FAITH IN WRITING
Essays in Honor of Jack L. Knowles

Edited by J. E. Knowles

Introduction

In his four decades at Milligan College, Tennessee, Jack L. Knowles has held many titles: Professor of English and Humanities; Chair of the Area of Humane Learning; Associate Dean; Dr. K., the women's tennis coach; European tour leader; and now, in his sixty-fifth year, Professor Emeritus. I, though, first called him by one of my earliest words—Daddy.

I say this, not as disclaimer, but as reason for my chutzpah in editing the work of Jack Knowles' colleagues, some of whom I've had difficulty in calling anything but "Dr." Because all my life, I have been a student of Jack Knowles.

Two things I learned from my father were to read well, and to "be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect."[1] This dual faith—in the power of literature and the approach of humanity to divinity—inspired this Festschrift. But the seriousness of the collection should not obscure the delight we take in learning. "'The sound of men laughing' Lewis said was one of his great pleasures,"[2] complains an anonymous blogger. "Where have these men gone?"[3] I can answer that: some of these men, and women, can be found in the teetotaling halls of Milligan College.

These essays reflect the individual authors' interests, which span more than a thousand years, from one of the earliest poems in English to novelists at work in the present millennium. They are organized (but need not be read) chronologically, by the dates of their subjects. A common theme emerges beyond the particulars of the Christian religion: that we are souls in bodies.

Once one of the most widely read U. S. authors, Pearl S. Buck is now remembered, at best, only for one novel, set in the China where her parents were missionaries. Bob Wetzel's essay lovingly acquaints us with Buck's biographies of her mother and father, respectively, who had very different ideas and ways of what they saw as their ministry to embodied human souls. Reading this, we gain a better understanding of why Pearl Buck was the first American woman to be awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature.

Phil Kenneson's contribution, on Wallace Stegner, shows the timelessness of ethics that were just as valid in pre-Christian times as in ours. When I first read Stegner's novel, its description of a young professor storing his books on bricks and boards reminded me exactly of my dad. The universal good of friendship, or brotherly love, is practiced in the very physical and day-to-day world that we live in. It is a theme that recurs in many of the essays here.

We arrive at the modern by way of Dante Alighieri. Nathan Gilmour takes the character of a young evangelical Christian, perhaps not raised on great literature, and introduces her to the mediaeval author whom Dorothy Sayers called "the most incomparable story-teller who ever put pen to paper."[4]

The need to focus our inner spiritual life in the midst of a busy, practical world is timeless. In her essay on an Old English poem, Pat Magness argues persuasively that today's Christians can find much to emulate in the poet's turning to the cross in meditation. Centuries later, Gerard Manley Hopkins may be suggesting that same cross in one of his poems that is not overtly Christian. This intriguing possibility is raised by Lee Magness (Pat's husband). If we stop and consider individual words of a work that has been so often read, we find unexpected layers of meaning.

The spiritual journey of a lifetime is the subject of a T. S. Eliot poem and of Roy Lawson's reflection on it. He shows that the Wise Men's visit to the infant Jesus was not only, as we say of a great vacation, "the trip of a lifetime," but the journey of our entire lives, from birth to (physical) death.

The words we think, speak, read, and write are essential to how we embody the life of the soul. In his essay on Feodor Dostoevsky and Leo Tolstoy, cousin Jeff Knowles tackles the problem

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[1] Matthew 5:48.

[2] "There's no sound I like better than adult male laughter," cited in Walter Hooper, *C.S. Lewis: A Companion and Guide* (London: HarperCollins, 1996), p. 16.

[3] http://oxfordinklings.blogspot.com/2004/11/forward-to-essays-presented-to-charles.html [accessed 30 June 2011]

[4] C. S. Lewis, ed., *Essays Presented to Charles Williams* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans, 1966), p. 2.

of how those same words can be used for (as Bob Wetzel said to me long ago) both love letters and grocery lists.

Reading and writing are essential to the Abrahamic faiths. In the Qur'an, Jews and Christians are both known as "people of the book." And there is an oft-recounted story in the Babylonian Talmud, about the time that Rabbi Eliezer and a group of his colleagues were arguing about the meaning of a text. R. Eliezer invoked a number of supernatural proofs to the effect that his interpretation was correct: physical objects moved at his command, and even a voice from heaven spoke, audible to all. Despite seeing and hearing these things, the group held firm to their interpretation of the text:

R. Yehoshua arose and said: "'It is not in heaven' (*Devarim* 30: 12)[5]. What does this mean?" R. Yirmiyah said: The Torah has already been given at Sinai. We pay no heed to heavenly voices..."

R. Natan came upon Eliyahu. He said to him: "What is the Holy One, Blessed be He, doing at this time?"

Eliyahu said to him: "He is laughing and saying, 'My children have defeated me; My children have defeated me.'"[6]

No doubt there is more than one possible interpretation of this story as well! but mine is that there is no substitute for a group of God's people reading, and thinking, and if need be arguing about the importance of what they have read. And when we do this, the story tells us, God *laughs*. It is hoped that, in microcosm, the book you are now reading may be a contribution to such living community, as well as a celebration of one member of that community. *Soli Deo Gloria.*

The Editor

[5] Deuteronomy.

[6] *Bava Mezia* 59b.