

One of the most interesting things about Wayne A. Meeks' new book, *Christ Is the Question* (WJK 2006)—at least from a certain perspective—is that the author admits to having avoided said question for so long. "For many years," he writes in the Preface, "students and friends have badgered or implored me to say something about Jesus. Until now I have shied away from this most central of issues for the New Testament scholar and for the Christian, because it seemed too difficult. Jesus, I replied to those entreaties, could be known only the way a black hole is known: by the effects, never directly" (ix). As both a Christian and critic, I appreciate Meeks' point. Furthermore, as the editor of the *bulletin*, reading and thinking about various debates in the field of Religious Studies, I'm struck by the similarity between Meeks' confessed side-stepping and the recurring question of whether or to what extent we, as scholars of religion, should ever openly discuss the "most central of issues" of religion on its merits; in other words, to once again bravely broach the topic of Truth.

Perhaps one or two of our regular readers will have ascertained by now that I am a fan of baseball. For some time, I've wanted to write a piece for the *bulletin* that would use Foucault to think through the religious aspects of all the controversy surrounding Pete Rose and his "confession." Hopefully, I will get to that someday, but something else has caught my attention in the meantime. In addition to being a fan of baseball, I play the hugely popular game customarily referred to as "fantasy baseball." There is an interesting debate that has been

going on among fans (of both baseball and fantasy baseball) for a number of years now over the best strategy for assembling and managing a team: statistics or (what is variously called) "the book," "instinct," one's "gut," etc.

Recently I picked up two books that represent opposite sides of this issue. Buzz Bissinger's *Three Nights in August: Strategy, Heartbreak, and Joy* (Houghton Mifflin 2005) is about "old school" baseball as epitomized in the managerial style of the St. Louis Cardinals' skipper, Tony La Russa. It takes an in-depth look, from the vantage point of the Cardinals dugout, at a three game series between the Cardinals and the Chicago Cubs in August 2003. It recounts every decision La Russa and his coaching staff makes before and throughout the series in their effort to beat their division rivals. The goal, of course, is to get inside the mind of one of baseball's best (and best known) managers to understand how and why he plays the game the way he does, and in so doing to learn more about the game itself.

The other book—Sam Walker's *Fantasyland: A Season on Baseball's Lunatic Fringe* (Viking 2006)—is written by a sports journalist who lobbies himself an invitation to join the famous Tout Wars Rotisserie League. Walker's experience reflects a certain tension between playing the game strictly by the numbers, on one hand, and, on the other hand, trying desperately to find some kind of edge by scouting players in the traditional fashion. In the end, despite spending thousands of dollars and making every effort to take advantage of his "inside" access as a sport's writer, Walker finished eighth (out of twelve) in the league. Along the way, Walker purports to have learned a good deal about the game itself—both baseball and rotisserie baseball—and about both players and fans.

What's at stake in these books, among other things, is the question of who has better access to the "real" game of baseball, and by what means such access is gained. In the final chapter of *Fantasyland*, Walker recalls watching college football games with his dad.

The moment a play is whistled dead on the football field, it's up to the referees to spot the ball at the point where the ballcarrier was tackled. This is anything but an exact science. Sometimes the refs are off by four inches, sometimes four feet. Nevertheless, when it comes time to determine if a team has earned a first down, two grown-ups dressed like crossing guards jog out purposefully from the sidelines dragging a chain that's precisely ten yards long.... As my dad and I watched delightedly, the crossing guards would use their finely calibrated tool of measurement to determine, to the millimeter, the distance between two completely arbitrary points. (330)

Herein we find the relevance of two books on baseball for those concerned with the academic study of religion. There is an analogous debate taking place in our field, which is neatly summed up in the so-called insider/outsider problem (though it goes well beyond that, to be sure). I have to be honest; I was beginning to think this "problem" was a thing of the past, at least insofar as I figured no one cared much about it and that

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each was content to go on studying religion the way she or he always has. In fact, the "problem" hasn't gone the way of the spitball at all. A recent piece on the *SBL Forum* by Jacques Berlinerblau, "The Unspeakable in Biblical Studies" (4/2 [February/March 2006]), points out that one would be hard pressed to find among the ranks of biblical critics anyone who wasn't, at one time or another, in some way or another, committed *existentially* to the things of the Bible, regardless of how they view it now. At the same time, for those non-confessionalists out there who study the Bible for altogether different reasons (presumably) will find it very difficult to secure employment because, no matter how much we say we're looking to move beyond a confessional study of the Bible, the field (and thus academic search committees) is still littered with seminary-trained professors who are inclined to hire seminary-trained professors. Numerous contributors have raised similar concerns in the *bulletin* on various occasions.

What is interesting to me about *Three Nights in August* and *Fantasyland* is that both authors are sincere fans of baseball. While the first book *seems* to be about *real* baseball games and the latter about *simulated* baseball games, both are about games and about whether intuition, history, and experience, on one hand, or science, mathematics, and quantitative analysis, on the other, are the keys to success, i.e., to having the best knowledge of the game and winning therewith. Moreover, in both cases, the goal is to account for everything. Following the excerpt above, Walker goes on to say:

It's a pretty good metaphor for what's happening in baseball. While the scouts, like the referees, preach the value of making a good spot, the quantitative guys, playing the role of the crossing guards, are convinced that all you need is a more accurate chain. What they don't seem to realize is that the only way they'll ever get it right is if they're *both* perfect. In the end, baseball is a game that turns on human tendencies, and human tendencies are fluid. (330, author's italics)

At the heart of this debate in baseball is a desire to know the game in the best possible way, which stems from a deep, passionate, and sincere love of the game. So what, precisely, is the goal of the academic study of religion? What would the best possible knowledge of the subject actually consist of, and who would be involved in determining whether we had achieved it? Who would be "licensed" to contribute to it?

I've had numerous conversations with plenty of folks who think that we in the field of religious studies needn't be concerned with matters of relevance, or with making the world a better place, and so on. It's not the nature of our business to entangle ourselves with questions pertaining to contesting truth claims. In fact, some would argue, concern with such matters is detrimental to our scholarship. On the other hand, however, few in the field today would deny that scholarship is always shaped in a context and that we all have vested interests of one sort or another.

It seems to me that avoiding certain question(s) is not an option simply because we think that answering them compromises our scholarship. Quite the contrary: our scholarship is compromised precisely because we presume to avoid certain questions insofar as the questions are never actually avoided so much as persistently ignored only to still have a powerful effect on the way that the field is shaped. It's obvious that we all share a passion for the subject and for teaching. It seems safe to assume that this passion stems from a desire to understand the focus of our inquiry and to make the world a better place, however one defines "better" and on whatever grounds one determines success. If such is the case, what are we missing when we spend so much time arguing whether we need more accurate stats or improved perception? I think the articles in this issue, each in its own way, unwittingly bump up against various aspects of these very questions.

In the pages that follow, you will read about how the academic study of religion is beginning to take shape in post-communist Bulgaria as the field navigates and negotiates certain constraints unique to that setting. In a similar vein, you'll hear about one scholar's challenging vision for the study of religion in the East in a postcolonial context. Following are two essays from graduate students at Syracuse University. The first investigates "bait and switch" strategies among liberal theoreticians when debating "controversial" issues. The second shares much in common with the preceding article as it interrogates the fundamentally religious nature of Spinoza's notion of tolerance. We conclude with an essay reflecting on why professors should seriously consider introducing community college students to matters of theory. Professor Weep returns this issue; the AAR book awards are announced; and information is provided on the newly formed International Association for the Cognitive Science of Religion (IACSR).

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