in the offing. Katie had heard through the grapevine (that is, Ms. Adams, the seminary's

secretary, had told Dolly De Angeli, the English Department's secretary, who told Ms. Lambert in the library, who told Katie and me) that just after Provost Kinealy had left Dunwoody's third-floor office in Erickson Hall, a distinct thumping could be heard within. Dunwoody was either beating his desk in frustration or practicing to be a Japanese taiko drummer.

As I worked late that same evening, Cornelius Dunwoody materialized suddenly in the doorway of my office and, unbudging, like Samson between his pillars, seemed to be weighing the pros and cons of bringing venerable Beetham Hall down upon our heads.

"Have a seat," I said. "We'll talk."

"Start explaining, Bonham—*now!*"

"Well, ... you see," I began, "I was walking across North Quad this past September ...," and I related the whole story, beginning with Katie and her triple espresso and concluding with how happy the provost thought the founders would be. To his credit, Dunwoody listened to the end, though not without a fair amount of grunting and goggling of eyes as though he were swallowing hard-boiled eggs.

"Do any of these professor friends of yours have theological training?" he asked at last.

"Well, you see, that's the point ... they're all highly qualified in their own—"

"Yes, yes, I'm sure, but what gives them the right?" he said, pinning me with the look of the basilisk. "What right do they have to teach *religion*? Do any of them know Hebrew or Greek? Have they studied theology or exegesis? How do we know they can interpret the Bible correctly? And who's going to check them for orthodoxy? *You*? And how do we know they're even Christians?"

"Well ... frankly, several of them aren't. There's Dr. Naazim el-Atar in sociology and—"

He made a noise that sounded like a spit take in a comedy routine. “This is outrageous, Bonham. Your moronic course on the English mystics was bad enough, but an entire department! ... What were you thinking? It’s like beginners’ night at the bowling alley—all of you, amateurs with no business meddling in any of this ... And *Theophily*! What nonsense! And what makes you think ...”

He was on a roll, so I decided to sit it out, as if I were waiting for a long freight train to pass. If I’d had a radio, I would have flipped it on.

A few minutes later he was still talking: “... and why should the university trust the likes of you to teach its students anything about religion? It’s irresponsible. It’s untrained people like you who’ve always made a mess of things—”

I interrupted. “As if you so-called professionals have fared any better. Do you know how many dozens of denominations there are, each with its own school of theology, and each convinced the others are wrong and—?” I stopped. He little “deserved the compliment of rational opposition,” as Jane Austen once wrote.

“And what stupid notions are you filling Ms. Westcott’s head with?” he said. “If she was having doubts, why didn’t she talk to *me*?” I flashed back to Katie’s eyeroll when I asked her that same question. He continued, “She was one of the most promising students I’ve ever taught; I considered her my protégé, and now *you’ve* ruined her career—”

“She’ll be a great administrator—maybe even our department chair someday.” Then I added, “And *she* knows Greek and Hebrew.” I meant it to sting.

“You’re a lunatic, Bonham. You’ve never published so much as an article in the field of religious studies—”

“Actually, I compiled an annotated anthology of fifteenth-century religious poetry—”

“That’s the point! You’re an English professor, a poetry scholar, a *grammarian* ... not a theologian. You can’t teach religion by virtue of being a master of ... of ... the subjunctive!”

“Oh,” I mumbled, “would that I were!”

“And it takes more than leather elbow patches to make a scholar!” A low blow. He folded his arms across his chest and glared at me, as if expecting a response. “Do you know what you are? A dreamer—a bona fide, pie-in-the-sky, wild-eyed dreamer.”

“Well, I do my best thinking in my sleep—”

“I’ll tell you this,” he said, pulling himself up to his full height, which was still nothing to brag about, “I will do everything in my power to make sure President Costa doesn’t sign off on this moronic idea. You haven’t heard the end of it, I promise.” And with that he turned and stalked back down the dark hallway.

Again I was reminded of Poe: “Deep into that darkness peering, long I stood there, wondering, fearing ...”

A shout echoed from the far end, “And you’re an idiot!” A distant door slammed.

“But a well-meaning one,” I said to myself. “And yes, I’m sure I haven’t heard the end of it.”

CHAPTER 2  
THE FORUM ON FAITH

Our good Lord answered to all the questions  
and doubts that I might make, saying full comfortably,  
“... Thou shall see thyself that  
all manner of thing shall be well.”  
—*Julian of Norwich, 1342–1416*

When I was nine or ten years old, I had the great privilege of being beaten up by Roger Schroder, one of the neighborhood’s preeminent bullies and a fellow whom one couldn’t help but pity—if only because Fate was clearly grooming him for long-term incarceration. When he was done beating me up, he looked down at me with a kindly expression and said, “Just to show you there are no hard feelings ...”—and he beat me up again.

So, in hindsight, I should have been wary on that bright, chilly February morning when Cornelius Dunwoody cornered me—literally, in a glassed-in right angle of the library entrance—and spoke those words.



At the time, Katie and I were waiting for President Costa to make a crucial decision regarding our proposal. The heads of all the affected departments had signed off with their blessing—except, of course, Dr. Dunwoody. The Provost’s Council had recommended, in their turn, that his veto *not* be considered since our department would draw its staff from the undergraduate college and local clergy rather than the graduate Seminary and School of Theology, but President Costa, needing to maintain good relations with the seminary, wanted time to weigh things. So the process was stalled on her desk.

Ever since the confrontation in my office more than a month earlier, Dunwoody had remained as silent as stout Cortez upon a peak in Darien. Until today.

“Listen, I know I came on a little strong before,” he said. “I apologize. Just to show you there are no hard feelings”—(the very words)—“I’d like to bury the hatchet and make you an offer.”

“An offer?” I repeated. The Roman poet Virgil had dire things to say about Greeks bearing gifts, but I briefly wondered whether the admonition might also apply to professors of New Testament Greek.

“Yes,” he replied. “As you know, next month is the Forum on Faith, and I was hoping you’d take part.”

“Take part?” I was beginning to sound like a parrot.

“As a favor to me. You see, we have an empty chair on one of the panels. Nothing out of your depth, Bonham ... just a general discussion on ‘New Directions in Faith in the Twenty-First Century.’ Sort of freewheeling ... open ended. Very *Theophily*, if you know what I mean. Right up your alley, don’t you think, eh?”

“Who are the other panelists?”

“Generalists like yourself—there’s an Episcopal priest from

the city and some popular inspirational writer. Easy-peasy. No prep required.”

*I can do that*, I thought—answer a few questions, offer sage advice, smile, and look important. And it might demonstrate to President Costa that I’m a team player, diving into the spirit of things, so to speak, and perhaps this was an indication that Dunwoody was beginning to reconsider his objection to the new department. I liked the way he said, “Very *Theophily!*” So, relieved that our little contretemps seemed to be over, I responded, “Sign me up!”

“With pleasure,” said Dunwoody. “I’ll owe you one.”

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AN UNMISTAKABLE HERALD of spring is the appearance of posters stuck to every vertical surface, announcing the Cupper-ton University Forum on Faith. The event, sponsored by the Seminary and School of Theology, takes place at the end of March every year and is a chance for students and the public alike to hear what current authors and scholars in the field of religion have to say. For a long weekend, panel discussions and workshops are offered throughout the mornings and afternoons, and lectures and concerts take place every evening.

Early in the year, ambitious seminarians start vying for seats in the various cars scheduled to make trips to the airport to pick up the distinguished speakers, more than an hour’s drive to the city each way. I cannot imagine what special kind of hell it must be for those unsuspecting dignitaries to be stranded in the backseat of a compact sedan with an overzealous graduate student giving a dramatic recitation of his or her dissertation-in-progress. I’ve heard that some seminarians go so far as to ensure that the child safety locks are activated to prevent escape.

In the past, I'd attended sessions at the Forum, but this was the first time I'd been asked to participate. I was flattered and rather excited. Still, when I told Katie the next morning at the CupperTea, she glared at me. "Let me get this straight, M.B."—she'd taken to calling me *M.B.* recently—"Dunwoody asked *you?*"

"That's right."

"Hmm" was all she said.

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KATIE'S *HMM* stuck to me like a tick until the week of the Forum. On the morning of the panel, to relieve my anxiety, I staked out Phipps Auditorium an hour early, scanning the cavernous echoing space and watching as the tech staff checked the lighting and the sound system. They handed me a small pocket receiver with a wireless microphone to clip to my lapel. I paced the stage and brooded.

Soon, others began to stroll through the entrance, including my co-panelists. As we shuffled over to our chairs on stage, I introduced myself. The Reverend Joseph Clark, the Episcopal priest, was a bulky, bright-eyed, gregarious fellow, whose smile seemed permanently affixed; he was dressed in his clerical collar and sported a pin on his black tunic that read, "JESUS IS COMING (LOOK BUSY)." Renata Baker, the other panelist, was a perfectly coiffed, vivacious thirty-something writer of inspirational nonfiction for like-minded thirty-somethings. She was, as Katie informed me, a *New York Times* bestselling author, a fabulously popular blogger, and a master of social media—but "an intellectual lightweight" nonetheless, in Katie's overeducated opinion.

As the three of us chatted, I watched the attendees enter, singly and in groups—there were backpacked undergraduates

studying their smartphones; seminarians talking volubly about *ideas*, no doubt; and faculty members and townspeople who were there for no other reasons than enjoyment and edification. And, of course, Katie, my personal claque, took a seat in the front row.

Finally, bringing up the rear were President Costa and Provost Kinealy, who found seats near the back. Just as the lights dimmed and the moderator stepped to the podium, I saw Dunwoody squeeze his way, unapologetically, past a half dozen attendees to claim the empty seat next to President Costa. I thought of Katie's *hmm*.

The moderator was, like Katie, a third-year seminarian, and she too had once attended my mystics seminars. She smiled and raised her hands to silence the happy rumble of conversation. As we panelists sat in the hazy glare of the spotlights, she thanked everyone for coming and introduced the three of us, whom she characterized as "a priest, a popular writer, and a prof." After delivering a short exposition on the morning's topic, "New Directions in Faith in the Twenty-First Century," she opened the discussion by pointing to a young woman in the front row, two seats over from Katie, who directed her question to Ms. Baker: "Thank you. Ms. Baker, it's an honor to have you here at Cupperton. I've read all your books. I'd like to ask about your prayer life. How do you pray, and how does your prayer life affect your writing, and how is prayer even relevant in the modern world?"

I didn't listen to her answer because I was too busy taking in the surroundings and thinking how I would have answered the question myself, though I can't imagine anyone wanting to know about my prayer life, such as it is.

The next question was for Reverend Clark. A young seminarian student asked, "What is your greatest challenge as an urban pastor?"

“Mostly getting out of bed in the morning ...,” he quipped. When the laughter died down, the affable priest continued his response as I again gazed out over the fresh young faces.

A few minutes later, the moderator pointed to one of those fresh faces. “Yes, you. Second row.”

The young man was a seminarian whom I’d seen on campus. I think his name was Jason. He said, “I’d like to ask Dr. Bonham who his favorite theologian is.”

I reflected for a moment and answered with what I thought was a charming twinkle in my eye, “Certainly ... Charlie Brown.”

The auditorium erupted in laughter. I caught Katie’s eye. She smiled. Pleased with myself, I continued, “I think the late Charles Schulz, in his classic *Peanuts* cartoons, hit upon almost every modern spiritual dilemma we face—depression, insecurity, doubt, alienation, little red-haired girls ...” More chuckles. *This is fun*, I thought.

“But Dr. Bonham,” the student persisted, “in times like ours, don’t you think we need *strong* theological guidance? Seriously, with so many conflicting voices out there, I would like to know which contemporary theological writers you read and would recommend to the rest of us.”

Everything got quiet. A basic rule of repartee, which this student had obviously never learned, is not to step on someone else’s punchline unless you have a better one of your own. It’s undignified.

“Well, I *am* being serious,” I said, “but I can’t say I read contemporary theology. It’s not my field of study.”

Unbelievably, the student wouldn’t quit. In a shaming voice, he added, “But shouldn’t it be *every* Christian’s field of study?”

His words, of course, were an answer disguised as a ques-

tion, so I let it go by shrugging and glancing back at the moderator.

Reverend Clark stuck a plump finger into the air. “If I may ...”

“Yes, Reverend Clark ...,” said the moderator.

“I have a couple of recommendations.” He turned to the seminarian. “Being of the Anglican persuasion”—chuckles throughout the auditorium—“I’m quite fond of Alister McGrath. Have you read him? He writes on a wide range of topics. Quite accessible. Also, check out Christopher Hall on the historical church, or perhaps Rosemary Radford Ruether or Phyllis Trible if your bent is feminist theology, and if you’re looking for apologetics, be sure to read Richard Swinburne. Top notch.”

“Thank you, Reverend Clark,” said the moderator. As I sat there, I could feel my face flush the color of pickled beets.

Then the moderator pointed to a woman who asked Ms. Baker if she had any tips for young writers. Again, I didn’t listen. I was too shaken.

Several minutes later, another question came to me from another seminarian, a young man named Rowan whom I’d often seen with Katie: “This is for Dr. Bonham. Could you, as the academic on the panel, talk about the importance of the biblical languages in our time ... and how they’ve shaped your faith?”

I was conscious of furrowing my brow, which I realized made me look either miffed or dimwitted. I said, “I’m afraid I don’t *know* the biblical languages ... but as a professor of Middle English literature, I can attest to the rugged beauty of Wycliffe’s translation—”

“But the Bible is the founding document of our faith! How can any Christian *not* be curious about learning the *original* languages?” Another answer parading as a question.

“Well, I didn’t say I wasn’t curious, but I just ... it’s not my field.” I floundered.

I fully expected Reverend Clark’s pesky finger to prod the air again, but the moderator, in the conversational equivalent of a mercy killing, broke in, “All right ... who else has a question?”

But before anyone could respond, Ms. Baker oh-so-helpfully raised her hand. “Excuse me ...”

“Yes, Ms. Baker,” said the moderator.

“I can’t claim to be a scholar like these gentlemen, but I did take one semester of New Testament Greek in college, and it changed my life. I still have a Greek interlinear on hand for my personal Bible study. I encourage everyone to study at least a little Greek.”

I stared at her.

Then I glanced down at Katie. In her distress, her glasses were starting to steam up, making her look like Little Orphan Annie in the old cartoons.

I have no idea what transpired in the next twenty minutes except that the questions were directed to Reverend Clark and Ms. Baker. I was in a daze. What, I wondered, was going on? I felt a gnawing ache in the pit of my stomach—

I was awakened from my trance by titters from the audience. The moderator was talking. “Dr. Bonham, did you hear? Someone has a question.”

“Oh ... yes ... I’m sorry,” I said. “Of course.”

“Right,” said yet another bright-eyed seminarian, this one female, “I have two questions. First, perhaps the most important issue regarding faith in the twenty-first century is how we should balance tradition, experience, and general revelation in our spiritual lives. I would like to know your opinion. Also, I’d be interested to know whether you think Teilhard de Chardin’s

concept of a teleologically unfolding cosmos has become even more relevant in our time.”

For a moment I thought it was a joke, the punchline of which had sailed over my head. But no one was laughing, though I heard a tiny whistle of disbelief escape Reverend Clark’s lips. With all eyes fixed on me, I glanced at Dunwoody in the back row. He shrugged and made that funny little frowny shape with his mouth the way people do when they’re impressed with something, as if he were saying, “Hmm. Good question. Wish I’d thought of that.”

Then it hit me ... he *had* thought of that. This was all a setup.

Feeling the bile coursing through my veins, I croaked, “I’m afraid I’ll have to defer. I’ve not read Teilhard de Chardin, nor do I have strong feelings about general revelation.”

Uncomfortable laughter echoed throughout the hall. I felt sweaty and hot all over.

I don’t know how much longer the panel lasted, but when the lights came on, seemingly days later, the attendees offered up a polite round of applause, then shuffled off to their next session. Reverend Clark, beaming, shook my hand vigorously and told me what a magnificent job I’d done—“Really, really terrific,” he insisted; “this was great, wasn’t it? Just great!”—and a crowd of young admirers gathered around Ms. Baker, with books in their hands for her to sign. I looked up and saw Dunwoody talking animatedly to President Costa at the back as they exited the auditorium. My heart sank.

I couldn’t move. Katie dashed up onto the stage, where I was still seated.

Defeated, I bellowed, “Jesus, Mary, and Joseph!” forgetting, of course, that my microphone was still on. Those who hadn’t yet left the auditorium looked in my direction with alarm.



When they saw that I was still conscious and breathing, they continued on their way.

I fumbled for the mic switch and said to Katie, “Did I come off as badly as I think I did?”

“Yes,” she said.

“I was the intellectual lightweight on the panel, wasn’t I?”

“Yes.”

“I wish you’d been in my place. You could have answered those questions ...”

“Yes,” she said, giving me a pat on the shoulder, “but none of that matters.” Then in a stony voice she added, “Dunwoody’s behind this ... and I think I’m gonna have to have a talk with Rowan—like right now,” and off she sprinted.

In the days that followed, it became clear that our proposal was on life-support. When Katie and I asked Provost Kinealy where things stood, he shook his head and said, “It’s still on the president’s desk; she wants another couple of weeks, but I’m afraid it doesn’t look good. And”—he peered intently at me—“your performance at the Forum didn’t help.”

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ABOUT A WEEK LATER, as I was going up the steps of Beetham on my way to teach Mystics 402, Katie seemed to emerge from nowhere (I believe she’s part genie) and handed me a scrap of paper. “Call this number, M.B.,” she said, “like immediately. I’ll go to class and keep everyone in line till you get back. Just call.”

I knew Katie well enough by now to trust her with my life, to say nothing of mysterious phone calls, so, having left my phone at home as usual, I popped into the English Department office and asked Dolly De Angeli, the departmental secretary, if I might use her desk phone. I punched in the number and soon

understood Katie's urgency, for the call gave me a glimmer of hope.

After 402, I jogged over to Erickson Hall, mounted the three flights of steps, and rapped on the doorframe of Dunwoody's office. He looked up from his stacks upon stacks of papers (he was, I knew, on a committee that was producing a new Bible translation). "Humph. It's you." He looked back down at his work. I've had warmer greetings from traffic lights, which are, at least, green on occasion.

Out of breath, I said, "So sorry ... can't stay to chitchat, but I'm afraid I need to beg a favor. I hesitate even asking, but here's the scoop. You see, Ms. Westcott received a call today from another school. A student delegation is visiting campus on Thursday, and they're hoping to connect with someone to confer with them about philosophy and theology and the Bible and what not. And yes, I confess, I knew I'd be *way* out of my depth. So, here I am, metaphorical hat in hand, to ask if you'd consider talking to them. It wouldn't take more than an hour, and I suspect a few of them might even be good candidates for the seminary. And, if you remember, you *did* say you'd 'owe me one' for volunteering at the Forum."

He looked at me indulgently. "So, you admit to limitations, do you, Bonham? Well, that's a promising sign. Of course I'll help." I'm sure his gracious condescension was the consequence of knowing that the Department of Theophily was all but kaput.

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THE FOLLOWING THURSDAY MORNING, Katie and I welcomed the visiting scholars to my classroom in Beetham. We talked, exchanged stories about our respective academic institutions, and waited for the chairman to arrive. Eventually, over the din

of conversation, I could faintly hear the main door slam far off and footsteps tromping up the echoing tiles of the hallway.

No sooner had Dunwoody set foot in the classroom than he stopped short as if he'd been greeted by an overeager Boston cream pie. He couldn't have looked more stunned if he'd walked into a faculty meeting of leprechauns.

Being the empathic soul that I am, I immediately intuited the source of his stupefaction and realized, furthermore, that I was in part responsible. Somehow, I must have neglected to inform him that the visiting students with theological questions were first and second graders from the local Christian elementary school. How I could have been so absentminded, I don't know, but there it is. Things happen. And the irony of it all is that I'd long known from any number of sources that Dunwoody had never been what is called "good with children." One of my informants had even used the phrase *chronic, acute pedophobia*.

There were about thirty girls and boys chattering loudly and having a hard time keeping their hands to themselves. Their teacher, Ms. Amanda Niles, was the one with whom Katie and I had spoken on the phone, and she had indeed told us that her precocious charges were starting to ask tough questions about God, faith, and the Bible, questions that she and her colleagues at the school couldn't answer. So, she thought, why not make a field trip to the university out of it? They could talk to a real theologian, ask their questions, then have pizza and chocolate milk at the cafeteria. After that, they'd been promised an hour's playtime in the arboretum where they were looking forward to dashing around our lovely eleven-circuit labyrinth, something I myself enjoy doing, though at a more meditative pace.

The classroom was in an uproar until Ms. Niles, sounding like Moses addressing the querulous Israelites, shouted: "Hey!

Everyone! Settle down!” When the settling down had for the most part been accomplished, she regained her composure and said, “All right, then. Thank you, Dr. Bonham, for inviting us to your classroom. We’ve been so excited to talk to someone about our questions. Class, I’d like you to meet Dr. Cornelius Dunwoody, who’s in charge of the Seminary and School of Theology here at Cupperton—and who Dr. Bonham says is one of the smartest people at the university. He’s been kind enough to take time out of his busy day to talk with you. Do you all remember what you wanted to ask? Who wants to start?”

Small hands shot up everywhere—and Dunwoody stood there, pale and clammy, like a pillar of salt on an especially humid day. I wondered whether I should check his vitals.

“Avery,” said Ms. Niles, pointing to a red-haired girl in the front row who not only raised her hand but waved it vigorously, like a hyperactive Hermione Granger.

Avery pinned Dunwoody with a hard, accusing glare and said, “Why did God let my cat die?” She sounded threatening, as though she held Dunwoody personally responsible. “I prayed and prayed, but he still died. His name’s Boots and—”

Other voices shouted out, “My dog died,” “Arlo did too ...” “My parakeet ...” “My hamster ...” It felt as if a riot were about to break out.

Ms. Niles waved her hands as though she were flagging down a train. “Children ... children! One at a time! Avery, go ahead.”

“My mother said God needed a cat more than we did, but I think she’s making it up. Will I see Boots in heaven? *I want to see Boots!*”

Dunwoody stood there, working his mouth open and closed the way a goldfish does. At length he spoke. “Well ... animals in heaven, um, I’m sorry to say ... well ... there are

differing opinions. On the negative side, I believe it was ... uh ... Basil of Caesarea who wrote ...”

I was standing by the window, and Dunwoody glanced over at me. I shook my head and shut my eyes briefly as if to say, “Nope, don’t go there.”

“Or ... or ... well, no, I mean, on the positive side, Tertullian somewhere in his *Treatise on the Soul* ... no, wait, I think he was negative too ... um ...”

An awkward silence followed as the frantic little search engine in Dunwoody’s brain clicked through his mental files. We all waited.

Hoping to ease his distress, Ms. Niles interjected, “Professor, how about the Bible—does it say anything about animals in heaven?”

Dunwoody looked at her as if she were daft. But then, oddly, he brightened up. An idea had occurred to him. He made a gracious gesture in my direction and said, “Do you know who we should ask, boys and girls? Dr. Bonham here knows more about these kinds of things than just about anybody; don’t you, Bonham? He’ll explain it all to us.” His sarcasm dripped.

He thought he had me over the theological barrel, and that the barrel was about to go over Niagara Falls ... except he didn’t know that these were questions I’d been pondering ever since, well, since first grade.

“Those are great questions, Avery,” I began, “and thank you, Ms. Niles, for bringing such bright, inquisitive students to see us! As far as I’m concerned, the Bible *does* talk about that. Think about Noah’s ark. Did God save just Noah and his family? No. He saved the animals too. In Psalm 36 it says, ‘Man and beast Thou savest,’ which to me means that God takes care of all his creatures, people and animals. He made them, right? Why would they *not* go to heaven? And I like it when Paul says—you’ve heard about the apostle Paul in Sunday school I bet—

well, he says that ‘God will unite *all* things.’ That is, God will bring them all together in the end, and I can’t help but feel that *all things* includes pets. What do you think?”

There were smiles and even a couple of cheers among the young theologians.

“Now, I’ve got a question for all of you,” I said. “Do you know C. S. Lewis? He wrote the Narnia books ... your parents have read those to you, right? Well, he thought it was quite possible that there will be tame animals in heaven—all those animals that were loved by people on earth. But he also wondered this: do you think God will let mosquitos in?”

There was laughter and yells of “No way!”

“There would be a lot of them, for sure,” I said. “So, here’s what Lewis thought: maybe God will send mosquitos to that *other* place, and that will be *their* heaven!”

Laughter erupted. One boy said, “Nobody likes snakes either!” though one of the girls objected, “I like snakes!”

“Of course, we won’t know till we get to heaven, will we?” I said.

After a short pause, Ms. Niles asked, “What other questions do you have for Dr. Dunwoody?”

A boy in the back raised his hand. “My grandfather uses bad words and doesn’t go to church. Will he go to heaven?”

Dunwoody, who was starting to reprise his goldfish impersonation, turned in my direction again and snarled, “Be my guest, Bonham.”

I asked the boy, “What’s your name?”

“Dan.”

“Here’s a question, Dan. You love your grandfather?”

He nodded.

“Is he good to you?”

Nod.

“What do you like about him?”

“He takes me fishing. He talks to me about stuff. And he’s really, really funny.”

“I bet he loves you a lot. And I would also bet that God loves him for all the ways he loves you. Don’t you think?”

Nod.

“Well, that’s a good sign, isn’t it? The Bible says that God is love, so there has to be a little piece of God in your grandfather, right?”

From the far corner of the room, a girl asked, “What’s heaven like?”

By this point, I’d worked my way to the front of the room, while Dunwoody had taken my place by the window.

“Well,” I said, “who here likes Christmas?”

Shouts and yells.

“So, do you know what’s in all those packages before you open them?”

A lot of animated chatter ensued.

“That’s right. You *don’t*. Not until Christmas morning. But you know they’re going to be wonderful! You know it because the people giving them to you love you so much. Well, to me, that’s heaven. We don’t know what’s inside it, but we *know* it’s going to be special because the one who gives it to us loves us even more than our families do.”

The students nodded and smiled.

Someone asked, “Why do bad things happen? My friend’s house burned down.”

“Wow! That’s a big question,” I said, “and I don’t know, and I’m not sure anybody does, but I’ve got a story that helps me think about that. In my English classes I teach about a woman named Julian who lived hundreds of years ago in a place called Norwich, and she loved God a lot. But she was upset about bad things happening as well. She had a lot of questions she wished she could ask God. So, one time, when

she was really sick, she had a dream. In that dream, she saw Jesus and decided to ask him some of those questions. Jesus answered her, saying basically, ‘Julian, the truth is that bad things will happen, and people will suffer, but I can promise you this: all shall be well.’ Then Jesus repeated it, just so she’d understand: ‘All shall be well ... and all manner of thing shall be well.’ It wasn’t the answer Julian had expected. Instead, Jesus was saying that at some point, maybe sooner, maybe later, everything would be all right again.”

I let that sink in for a moment. Then I said, “That’s what I love about Julian’s dream. We don’t always get the answers we want or expect. But you know what? Our questions and doubts—all these things we deeply, desperately want to understand but don’t—well, they’re all ways of showing God how much we care. Think of that: all these questions you have right now are ways of showing how much you love God! And I suspect Jesus loves us *especially* for those hard questions because they’re a chance for him to comfort us. So keep asking, keep wondering, even if you don’t get the answers ... because Jesus is always there, saying, ‘All shall be well.’”

From the back of the room, Katie gave me a double thumbs-up.

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AT THE END of the hour, Dunwoody, his bald head suffused with crimson, collared me and hissed under his breath, “You’re so smug, Bonham! You tricked me. And you know as well as I do that everything you said was bunk ... I wish I could—” He was about to say more, but Ms. Niles approached to thank us.

“Dr. Dunwoody,” I said, “I’d like to introduce you to Ms. Amanda Niles.” Curtly, he shook her hand. Then, after a dramatic pause, I added, “Amanda *Costa* Niles.”



“Costa?” Dunwoody’s expression turned from restrained rage to bewilderment. “You’re related to President Costa ...?”

“I’m her daughter,” said the teacher. “My mother has told me *so* much about you and Dr. Bonham. In fact, she was the one who suggested I call Dr. Bonham to arrange all this ...”

I smiled at Ms. Niles and said, “Please tell your mother what a great help Dr. Dunwoody was this morning. I don’t know what we’d have done without him.”

Dunwoody shot me a nasty look, then flashed an insincere smile at Ms. Niles, shook her hand again, and left abruptly.

A few minutes later, as Katie and I were halfway down the front steps of Beetham, someone grabbed my arm from behind and swung me around. Dunwoody glared at me. “You think you’re so clever, Bonham, you prig! You set me up!”

“Not at all,” I said. “Not at all. After the panel at the Forum, I just wanted to return the favor ... and to show you ... there are no hard feelings.”

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TWO DAYS LATER, Provost Kinealy called to say that the logjam in the president’s office had broken. She had overruled Dunwoody’s objection to the new department, and the proposal was now moving on to the next stage. Kinealy even added that the president was giving our project her “most enthusiastic support” and that she could see more clearly than ever why Cupperton needed a Department of Theophily. By the end of April, the rest of the signoffs were obtained from the various committees and the Finance Office.

The day after we received the letter of declaration that our proposal had been approved, Katie, as was her habit, materialized in my office and said, “I’ve done it!”

I looked at her quizzically.

“I promised myself I’d do it if we got the department, but I wasn’t sure what I wanted it to say until the first graders came.”

Again, I gave her a puzzled look. She rolled up the sleeve of her black T-shirt, and there on her right deltoid was a tattoo.

A red rose, under which the florid script read, “All shall be well.”

# A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

## CUPPERTON, THEOPHILY, AND FLIGHTS OF FANCY

Although Cupperton University is fictional, it has existed with great vividness in my imagination for many years. In December 2017, I planned to write a series of articles to explain how the study of the humanities and sciences could provide ways of approaching God that are every bit as valid as the study of theology. Then this thought occurred to me: Why haven't colleges created departments in which faculty members might teach their students about the spiritual aspects of their various disciplines? How, for instance, can we learn to love God more through biology, history, literature, sociology, art, and so on? At that point, another thought occurred to me: Why don't I create my own imaginary college with its own Department of Theophily—its department of “the love of God”?

From that point on I began to visualize, as clearly as if I could walk there myself, Cupperton University, with its two quadrangles of Gothic-revival sandstone buildings with their crisscrossing walkways of uneven brick; its shaded arboretum, awash with lilies and smelling of pungent wisteria and sweet

lilac, with its wooden benches, jingling fountain, and flagstone labyrinth; its glass-façaded art museum, which visiting parents complain is much too modern for the rest of campus; its black squirrels hopping across South Quad where students lounge under majestic maples, scrutinizing their smartphones as if they were mirrors, which, in a sense, they are. When things had proceeded this far, I had no choice but turn it all into a novel.

Cupperton, as I imagined it, is located somewhere among the cornfields of the vast, bountiful, cloud-speckled Midwest, with four unambiguous seasons and spotty cellular connection—and distant enough from the nearest urban center to have created its own somewhat insular subculture. Alumni from such schools know what I mean.

About five thousand students attend Cupperton. As a private liberal arts college, it has, like so many similar institutions, vaguely religious roots, being founded two centuries ago by Episcopalians or Methodists or Congregationalists—no one seems quite sure. I suspect Ms. Lambert in the library would be happy to provide you with that information.

The school earns the right to call itself a university because of its music conservatory, its pre-nursing program, and, as you've gathered, its graduate-level Seminary and School of Theology, which, while not on a par with Notre Dame or Duke Divinity, produces students who could hold their own at a church-history trivia night against such schools as Marquette or Wheaton.

The school's colors are navy and gold, and its crest, displayed on the wrought-iron archway over the west entrance—and on the logowear for sale in the Student Stores—shows a night sky with gold stars against a navy field. At the lower end is a child's shoe, and the motto on the ribbon beneath it reads *GRADIBUS PARVULIS AD ASTRA*—"By Baby Steps to the Stars."

No one is quite sure where the name Cupperton comes from, though again, you might ask Ms. Lambert. Some say it's a corruption of Copper Town—though the nearest copper mine is some two hundred miles away. Others insist that Cupperton is a namesake of the Italian city of Copertino, which was the home of one of the more dubious Renaissance saints: Joseph of Copertino, who is said to have had the unusual gift of levitation. That is, he could fly. As a result, he is now regarded as the patron saint of pilots, airline passengers, and drone operators—and not surprisingly, he is also the patron saint of those suffering from extraordinary delusions. Which gives an entirely new meaning to the term *flights of fancy*.

Whatever the origin of the name, that buoyant saint is appropriate for the university's newest and most controversial academic department: the one-of-a-kind, interdisciplinary Department of Theophily, which is about nothing if not flights of fancy, as you will have discovered in these pages.

So what exactly is *theophily*? From the Greek, it means “the love of God”—our love for God and, by extension, God's love for us. As Professor Bonham explains to his students, theophily is different from theology. While theology focuses on learning as much *about* God as humanly possible, as an object of study, of scrutiny, theophily focuses on how to *love* God more deeply with “all our heart, soul, mind, and strength.” Two very different things. Studying something doesn't necessarily lead to loving it, which anyone who failed high school chemistry can tell you. As Thomas Traherne (Bonham's favorite writer) once wrote, “To study [an] object for ostentation, vain knowledge, or curiosity is fruitless impertinence, [even if] God himself and angels be the object. But to study that which will oblige men to love him and feed us with nobility and goodness toward men, that is blessed” (*Centuries of Meditations*, III, 40).

The word *theophily* has biblical associations. The writer of

the Book of Luke and the Acts of the Apostles addressed both documents to a person named Theophilus—“lover of God”—about whom scholars know nothing, which hasn’t prevented them from advancing conflicting theories and more or less casting Theophilus in their own image. But in the absence of evidence, as Dr. Bonham would point out, the name already hints at everything we need to know. Theophilus loved God or, at least, wanted to love God more—otherwise Luke wouldn’t have been writing to him—and as Dr. Graciela Rojas said in her talk at the celebration banquet, “Wanting to love God more is loving God more.” Each chapter in this book has tried to suggest some way of doing just that, for each contains a small and usually not-so-subtle homily on the subject of how we can love God more.

This novel, as you’ve noticed, is not like most. Readers expecting a well-wrought three-act romance or a spine-tingling suspense thriller will have been disappointed. *The Beautiful Madness of Martin Bonham* was written in the deliberately episodic tradition of “the novel of ideas,” or “philosophical novel,” in which each chapter is more-or-less self-contained and each presents a specific idea—in this case, about how to love God—with a new character usually provided to introduce each idea. Such novels used to be popular—Thomas More’s *Utopia*, Voltaire’s *Candide*, Dr. Johnson’s *Rasselas*, or more recently, C. S. Lewis’s *Great Divorce*. This means that the characters in this “theo-philosophical novel” support the ideas rather than the other way around. In a sense, the ideas *are* the characters.

Which is not to say that the human actors are unimportant. Each one reminds me of someone I’ve known, or, more accurately, many someones. They are all composites—except for Ms. Lambert, who is a very real librarian and gave me

permission to use her name. Their various approaches to loving God are what interest me.

More to the point, most of the characters are also me, for each one lives and breathes inside me, and at some time or other I have shared their attitudes, enthusiasms, excesses, and misconceptions. This book, rather than being a “lives of the eminent philosophers” is more like a “lives of the immanent philosophers.” We look within ourselves to see the world ... and to see its creator.

So thank you for spending time at the wholly imaginary but otherwise very real campus of Cupperton University. My hope is that you too, in your own mind’s eye, can picture these oddball characters as they scurry across campus while the bells in the tower of Murphy Chapel chime the Westminster quarters; as they hang out at the CupperTea Café across the street from Phipps Auditorium or slip into the Student Stores for protein bars or ear buds or to order next semester’s texts; as they cluster in shaded, ivy-framed doorways, having animated conversations; jogging past the graffiti-covered boulder in the center of North Quad; or as they peer up at you from their laptops in library cubicles. They are young and old, dignified and silly, religious or not, but most of all, they are not really *they*; rather, they are us—all of us—as we prepare for our own exams in that curious and sometimes perplexing life course on the subject of loving others, loving ourselves, and loving God. In other words, Theophily.

See you in class.

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Now, some acknowledgments: As in everything I write, Shelley Townsend-Hudson is on every page. She has taught me more about God’s love than anyone. Thank you to my daughters,

Abbie, Molly, and Lili, for their constant encouragement and listening. From among the things they will inherit from me someday, may Theophily be the one that means the most.

Special thanks to Linda Lambert, formerly instructional services and collection development librarian at Taylor University, for meticulously reviewing and commenting on these pages and for making editorial contributions, not the least of which is suggesting most of the biographical details of her eponymous character. She provided information about the inner workings of a university, and she did indeed conceive of the Hiss and Hearse Series referenced in these pages.

For reviewing all or portions of this book and making helpful suggestions, I would like to thank Julia McKee Bergquist, Jessica Dion-Steffes, Dr. Matthew Estel, Mary Hassinger, Miranda Gardner, Tisha Martin, Bethany Russell, Timothy John Stoner, Emily Van Houten, Virginia Wieringa, and Courtney Zonnefeld. Of invaluable assistance was Reverend Jon Propper, formerly of Park Congregational Church, Grand Rapids, Michigan, who was the inspiration for chapter 12, “The All-Faiths Festival”; and I extend special appreciation to Dr. James Ernest, publisher at Eerdmans, who made a key suggestion on an early draft, which turned into chapter 5, “A Visit from the Archbishop.”

Thanks also to Dr. Chris Beetham, who checked my Latin; Dr. Nancy Erickson for her constant, joyful encouragement; and poet Brian Phipps for always asking how the writing was coming. Brian was one of the earliest and most enthusiastic advocates for this project. In gratitude for their contributions, three buildings on the Cupperton campus have been named in their honor.

The bits of sententious wisdom collected under the name of Dudley Fitts (Bonham’s old friend, *not* the poet and classical



scholar) come from three old friends of my own, Dr. Robert F. Gross Jr., Bob Moore†, and Duane Siebert.

Many thanks to artist Mark Sheeres for his beautiful map, the image of the labyrinth, the Cupperton University crest, and the cartoon on the next page.

To visionary author, editor, and publisher Rev. Dr. John Mabry—a heartfelt thanks for seeing the value in this book and for his lovely endorsement.

Thank you to Kelly Hughes of Dechant Hughes Associates for her amazing and persistent promotional work on behalf of this book. Thanks to Sarah Arthur, Traci Rhoades, Leonard Sweet, and Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove for their kind endorsements; I encourage everyone to track down their books, each of which has a special meaning for me.

And special gratitude goes to my agents, Tim Beals and Pete Ford of Credo Communications. It's rare to find agents who love Medieval and Renaissance literature as much as I do.

—*Robert Hudson, August 2023*

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Since our errors do not arise out of malice  
but are the natural consequences of human weakness,  
we hope we shall be pardoned for them  
in this world and the next.

—*Voltaire, A Philosophical Dictionary*  
(*trans. Martin E. Bonham*)





*“Stop calling me ‘holier than thou’;  
I AM holier than thou!”*

