“A Jewish atheist, a Christian atheist and a Muslim atheist walk into a bar . . .” A friend of mine has suggested that I begin this lecture with a joke like that, but I cannot complete it. Perhaps it is sufficiently funny that one could describe atheists as either being Jewish, Christian or Muslim. Many atheists might be happier simply to describe themselves as atheists pure and simple, without any notice given to the faith they or their ancestors once professed. There is in recent years something fashionable in describing oneself as an atheist. The New Atheists get advertised and reviewed in *The New York Times.* Theologians do not. On the whole I don’t know whether I find the New Atheists or the New Apologists who have taken them on more tiresome.

In this evening’s lecture I want to reflect on the work of three very non-tiresome writers of imaginative fiction in English, all of them living, each of them distinctly reacting against the faith of his fathers—and against the faith of their mothers as well. Those three writers are the American, Philip Roth, the Irishman, Colm Tóibín, and the British Indian, Salman Rushdie. All at one time or another have outraged their former co-religionists. I wish to examine some of the writings of each of these contemporary writers to see what they criticize about their ancestral faith, and to interrogate what people of Jewish, Christian and Muslim faith might learn from those critiques. To this point, let me quote the Scottish poet, Robert Burns: “O wad some Power
the giftie gie us/To see oursels as ithers see us!” ¹ The authors involved might question the existence of that Power, but they can still “gie us” that “giftie” themselves. Men and women of faith—Jewish, Christian and Muslim—sometimes need to “see oursels as ithers see us.”

I. Philip Roth: Imagination Born and Bred in Newark

Philip Milton Roth was born 79 years ago in Newark, New Jersey. Since 1959 he has published 29 novels. Between 2006 and 2010 Roth published four short novels to which he has assigned a Greek common title: Nemeses, the English plural of the Greek word Nemesis. Nemesis in Greek mythology is the hypostasis or goddess of revenge, the fury who repays the hubris of human beings, their overweening pride. Three of these novels are excellent; about the third and shortest, The Humbling (2009), the less said the better.² I will comment mainly on two of the three excellent novels in this series, Indignation (2008) and Nemesis (2010), among the best ever written by Roth.

In both of these novels the leading character’s life is reviewed, starting from his childhood in a lower middle-class urban setting in New Jersey. Each character has a tragic flaw or makes a series of strategic mistakes that lead to his downfall. These novels are not repetitious; the accounts of how the main characters meet their respective nemeses prove relentless. In each novel the hero (if I may use an old-fashioned term) cries out against God and the whole structure of a life based on the faith tradition of Israel. Roth has seldom, if ever, written positively about Judaism, but these two novels prove more than eloquent in their expression of rage not only against Judaism but also against God.
*Indignation* (2008) narrates the brief life of a young man from Newark, Marcus Messner, the son of a kosher butcher and his wife, who in 1951 escapes the increasing paranoia of his father by transferring from a local commuter college in Newark to Winesburg College in Ohio. Winesburg College, once a Baptist seminary, is by 1951 a secular college, but undergraduates are still required to attend Wednesday chapel services. This regulation, along with roommate problems and romantic complications, make coexistence with Messner’s paranoiac father in Newark begin to look easy.

We learn early in the novel that Marcus is narrating the story of his life from the grave, a life story that he calls “the series of mishaps ending in my death at the age of nineteen.” Even though his parents make their living as kosher butchers, Marcus has no use for any religious tradition, beginning with the Jewish tradition the family business serves. The other students at Winesburg College, Jewish and Gentile, are willing to get through college without confronting the system. Not Marcus: in a fiery interview with the Dean of Men Marcus objects to mandatory chapel: “I objected, “ he says, “not because I was an observant Jew but because I was an ardent atheist” (80). To sustain him through the one Wednesday chapel service he ever attends, Marcus sings to himself the Communist Chinese national anthem in English translation, itself the source of the novel’s title: “China’s masses have met the day of danger. / Indignation fills the hearts of all of our countrymen” (82). Messner, drafted into the army when his student exemption expires after his expulsion from Winesburg College over the mandatory chapel problem, dies of wounds sustained in a Chinese attack in the Korean War.

What was the nemesis of Marcus Messner? Like his father, he gradually descended into paranoia: lashing out at his family, his roommates, the regulations of the college he himself had picked out for his escape from home. The Chinese whose revolutionary indignation he sang
finally undid him on what came to be called Massacre Mountain in Korea: “He’d not been encircled by so much blood since his days as a boy at the slaughterhouse, watching the ritual killing of animals in accordance with Jewish law” (226). From his place among the dead Marcus regrets all the wrong turns of his first nineteen years. But still he feels, even in death, that “he couldn’t believe like a child in some stupid god!” (230). Marcus Messner looks backward at his life with a deep regret but without any hope of something better in the world to come. As an ardent atheist he repudiates all such hope.

The last and longest of these four relatively short recent novels of Roth has for its title the singular form of the Greek word for the whole series: Nemesis (2010). The narrator, speaking in 1971, is a survivor of a 1944 polio epidemic in Newark. He and many of his schoolmates probably contracted polio from a carrier who was eventually to come down with polio himself, Eugene “Bucky” Cantor, the main character of this novel. An elementary school gym teacher who works for the summer supervising a playground for children in a Jewish section of Newark, Cantor—deferred from service in World War II because of poor eyesight—thinks that he is waging a battle against the polio epidemic without realizing that he himself is a source of the epidemic. When he withdraws from that battle in Newark, he brings the virus with him to a summer camp in the Poconos. Cantor’s poor eyesight, much emphasized by Roth, parallels symbolically the blindness of Oedipus to the facts of his origins, even before the king of Thebes eventually tears his eyes out when he realizes he has killed his father and married his mother.

Long before Cantor realizes the horror of what he has inadvertently caused, he seethes with rage against any attempt by the Jewish community in Newark to seek refuge in God. The Kaddish, the famously objective mourner’s prayer in the Jewish tradition, offers little or no consolation to mourners, insisting rather on the absolute sovereignty and holiness of God. Bucky
Cantor will have none of it. At the funeral of the first of his playground children to die of polio, Bucky rages against God and his worshipers at that graveside who are characterized as “praising God’s almightiness, praising extravagantly, unstintingly, the very God who allowed everything, including children, to be destroyed by death.”

Cantor’s own polio leaves him partially handicapped and deeply angry for life, and especially angry with God. He refuses to marry Marcia Steinberg, the doctor’s daughter with whom he had been almost engaged, even though she wants to marry him. “Whoever she married, let them and their children be happy and enjoy good health. Let’s hope their merciful God will have blessed them with all that before He sticks His shiv in their back” (254). Marcia had tried to reason with him, defending God the way God defended himself in the Book of Job: “You have no idea what God is! No one does or can!” (261). The narrator, himself an atheist, catches Bucky Cantor in a certain contradiction: “You speak of God. You still believe in this God you disparage?” Bucky replies: “Yes. Somebody had to make this place” (264). But Bucky has no love for this Creator or for the place he created.

Bucky Cantor sees himself imaged in a campfire story told to children in the summer camp to which he had carried the polio virus. “The Indians believed that it was an evil being, shooting them with an invisible arrow, that caused certain of their diseases” (271). The narrator refuses to accept Bucky’s description of himself as that invisible arrow: “Don’t make things worse by scapegoating yourself” (272). Easier said than done. The narrator finally accedes to Cantor’s terrible sense of his own responsibility for the summer camp polio outbreak: “Maybe he was the invisible arrow” (275).

The narrator refuses to end his story of Bucky Cantor on such a tragic note. The last five pages of this powerful novel evoke the narrator’s lyrical memory of Bucky Cantor, before the
polio outbreak, teaching his wards how to shoot a javelin. “The first javelin thrower was said to
be Hercules, the great warrior and slayer of monsters, who, Mr. Cantor told us, was the giant son
of the supreme God, Zeus, and the strongest man on earth” (276). But the myth of Hercules the
javelin thrower narrated by Bucky Cantor possibly hints as well at other and more tragic
elements in the story of that quintessential athlete, and especially his fiery death caused by the
shirt stained with toxic blood that the centaur Nessus, once defeated by Hercules, had given as
love magic to the jealous wife of Hercules, Deianira.7 The athletic heroism of Bucky Cantor—
including his battle with polio among his charges—brought down on him the nemesis that
destroyed the rest of his life.

The moral universe of these novels of Philip Milton Roth is Greek and tragic. He has no
desire to embrace the transcendent purpose of the poet from whom he takes his middle name,
attempting “to justify the ways of God to men.”8 On the contrary, this great novelist intends to
expose the cruelty of God, the capriciousness of the world in which we live. Roth’s is a dark
vision, imaginatively and superbly conveyed in these two recent novels. Glibly expressed faith
needs to pause in the presence of this darkness—pause and reflect.

II. Colm Tóibín: Imagination Born and Bred in Wexford

Born 57 years ago in Enniscorthy, County Wexford, Colm Tóibín has published since
1987 at least six novels and two books of short stories as well as eleven works of collected
journalism, literary criticism, a memoir as well as some poetry and pieces for the theater, with
more coming out every year. Since September 2011 he has been a professor of creative writing at
the University of Manchester. Like Philip Roth, Tóibín is a master stylist, but he has, even more
than Roth, taken on the mantle of public intellectual, especially, but not exclusively, in his native Ireland. He has not been afraid to take up subjects that embroil him in controversy, including controversy with the Catholic Church. Openly gay, Tóibín has in his non-fiction written not a few things critical of the faith of his ancestors, and especially things critical of the Catholic Church’s teaching on sexuality. But is Tóibín an atheist? I am not entirely sure of the answer to that question, although it must be admitted that some of the voices captured in his fiction, especially his more recent fiction, lean in that direction.

In his earliest book of non-fiction, *Walking Along the Border* (1987), Tóibín gives an account of the journey he took in the summer of 1986, largely on foot, along the border that separates the Irish Republic from the six counties of northeastern Ireland still under British rule. At the time the Republic of Ireland was preparing for a referendum on the article in the 1937 Irish Constitution that forbade divorce under any circumstance. At the same time, the six counties under British rule were still wracked with periodic outbreaks of violence between the Provisional Irish Republican Army, the Royal Ulster Constabulary and the occupying British forces. Preoccupation with both of these realities dogged Tóibín on his journey. Two chapters in *Walking Along the Border* narrate contrasting visits made by Tóibín to islands with long religious histories, Saint Patrick’s Purgatory on Station Island in Lough Derg, Country Donegal, within the Republic of Ireland, and a Hiberno-Romanesque church ruin on White Island in Lough Erne, Country Fermanagh, within Northern Ireland.

The penitential pilgrimage to Saint Patrick’s Purgatory demands a great deal of the pilgrim, who is to fast from midnight on the day of arrival and is only allowed tea or coffee and hard brown bread or toast while on the island. Shoes are removed immediately on disembarking and the pilgrim remains barefooted, rain or shine, while making the many circumambulations in
the stony penitential “beds” that each pilgrim must complete while on the island. The first night is spent in sleepless common prayer, much of it involving numerous repetitions of the Our Father, the Hail Mary and the Apostles’ Creed. Participation is expected at masses three times during the pilgrim’s stay as well as at other devotions. Although Tóibín seems to have started off in earnest on the pilgrimage, having fasted from midnight of the day of his afternoon arrival, he began to become disenchanted as the first evening developed, especially when he discovered that he was expected to go to confession, a practice of the universal Church today that owes much of its shape to the practice of purgatories like Station Island in first-millennium Ireland. “Praying was one thing,” Tóibín writes, “and singing hymns was fine, but telling my sins to a priest was something I hadn’t done since I was fifteen.” Although he considered fleeing the island immediately, Tóibín finally persisted through the whole experience, cutting corners on the penitential “beds” and other rigors of the three-day experience, but he admitted that he did take the opportunity to renew his baptismal promises, “renouncing the devil, which I was glad to do.” But in the long run Tóibín found himself alienated from the central intent of the rigorous pilgrimage, and especially from the preaching he heard at one of the masses, more or less subtly aimed against passage of the divorce referendum the following Thursday.

Tóibín’s experience a week later, when he traveled with a group of friends to White Island on Lough Erne, contrasted vividly with his previous weekend on Station Island. During the intervening week the electorate in the Irish Republic had rejected by a substantial majority the possibility of amendment of the prohibition on divorce in the Constitution. Famously, the opponents of the passage of the amendment had campaigned with the slogan that “a woman voting for divorce is like a turkey voting for Christmas.” Tóibín and his friends, appalled at the outcome, distracted themselves with a far from ascetical boat trip to Lough Erne. In the ruined
church on the island they saw weather-worn images from the ninth through the eleventh century, most of them rather dour-faced figures with croziers who seemed to Tóibín and his companions “to be joining the rest of the population, North and South, in saying ‘No.’ Their mouths on the word for eternity. ‘No, No, No.’”13 One solitary archaeological relic preserved in the ruins seemed to originate from pre-Christian Ireland, a female figure (possibly a fertility image), usually called a sîle-na-gig. This sîle-na-gig does not strike me as much more attractive to the eye than the dour-faced ecclesiastics, but in the mood of that weekend after the failed divorce referendum, Tóibín saw the “fixed grin on her face” as an invitation to an encounter with an ancient Molly Bloom: “‘Yes,’ she was saying, ‘yes, yes, yes.’”14

In an article published in 2005 by Michael Böss of the University of Aarhus in Denmark, the scholar analyzes, especially in terms of these two essays in Walking Along the Border, the ambiguities of Tóibín’s relationship to Ireland and to the Catholic Church. Böss put words into Tóibín’s mouth in a 1994 interview with him when he asked him “why he, as an atheist and a liberal intellectual, had not simply decided to reject religion and church.”15 Tóibín does not bite readily at the fruit offered by Böss: “Well, you see,” Tóibín replied, “one gets used to people. Many priests and many Catholic people in Ireland may still not be liberal, but they are also my neighbours, also my family. One gets fond of people, personally.”16

For a man who feels alienated from the Catholic Church, Tóibín manifests a continuing interest in the Church. In a 1994 book of travel essays, The Sign of the Cross: Travels in Catholic Europe, Tóibín covers, among other topics, pilgrimages to Medugorje and Santiago de Compostela as well as the 1991 visit by Blessed Pope John Paul II to Poland, and especially a deeply moving vigil of prayer and reflection led by the Pope at the Marian shrine of Czestochowa. There, Tóibín notes, the Pope had preached at length and “had not mentioned sex
or sin. He had not hectored us. His words had been suggestive, at times poetic.” The most unusual essay in this collection, however, and the source of its title, is not a travel essay at all but an account of an inner journey Tóibín undertook under the direction of a psychiatrist friend who specializes in helping clients confront blocked past psychological traumas. The psychiatrist aided this process along with the use of ketamine, a drug that has effects both analgesic and anesthetetic and that sometimes causes hallucinations. All too often ketamine has been employed as a so-called ‘recreational drug.’

The psychiatrist who urged this process on Tóibín did so because he felt that the writer had never faced up to the effects the death of his school-teacher father had had on him when he was twelve years of age. Tóibín admitted earlier that he had entertained some ambiguous feelings about his father, who was likely to become his class teacher a year or two later, had he lived. Eventually, however, as a result of the drug-induced inner journey, Tóibín felt himself “overwhelmed by a compulsion to thank my father for life,” but he also felt that the expression of such a sentiment “sounded like the sort of thing you hear at a bad funeral service.” Finally Tóibín “wanted to bless” his father and eventually did so: “I made the sign of the cross in the air, over and over. I had no choice.” This inner journey of Tóibín’s “in Catholic Europe” gives the entire book its title and rightly so; it stands head and shoulders over the other chapters.

The death of the writer’s mother in September 2000, thirty-three years after his father passed away, has returned as a theme in several of Tóibín’s recent writings, including a brief memoir of his upbringing that was published by Penguin as an audio-book in 2011. The 2010 collection of short stories called The Empty Family opens with an exquisite story of an Irish writer teaching in Texas recollecting in 2006 the anniversary of his mother’s death six years earlier. While remembering the events of her funeral he wants to call a lover in Dublin who had
come to be with him on that occasion. “The moon hangs low over Texas,” the narrator thinks. “The moon is my mother. She is full tonight . . . I have never seen a moon so low and so full of her own deep brightness. My mother is six years dead tonight, and Ireland is six hours away and you are asleep.”20 The narrator goes on to tell his absent lover that “You know that I do not believe in God. I do not care much about the mysteries of the universe, unless they come to me in words, or in music maybe, or in a set of colours, and then I entertain them merely for their beauty and only briefly.”21

Tóibín has been criticized by some Catholics for the aestheticism of his attachment to Catholicism, combined with his distaste for the Church’s teaching on sexuality. The online version of the British weekly, The Catholic Herald, featured in September 2010 a thunderous blog headlined “Colm Tóibín wants the Church to be beautiful and exotic. But she has to impart truth too.”22

Let me conclude this too brief overview of Tóibín’s imaginative struggle with faith with an account of a meeting he had in the late 1980s with a British journalist who told him that she collected rosary beads. “She had converted some into bracelets and necklaces . . . but others she just kept as antiques. The problem was, she went on, that old ladies in Ireland insisted on being buried with their beads, which was a nightmare for the serious collector.”23 Tóibín found himself in the unlikely role of defender of the faith when talking to this trivializing aesthete: “Catholicism and all its trappings, somehow, belonged to me.”24 The aesthetic affection of Tóibín for the faith of his fathers and his mothers over many generations in Enniscorthy, Co. Wexford, remains with him, even if his Catholicism does not measure up to the standards of some bloggers for The Catholic Herald.
III. Salman Rushdie: Imagination Born and Bred in Bombay

Ahmad Salman Rushdie was born in Bombay of highly educated Muslim parents less than two months before the division of British India into India and Pakistan in 1947. He is distinctly a Bombay, not a Mumbai person, a British Indian rather than an Indian pure and simple, and he holds British citizenship. After his primary and early secondary schooling in India he moved to England in the 1960s where he completed his secondary schooling at the Rugby School, and from there proceeded to King’s College of the University of Cambridge. No “Slum Dog Millionaire,” Rushdie was dubbed a Knight Bachelor for services to literature by Queen Elizabeth II in 2007. But despite the great class and educational differences between Rushdie and many of his Indian Muslim contemporaries, much of his fictional output has been characterized as magical realism and it bears a strong family resemblance to ‘Bollywood’ films. He is currently University Distinguished Professor at Emory University in Atlanta.

Rushdie established his reputation as a writer of fiction with his second novel, winner of the Booker Prize, *Midnight’s Children* (1981), the story of a child born at the stroke of midnight on the day that India gained its independence. But it was Rushdie’s fourth novel, *The Satanic Verses* (1988), which mainly accounts for the author’s fame or infamy, depending on who is evaluating him. It brought down on his head not only a great deal of obloquy from Muslims in many parts of the world but also a *fatwa* or legal pronouncement calling for his death emanating from Iran’s Supreme Guide at the time, Imam Ruhollah Khomeini, who died a year later. In actual fact, very few Muslims took that *fatwa* seriously, although there were enough entrepreneurial types who might have vied for the bounty promised for the assassination that the author felt it necessary to go into hiding for nearly a decade. Nowadays, however, Rushdie seems
to be everywhere, as a recent article in the Fashion & Style section of *The New York Times* sardonically noted.\(^{25}\)

A brief outline of the novel, better known for its title than for its contents, is in order. The two main characters are Indian Muslims, neither of them in any sense devout: Gibreel Farishta, a Bollywood actor originally born with the name Ismail Najmuddin, and Saladin Chamcha, a Bombay-born entrepreneur originally named Salahuddin Chamchawala, now established in England. The names of the two characters translate as Gabriel Angel and Saladin Spoon, the latter term in Hindi and Urdu referring in a vulgar fashion to a sycophant.\(^{26}\) Gibreel, for his part, has spent his Bollywood career playing roles in what he calls “theologicals,”\(^{27}\) films about the Hindu gods, the sort of thing a devout Muslim would never do. Through such films, according to Farishta, “every god in the pantheon got his or her chance to be a star” (24). Saladin Chamcha, on the other hand, had dedicated himself to business concerns in Britain; in the process he had become alienated from the father who originally sent him there to study: “I accuse him of becoming my supreme being,” Saladin declares, “so that what happened was like a loss of faith” (41). Neither of these Indian Muslims seems to have any form of faith by the time they are involved in an airplane hijacking by militant Sikhs.\(^{28}\)

In the novel Farishta and Chamcha survive the plane bombing, landing unharmed on the coast of England. Chamcha, a British citizen, is almost immediately arrested for illegal immigration, but Farishta, the Indian actor, passes himself off as a Briton. In the process of their fall from the sky Gibreel becomes an angel and Saladin a devil. Part II of the novel, the section that prompted most of the outrage in the Muslim world, is a fantastic dream of Gibreel’s, much of it parodying events of the prophet Muhammad’s life in Mecca, especially the early years of his experience of revelation (610-622 CE). The point of view is that of Farishta, a totally
secularized or lapsed Muslim, whose version of the life of Muhammad owes more to the
tradition of English music hall than to the Qur’an and the early lives of Muhammad. To
symbolize this comedic intent, the prophet Muhammad appears in the dream sequence as
“Mahound,” a name created by medieval Christian polemicists writing anti-Muslim
propaganda, and he is also described as “that businessman on the hill” (94), a reference to
Muhammad’s meditative seclusion on Mount Hira after he had withdrawn from active mercantile
life. Much of this section reminds me of the sort of thing undergraduates write when they are
trying to be amusing. Muslims generally do not find this novel funny.

One incident in Muhammad’s life, much satirized in Farishta’s Bollywood dream
sequence, provides the title for the entire novel. Muhammad had struggled for nearly a decade to
purify Mecca and its sacred shrine, the Ka‘ba, from the rampant polytheism enshrined there.
That polytheism was intimately connected with the role of Mecca as an entrepôt for Arabs of
every variety and even some non-Arabs; everyone was welcome to exchange goods in Mecca
and the central shrine of that town welcomed the religious imagery connected with each of the
communities who came there to trade. At one point of his Meccan preaching career, Muhammad
seems to have received a revelation indicating that at least three goddesses, the so-called
“daughters of Allāh” (al-Lat, al-‘Uzza and Manat), prominent in certain locales of strategic
importance, might be venerated by Muslims on a subordinate level. The temptation to give
subordinate divine status to these goddesses soon passed and Muhammad recognized the
spuriousness of the verses he had supposedly received from God; these repudiated verses are
called “the satanic verses.”

Rushdie’s Mahound sounds very like a Bombay entrepreneur when he tells his closest
disciples that he has been “offered a deal” (107) by the faithless leadership of Jahilia, the novel’s
name for pre-Islamic Mecca. Mahound’s closest disciples discourage any compromise on monotheism, urging Mahound to consult with the angel Gibreel, the interlocutor of God. But in Farishta’s dream he himself is the angel Gibreel, and none too happy about his position: “Mahound comes to me for revelation, asking me to choose between monotheist and henotheist alternatives, and I’m just some idiot actor” (111). Rushdie’s Mahound finally makes the compromise on grounds somewhat parallel to the prophet Muhammad’s long opposition to the destruction of unwanted female infants in pre-Islamic Mecca: “In the old days he wanted to protect the baby daughters of Jahilia; why shouldn’t he take the daughters of Allah under his wing as well?” (121). Finally, however, Rushdie’s Mahound, like the historical Muhammad, repudiates the satanic verses and, persecuted by the Meccan elite, migrates from Jahilia to Yathrib, the oasis later renamed Medina. Gibreel, however, is left to suffer the wrath of the three spurned daughters of Allah, harpies none too happy about their demotion: “they fall upon him from the night sky . . . flapping around his head, clawing at his eyes, biting, whipping him with their hair, their wings” (128-129). In their revenge the demoted goddesses resemble some of the women who have bedeviled the life of Gibreel Farishta.

Much more could be said about the atheism of the main characters in The Satanic Verses, but it must also be added that their atheism reflects that of the author. In a 1999 article in the British daily, The Guardian, Rushdie wrote one of a series of letters to the six billionth human being estimated to have been born in October of that year. The letter suggests that no room for faith of any sort should be given. “As human knowledge has grown,” Rushdie writes, “it has also become plain that every religious story ever told about how we got here is quite simply wrong. This, finally, is what all religions have in common. They didn’t get it right.” Later on he asserts that “religion, even at its most sophisticated, essentially infantilises our ethical selves by setting
infallible moral Arbiters and irredeemably immoral Tempters above us: the eternal parents, good and bad, light and dark, of the supernatural realm.”³² In a 2002 interview with Irshad Manji, a believing Canadian Muslim of very liberal opinions, currently director of the Moral Courage Project at New York University, Rushdie admits that “I’m not a person of religious belief” and that “I have the religion of a flea.” When Manji went on to ask him if he found “anything redeeming about religious faith,” he admitted that “I can see it being valuable to other people, like a consolation in difficulty. For myself,” he continued, “I don’t feel the urge. There’s no hole in me that it needs to fill.”³³ There is not much room for dialogue with an atheist who says thing like that, and, alas, it must be admitted that Rushdie is not alone today in this absolute rejection of God. The flashy colors of Bollywood seem to bring him no intimations of the transcendent.

IV. Reflections from the Deck of a Sinking Ship

We have just passed the centenary of the sinking of the Titanic. Were I to find myself on the deck of a sinking ship with either Roth, Tóibín or Rushdie, what (briefly) could I say that I have learned from them? I would like them to say more, but the ship has struck an iceberg and we are beginning to sink. Furthermore, what (again, very briefly) would I like to say to them? The end is near and I have to be more succinct than this topic deserves.

First of all, what have I learned from the bleak vision in the late novels of Philip Roth? You can see Philip Roth on YouTube telling an interviewer that “When the whole world doesn’t believe in God, it will be a great place.”³⁴ The God in whom Marcus Messner puts no faith, the God whom Bucky Cantor simply despises, seems a very exalted Sovereign of the Universe, the God praised in the Kaddish. Roth quotes that great mourners’ prayer in part in Nemesis: “May
His great Name be blessed forever and ever . . . Blessed, praised, glorified, exalted, extolled, . . . mighty, upraised, and lauded be the Name of the Holy One, . . . Blessed is He.” For Bucky Cantor, listening to the recitation of the Kaddish at a child’s burial, it would be better to worship the sun as a god: “Better to sanctify and placate the unrefracted rays of Great Father Sun than to submit to a supreme being for whatever atrocious crime it pleases Him to perpetrate.”

The majesty of God—most commonly symbolized in the Jewish tradition by God’s unutterable Name—can leave the mourner feeling bereft. Not a few Holocaust survivors have claimed that they can no longer put their faith in God in the wake of Auschwitz. But is infinitely exalted majesty the only presentation of God in the tradition of ancient Israel that continues down to the present day in Judaism? Orthodox Jews sometimes seem less than totally familiar with the prophetic tradition and its presentation of a passionate God who suffers for and with his people. Hosea portrays God as a husband taking pity on his faithless spouse, the Northern Kingdom called in this context Ephraim: “I have had a change of heart,/ All My tenderness is stirred./ I will not act on My wrath,/ Will not turn to destroy Ephraim./ For I am God, not man,/ The Holy One in your midst;/ I will not come in fury” (Hosea 11:8-9). The extra-Biblical Jewish tradition depicts God suffering with Israel in its vicissitudes; it even goes so far as to portray God’s sympathy with the Egyptians drowned at the time of Exodus. In two different tractates of the Babylonian Talmud God is said to have rebuked angels who wished to sing the divine praises on that occasion: “My handiwork [the Egyptians] is drowning in the seas; would you utter song before me?” A passionate God, pitying both Israelites and Egyptians, still has no ultimately satisfying answers for those who suffer, but perhaps that passionate God can evoke some spark of compassion for God in us as well.
I must move on to Colm Tóibín, who has (happily) managed to get up on deck from steerage. I must admit to Tóibín that his aesthetic feeling for Catholic Christianity, or for Christian faith more generally, needs no defense, in my opinion. Even that anonymous narrator in a recent short story who says that he did “not believe in God” and did “not care much about the mysteries of the universe, unless they come to me in words, or in music maybe, or in a set of colours” leaves the door of faith, aesthetically perceived, slightly ajar. Undoubtedly Christian faith also entails stringent moral demands, but it is important not to underemphasize the aesthetic as a way of knowing God and reaching out to God in faith. The late Swiss theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar famously meditated on four transcendentals, four overarching ways of characterizing being in general. “That which is truly true,” Von Balthasar writes, “is also truly good and beautiful and one. A being appears, it has an epiphany: in that it is beautiful and makes us marvel.”

Pope Benedict XVI, a man with a deep and abiding appreciation for music and the arts more generally, in a 2011 allocution meditated in this vein: “Perhaps it has happened to you at one time or another—before a sculpture, a painting, a few verses of poetry or a piece of music—to have experienced a deep emotion, a sense of joy, to have perceived clearly, that is, that before you stood not only matter—a piece of marble or bronze, a painted canvas, an ensemble of letters or a combination of sounds—but something far greater, something that ‘speaks,’ something capable of touching the heart, of communicating a message, of elevating the soul.” There are many ways of recognizing the divine in a sublunary setting, and not every one of those ways is purely logical, in a mathematical understanding of logic, or purely rational, in a rationalistic understanding of reason. Blaise Pascal understood this very well when he wrote in his Pensées that “Le cœur a ses raisons que la raison ne connaît point.” That is a notoriously difficult
sentence to translate, but I offer this possibility: “The heart has its own types of reasoning that rationality can never understand.” Colm Tóibín can readily understand what Von Balthasar, Pope Benedict and Blaise Pascal intend.

The waters are rising to the main deck and I must get on to Salman Rushdie. I have to admit to him that he makes some very good points in his conversation with Irshad Manji, maintaining that all too many Muslims in modern times have fallen under the rigorous sway of Wahhabi-Deobandi-Salafi madrasas in south Asia, the Middle East and parts of Africa. Even in the state-supported Muslim schools of England, according to Rushdie, an atmosphere prevails which “in a way denies the reality of the world outside the school.”

What I have characterized as the Wahhabi-Deobandi-Salafi version of Islam originated in the eighteenth-century Arabian peninsula and south Asia as a reaction, at least in part, to Ottoman and Mughal decline and European colonial invasion. The rigorous vision of Islam as purely a religion of law with no room in it for elements of the Sufi or mystical tradition has done much to obscure the truth of God’s mercy and love so central to that religious tradition.

Before the Islamic tradition ever evolved legal traditions, the Qur’an proclaimed the absolute mercy of God at the center of its message. The basmala, the invocation “In the name of God, the Compassionate and Merciful One,” begins every sura of the Qur’an but one and precedes many activities in the Muslim world. That invocation gives us a key to what Islam can really say to people on a sinking ship. Both of the words pointing to God in the basmala, al-Rahman and al-Rahim, which I have translated as “Compassionate” and “Merciful,” derive from the same triconsonant root in Arabic, R-H-M. The former, al-Rahman, seems to have been a name for the supreme God presiding over a hierarchy of lesser gods in pre-Islamic south and central Arabia. Consequently, al-Rahman (“Compassionate”) as a term can only be used for
God, but *al-Rahim* (“Merciful”) can also be used to describe human beings. The root of both words connotes tenderness and points imagistically to the womb (*rahim* or *rihm*). Although some Arabs of the pre-Islamic period lived in societies characterized by matrilineal descent and affinity groups,⁴⁵ patrilineal social patterns prevailed, especially after the rise of Islam. To connect the mercy of God with feminine characteristics is to understand God’s perfection as including all that is most tender in created reality, including the generative and loving characteristics of mothers.

A famous hadith or quotation attributed to Muhammad narrates that he restrained a companion from engaging in battle precisely because his mother was still alive. That companion would not attain heaven by a martyr’s death but by filial devotion to his mother: “Then stay with her and look after her needs. Your heaven lies under her feet.”⁴⁶ My great shaykhah in the ways of Islamic mysticism, the late Annemarie Schimmel, used that very quotation from Muhammad on the memorial card for her mother when that good Lutheran woman went to her eternal reward.

The orchestra is playing “Nearer My God to Thee,” the violin players’ feet are getting wet and it is time to dive into the waves. There is much more that I would like to say on this topic, but I will leave the rest to my respondents.
NOTES


2 Critics have not been kind. For example, Kathryn Harrison writes in The New York Times Sunday Book Review: “A lazy work, ‘The Humbling’ lacks its author’s genius — all that would help us, as it has so many times before, to forgive him his prejudices and blind spots.” (New York edition: November 15, 2009, BR11.)

3 Winesburg College is a fictitious institution. But there is a real Winesburg, Ohio which gives its name to Sherwood Anderson’s lection of short stories with this title.

4 Philip Roth, Indignation (Boston/New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2008), 54. All further references to the text of this novel will be given in parentheses in the text.

5 Philip Roth, Nemesis (Boston/New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2010), 74. All further references to the text of this novel will be given in parentheses in the text.

6 See Job, chapters 38 and 39.

7 Ovid Metamorphoses IX.

8 Milton, Paradise Lost, bk. 1, line 76.


10 Ibid., 44.

11 Ibid., 43.

12 Ibid., 48. It was eventually amended with a very slight majority of votes in a 1995 referendum and went into effect in 1996.

13 Ibid.

14 Ibid.
Michael Böss, “‘Belonging without Belonging’: Colm Tóibín’s Dialogue with the Past,” *Estudios Irlandeses*, no. 0 (2005), 23.

Tóibín as quoted, ibid.


Ibid., 137.


Ibid., 4.

Francis Phillips in *CatholicHerald.co.uk* (9 September 2010).

*The Sign of the Cross*, 250.

Ibid.


This explains why Gibreel (“Giboo”) so often refers to Saladin (“Salad”) as “Spoon-O.”


The incident referred to, but with changed details, was an Air India Flight taking the Montreal-London-New Delhi route on 23 June 1985; the plane was blown up in Irish airspace and resulted in the death of all 329 people on board. The hijackers were Sikh militants based in Canada.
29 G. K. Chesterton uses this name for Muhammad in his decidedly Eurocentric poem, *Lepanto* (1915): “Mahound is in his paradise above the evening star.”

30 The abrogation (*naskh*) of these verses in the Qur’an and the substitution of other verses I have described in an earlier McGinley lecture as an example of divine critique and revision, and therefore prophetic critique and revision “The Prophetic Faith and the Critique of Tradition: Jewish, Christian and Muslim Perspectives,” Annual Fall McGinley Lecture, (Fall 2010; published in booklet form by Fordham University), 13-14.

31 “Ignorance” in Arabic, particularly applicable to pre-Islamic ignorance or paganism.

32 Salman Rushdie, “Imagine No Heaven” (October 15, 1999), available online at www.guardian.co.uk.


34 See, for this clip, among other places, www.atheistmedia.com (October 26, 2002).

35 *Nemesis*, 76.

36 Ibid., 75.


38 See *Tractate Sanhedrin* 39B and also *Tractate Megillah* 10B.

39 See note 19 above.


43 See interview with Irshad Manji cited above in note 32.


46 This hadith of the Prophet can be found in Ahmad al-Nas’i (d. 303 A.H./916 C.E.), *Sunan al-Sughra*. 