

GRACE IN THE ARTS:

ANNIE DILLARD: MISTAKEN MYSTIC?

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I. INTRODUCTION

When Annie Dillard won a Pulitzer Prize in 1974 for her book, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, many Evangelical Christians thought they had discovered a kindred spirit. However, “Dillard has called herself a Christian mystic whose audience is primarily agnostic nonbelievers, [and] she considers herself an artist rather than a theologian or exegete.”¹ This is both her strength and weakness, for we are blessed by the artistry, but cursed by the ambiguity.

The principal problem an Evangelical Christian has with Annie Dillard’s publications is that instead of inching toward greater assured truth as revealed in Scripture, she focuses instead on the mystical aspects of Christianity. Particularly in regard to what is unrevealed, unknowable, or uncertain about the Bible, God, Christ, sin, and salvation.

II. A BRIEF BIOGRAPHY

Annie Dillard grew up in Pittsburgh, PA with the name Meta Ann Doak. Annie’s growing-up years are autobiographically recorded in *An American Childhood* and Annie’s writing reveals the influence of both parents. Her father was a lapsed Presbyterian, and her mother’s speech was “endlessly interesting.”²

In the religious realm, three situations in her younger years are noteworthy. The first is her brushes with the Catholic Church. She spoke (through her childhood thought-grid) of “gibberish” which the Catholic

¹ Linda L. Smith, *Annie Dillard* (New York: Twayne, 1991), 1.

² Annie Dillard, *Three by Annie Dillard* (New York: Harper Collins, 1990), 308.

school children “had to believe.”³ Through the filter of her Protestant schoolmates, Dillard got the notion that these faithless children “wrote down [in their workbooks] whatever the Pope said.”⁴ “Her perception was that the [teaching] nuns seemed to be kept in St. Bede’s [School] as in a prison.”⁵ Annie’s mother tried to disabuse the child of some of her stereotypical notions by taking her out and having the “black phalanx” of nuns say hello to her daughter.⁶ “No one knew what Mass might be; my parents shuddered to think.”⁷ Nevertheless, Dillard described her childhood Presbyterian church as “anti-Catholic.” Oddly enough, the adult Dillard ended up becoming part of the Catholic Church in 1988 at age 43.⁸

A second formidable factor in her younger years were summer Bible camps where she was required to memorize Bible chapters, sing hymns, and attend chapel.⁹ As a result of camp, Presbyterian Sunday school, and Thursday’s Bible-as-literature classes at school, Dillard “had miles of Bible in memory.”¹⁰ Such Bible passages and allusions spout up like underground geysers erupting later in her adult writings.

A third vignette involves her teenage rebellion and church dropout. During her teenage years she was suspended from school and wound up in juvenile court for involvement in drag racing. During this period she announced she was quitting the church and wrote the minister a letter. The assistant pastor, Dr. James H. Blackwood, met with the teenager and offered her some of C. S. Lewis’ writings (which the precocious Dillard found inadequate on the problem of pain).¹¹ Her church dropout lasted one month.

Dillard graduated from Hollins College in Virginia with a B.A. (1967) and M.A. (1968) in English literature. She married her creative writing professor while she was an undergraduate at Hollins, but got

³ Ibid., 303.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid., 304

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid., 310-11.

⁸ Pamela A. Smith, “The Ecotheology of Annie Dillard: A Study in Ambivalence” *Cross Currents* 45 (Fall 1995), 341.

⁹ Philip Yancey, “A Face Aflame,” *Christianity Today*, May 6, 1978, 14. See also, Dillard, *Three by Annie Dillard*, 410.

¹⁰ Dillard, *Three by Annie Dillard*, 411.

¹¹ Ibid., 511-13.

divorced ten years later in 1975—the same year in which she received her Pulitzer Prize (at age 30). Her second marriage was also to a college professor. They lived together for several years before marrying. She married for a third time in 1988.

Dillard is most widely recognized for her Pulitzer-winning *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, but she wrote numerous other books as well. *Holy the Firm* is the most orthodox, while *For the Time Being* is her most troubling book (for an Evangelical Christian), since it takes a comparative religion approach to knowing about spiritual truth. *An American Childhood* offers a partial autobiography while *The Living* narrates pioneer adventures of families settling in the Pacific Northwest.

Dillard issued two volumes related to her authorial craft, namely, *Living by Fiction* and *The Writing Life*. Her *Encounters with Chinese Writers* collects her reminiscences and insights from the two-way cultural exchange she engaged in at home and abroad. Dillard also published two slender volumes of poetry: *Tickets for a Prayer Wheel* and *Mornings Like This*.

III. DILLARD'S THEOLOGY

A. THE BIBLE: JUST ANOTHER RELIGIOUS BOOK

Annie Dillard's writing *is* very impressive. Frederick Buechner, himself a similarly gifted writer much relished by Evangelicals, said: "For sustained intensity [Dillard's] style is not easily matched anywhere in contemporary writing."¹² Furthermore, Dillard demonstrates a high degree of familiarity with the biblical text. For example, her book *Holy the Firm* borrows the tripartite pattern of (1) creation, (2) fall, and (3) redemption for a framework.¹³ Also Eugene Peterson tabulated seventeen allusions to and three quotations from the Bible in her *Teaching a Stone to Talk*.¹⁴ How many seminarians would have sought to make a point from the OT wave offering (as Dillard does)? It is rare for her to make a factual error with reference to the Bible.

To the knowledgeable, Evangelical, Christian reader, however, the problem lies not in Dillard's insightful usage or poetic license, but in her

¹² Buechner, cited in Smith, *Annie Dillard*, 83.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 74.

¹⁴ Eugene Peterson, "Annie Dillard: With Her Eyes Open," *Theology Today* (July 1986), 184.

more liberal approach to God's Word. She refers to "the Adam and Eve of legend,"¹⁵ and thinks the book of Genesis was not written by Moses, but was compiled by various men in the fifth century B.C.¹⁶ These are typical liberal opinions about Genesis.

Regarding the inspiration of Scripture, Dillard states that "God wrote no scripture, neither chapter nor verse. It is foolish to blame...Him for his admirers' claims, superstitious or otherwise."¹⁷ While few Evangelicals believe in a mechanical view of inspiration, it sounds like Dillard is denying that God is the ultimate Author behind the human writers of the Bible. If so, orthodox Christians have a bone to pick with her theology.

Because of Annie Dillard's deficient perspective on Scripture, she frequently speaks as if God were silent (or raises the question about God's silence). In *Teaching a Stone to Talk*, Dillard declares: "We doused the burning bush and cannot rekindle it," with the aftereffect that God is "keeping mum."¹⁸ Later in the same book she asserts twice: "The silence is all there is."¹⁹ Earlier in the same volume she speaks of trying "to raise a peep out of anything that isn't us" and "pray[ing] till we're blue."²⁰

Dillard also confused general revelation (in nature) with special revelation (in Scripture). As a literary scientist, Dillard explores the realm of nature in great detail, only to raise the question of meaninglessness. Is God speaking in creation? In *Living by Fiction* she raises the issue:

Who will tell us the meaning of the raw universe? By the raw universe I mean here all that we experience, all things cultural and natural, all of the universe that is known, given, made, and changing: "the world, and they that dwell therein."²¹

As Dillard engages in her Thoreau, back-to-nature, re-enactment outdoors in Virginia (in *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*) she decides: "Revelation is a study in stalking. Pass the nets on the right side of the ship and ye shall

¹⁵ Ibid., 60.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid., 86.

¹⁸ Dillard, *Teaching a Stone to Talk* (New York: Harper Collins, 1988), 88.

¹⁹ Ibid., 90, 94.

²⁰ Ibid., 89.

²¹ Annie Dillard, *Living by Fiction* (New York: Harper & Row, 1982), 145.

find.”²² In her mind, “revelation” is evidently equatable with “illumination” or “insight.”

In this regard Dillard uses a wonderful illustration: “Nature is like one of those line drawings of a tree that are puzzles for children: Can you find hidden in the leaves a duck, a house, a boy, a bucket, a zebra, and a boot?”²³ Yet Linda Smith deduces from Dillard that “a deity exists and that his nature can be discerned in his creation.”²⁴

Dillard is right that some truth about God may be deduced from the natural world (Rom 1:20). In fact, Linda Smith claims that Dillard’s assumption is “that God’s grace is revealed in the physical world in the manifestation of nature, a basic tenet of Christianity.”²⁵ The problem is, as Dillard all too well recognizes, that Lord Alfred Tennyson’s dictum about nature being “red in tooth and claw” is all too prevalent in the out-of-doors-world. Since this is so, what does it say about God?

In Philip Yancey’s 1978 interview with Annie Dillard, she said: “I approached the whole chaos of nature as if it were God’s book.” Yancey must have felt uncomfortable with this combined statement for he rejoined: “But only God can tell you about God. Nature merely tells you about nature. What if something you learned from nature contradicted Scripture?”²⁶

Oddly enough, Annie Dillard pinpointed the principal problem concerning natural revelation as well as anyone has. She wrote: “Like a blind man at the ball game, I need a radio.”²⁷ However, she never seemed to recognize that the Bible *is* the radio. Natural revelation must be subject to special revelation. The world of God must be deciphered by means of the written Word of God. Unless the Bible becomes our lighthouse guide, we are left to flounder at sea (among the anarchy of opinions), and there are treacherous, jagged rocks along the shore awaiting our fragile ships. Annie’s lack of dependence upon Scripture led her to some frightful ideas about God.

²² Dillard, *Three by Annie Dillard*, 181.

²³ *Ibid.*, 181.

²⁴ Smith, *Annie Dillard*, 31.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 19.

²⁶ Yancey, “A Face Aflame,” 17.

²⁷ Dillard, *Three by Annie Dillard*, 37.

B. GOD: UNCARING OGRE

1. *The Agnostic Annie*

In an interview in 1978 Dillard declared: “I don’t know anything about God, any more than anybody else does...I’m just writing...to turn your attention to God.”²⁸ Again, in *For the Time Being* she reiterated: “I don’t know beans about God.”²⁹ In reference to her favorite (or most-quoted) modern thinker (Teilhard de Chardin), Dillard quotes him (without any critique) as saying, “I feel no special assurance of the existence of Christ.”³⁰ What the paradox-loving Teilhard calls the “shadows of faith,” she calls “doubt,” for faith “is not assenting intellectually to a series of doctrinal propositions; it is living in conscious and rededicated relationship to God,” although “the temptation to profess creeds with uncrossed fingers is strong.”³¹ Nevertheless, Dillard can write that “the mind wants to know all the world, and all eternity, and God.”³²

2. *God’s Ogrish Aspect*

One of Dillard’s central concerns is with the seeming callousness or cruelty of God. She stated to Philip Yancey: “When I worked on *Holy the Firm* and [a] plane went down [leaving a girl terribly burned], I thought, ‘Oh no, God is making me write about this damn problem of pain again.’”³³ The sentence supplies us with certain presuppositions about her view of writing and about God when she deduces from the current catastrophe that “God is making” her write about the problem of pain.

The horrors viewed within nature in *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* furnish Dillard with the “aspect of God...that challenges the narrator’s view of a benevolent deity.”³⁴ *For the Time Being* opens with elaborate detail from a photographic textbook on human beings who would be popularly described as freaks—humans with grotesque appearances due to birth defects. She also vividly describes how the Romans flayed the skin off of

²⁸ Smith, *Annie Dillard*, 82.

²⁹ Annie Dillard, *For the Time Being* (New York: Random House, 1999), 169.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 145.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 146.

³² Dillard, *Teaching a Stone to Talk*, 24.

³³ Yancey, “A Face Aflame,” 17.

³⁴ Smith, *Annie Dillard*, 29.

the eighty-five-year-old Rabbi Akira with a curry comb.³⁵ The reader is then treated to numerous statistics on millions of people tortured and killed by various tyrants. For example, in Communist China the toll numbered 72 million.³⁶

Later, Dillard writes:

Many times in Christian churches I have heard the pastor say to God, ‘All your actions show your wisdom and love.’ Each time, I reach in vain for the courage to rise and shout, ‘That’s a lie!’—just to put things on a solid footing.³⁷

Dillard cries out, “God, look at what you’ve done,...look at the...cruelty, the long damned waste! Can it possibly, ludicrously, be for *this...that...with my innocent kind I play softball all spring?*”³⁸ Here she sounds somewhat like Mark Twain—with humans being “innocent” while God becomes the ogre. Her conclusion in *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* is that the final understanding about God is that we are “dealing with a maniac.”³⁹ In *Holy the Firm* “we reel out love’s long line alone toward a God less lovable than a grasshead, who treats us less well than we treat our lawns.”⁴⁰ Similarly, she writes that “Only some deeply grounded and fully paradoxical view of God can make sense of the notion that God knows and loves each of the 5.9 billion of us.”⁴¹ So to Dillard, God is uncaring and unloving toward most of humanity. Dillard’s view of a loveless God is further hampered by her view of Christ.

C. CHRIST: GOD-MAN

Dillard clearly believed that God became, in some fashion, a man. In *For the Time Being* Dillard relates her trip to the Holy Land and visiting the Church of the Nativity. She writes of Bethlehem: “Here, just here... two thousand years of Christianity began...where God emptied himself into man.”⁴²

³⁵ Dillard, *For the Time Being*, 26.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 58.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ Dillard, *Three by Annie Dillard*, 254.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 259.

⁴⁰ Annie Dillard, *Holy the Firm* (New York: Harper & Row, 1977), 46.

⁴¹ Dillard, *Three by Annie Dillard*, 209.

⁴² Dillard, *For the Time Being*, 79.

In *Tickets for a Prayer Wheel* the narrator apprizes us “that God, in the form of Christ, really did come to earth” and die.⁴³ Linda Smith assumes that “Dillard’s identification of God with man is...embodied...literally in the Christian doctrine of the dual nature of Christ.”⁴⁴

However, in spite of these rather orthodox views, Dillard departs from mainstream Christianity by “seeing God in all humankind, not just in Christ.”⁴⁵ Therefore, Christ cannot be the embodiment of God’s love and grace to a sinful humanity. And indeed, Dillard sees Christ’s life and death as little more than a foolish waste. In *Holy the Firm* she asks, “Did Christ descend once and for all to no purpose, in a kind of divine and kenotic suicide, or ascend once and for all, pulling his cross up after him like a rope ladder after him?”⁴⁶ So Christ is not really the embodiment of God’s love, but simply another example of how God doesn’t know what He’s doing.

D. SIN: INHERENT IN ALL

If God is a foolish ogre, and Christ’s life and death was a waste, then it is no surprise that Dillard seems to see God as the root cause of sin. She writes, “The world has signed a contract with the devil; it had to... The word came into being with the signing of the contract. ...Creation itself was the fall.”⁴⁷

Probably, this view of God and creation is due to her emphasis on creation as the primary source of revelation. She writes: “That something is everywhere and always amiss is part of the very stuff of creation.”⁴⁸ By extrapolating from Tennyson’s “nature red in tooth and claw” (with its created parasites and predators), Dillard informs the reader: “The world is festering with suppurating sores. ...The world is...a hungry old man, fatigued and broken past mending.”⁴⁹ This is not precisely the biblical portrait of universalized sin, but it does clearly indicate that we don’t live in Paradise.

However, it seems that although she talks about sin and the fallenness of all humanity, she does not seem to view sin as moral failure, but

⁴³ Smith, Annie Dillard, 63.

⁴⁴ Ibid,

⁴⁵ Ibid., 100.

⁴⁶ Dillard, Annie Dillard, 100.

⁴⁷ Dillard, *Three* by Annie Dillard, 176, 209.

⁴⁸ Dillard, *For the Time Being*, 139.

⁴⁹ Dillard, *Three* by Annie Dillard, 229.

as a result of evolution. Dillard writes, "It need not craze us...to know we are evolving, like other living forms, according to physical processes."⁵⁰ Then she refers to Teilhard's appraisal that such evolutionary winnowing is responsible for distress and death. Her conclusion is that "It is hard to find a more inarguable explanation for the physical catastrophe and the sufferings we endure at chance from the material world."⁵¹ Evolution, evidently, is Dillard's original ogre, and the negative things that are experienced in life are a result of the changes that occur through the evolutionary process.

Therefore, Annie Dillard does not seem to come close to a full-orbed biblical idea on the subject of sin. So if Dillard views God as a foolish ogre, Christ as a wasted life, and sin as a part of the theistic evolutionary process, it is no surprise that her view of salvation is warped as well.

E. SALVATION: AN AWARENESS OF GOD

In her 1978 interview with Philip Yancey, Annie Dillard announced that her intended audience in her writing was "the skeptic, the agnostic, not the Christian. Just getting the agnostic to acknowledge the supernatural is a major task."⁵² Therefore, her goal is not to explain how a person can get to heaven or into a right relationship with God, but simply to raise the possibility that the supernatural exists. She wants to "lead the reader to the awareness of God."⁵³

This is an important step in the evangelistic process, but the question must be raised whether Dillard's writings actually drew agnostics toward God. Is the agnostic likely to come away from reading Dillard with a warmer, attracting conception of God? Is the skeptic likely to have intellectual difficulties or objections resolved by reading Dillard? In this dark world has Dillard sent up flares that will point people toward the path to salvation? Some think so, since Linda Smith points out that Dillard annually received numerous letters from readers who were seeking spiritual instruction.⁵⁴

But while Dillard does raise some good questions, her writing is short on answers. For example, in *Tickets for a Prayer Wheel*, the strategic question is raised (in a Thoreau quote): "With all your science can

⁵⁰ Dillard, *For the Time Being* 87.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Yancey, "A Face Aflame," 15.

⁵³ Smith, *Annie Dillard*, 36.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 37.

you tell me how it is, and whence it is, that light comes into the soul?"⁵⁵ But no answer is ever provided on how light does come into the soul. It would have been helpful if she had referenced, or at least pointed her readers in the direction of the Bible as a source for answers to such questions. Instead, the reader is left with much redemption language that cannot be labeled as distinctively Christian.

Dillard does employ standard scriptural soteriological language from time to time. Linda Smith claims that Dillard brings "the reassurance that God's response to man's absurdity is...love and acceptance."⁵⁶ Smith also comments upon *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* that, "In all mystical traditions death is the necessary condition for mystical regeneration and rebirth."⁵⁷ She quotes a Jewish evening prayer which says, "God, being merciful, grants atonement for sin and does not destroy."⁵⁸ Dillard sounds like Anselm in saying that "faith is the requisite of knowledge."⁵⁹ This is just a sampling of Dillard's salvation language (atonement, redemption, acceptance, faith, etc.).

Dillard also employs terminology explicitly related to the matter of *grace*. She relates how, as a child, she would hide a penny on the sidewalk, leaving a note close by which read: "SURPRISE AHEAD" or "MONEY THIS WAY." The passer-by might "receive in this way, regardless of merit, a free gift from the universe."⁶⁰ Here is language from the heartland of Protestantism. However, she employs the terms illustratively not of supernatural recreation but of bountiful original creation, saying, "The world is fairly studded and strewn with pennies cast broadside from a generous hand."⁶¹ So Dillard writes of the bounty seen around Pilgrim Creek: "I never merited this grace, that when I face upstream I see the light on the water careening toward me, inevitably, freely, down a graded series of terraces like the balanced winged platforms on an infinite, inexhaustible font."⁶² Such beauty and bounty makes the Christian heart leap with gratitude. "I have gluttoned on rich-

⁵⁵ Ibid., 63.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 100.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 40.

⁵⁸ Dillard, *For the Time Being*, 55.

⁵⁹ Dillard, *Living by Fiction*, 168.

⁶⁰ Dillard, *Three by Annie Dillard*, 21.

⁶¹ Ibid., 22.

⁶² Smith, *Annie Dillard*, 19.

ness” in creation, she tells us in her naturalist’s reveries.⁶³ God’s creating is “God’s spendthrift and never-ending jubilee.”⁶⁴ An underlying spiritual unity to this universe Dillard views (says Linda Smith) “as the grace of salvation.”⁶⁵ One is left to wonder why Annie Dillard, who employs such grace-language with reference to other matters, is so reserved about using similar language with reference to eternal life.

Linda Smith writes of Dillard that “If one thing is clear in *Teaching a Stone to Talk*, it is that the salvation of the individual requires involvement with and commitment to other people. ...More than the acceptance of any religious dogma, it is involvement with others that creates man’s salvation”⁶⁶ So “relationships with people...perhaps even constitute relationship with God.”⁶⁷ Smith also concludes that “Dillard intimates that humankind must somehow lift itself by its own bootstraps and...create its own meaning.”⁶⁸ This is hardly consonant with salvation by grace through faith in Christ.

In fact, in *apropos* Roman Catholic fashion Dillard quotes: “‘All depends on the preponderance of good deeds,’ Rabbi Akiva had said. The weight of good deeds bears down on the balance scales. Paul Tillich also held this view.”⁶⁹ Another rabbi (quoted by Dillard) declares: “It is the specific mission of the Jew to free the entrapped holy sparks from the grip of the forces of evil by means of Torah study and prayer.”⁷⁰ Are such adulations of works-salvation likely to aid the agnostic in a God-search?

The closest Dillard comes to conveying a clear concept of NT salvation is when she (benignly) ridicules a local Virginia fundamentalist family. This family has an “8-foot aluminum cross” in front of their house which reads: “CHRIST THE LORD IS OUR SALVATION.”⁷¹ The boy in the family feels pressured to ask Dillard, “Do you know the Lord as your personal Savior?” To this she rejoins: “Not only that; I know your mother.” The mother also asks her, “Do you know the Lord

⁶³ Dillard, *Three by Annie Dillard*, 249.

⁶⁴ Dillard, *Living by Fiction*, 61.

⁶⁵ Smith, *Annie Dillard*, 60.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 98, 100.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 96.

⁶⁹ Dillard, *For the Time Being*, 26.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 139.

⁷¹ Dillard, *Teaching a Stone to Talk*, 97.

as your personal Savior?" Dillard surmises that the woman must feel she has to ask everyone this question. Dillard responds, "She was stunned that I knew the Lord, and clearly uncertain whether we were referring to the same third party."⁷² The family drove 120 miles to attend Jerry Falwell's church, and the woman supplied Annie Dillard with tracts. In response to this, Dillard says (if she were reincarnated in a later life) she'd rather return as a palo santo tree "so that I could be...a perfect witness...mute."⁷³

Two observations on this subject are worthwhile. First, Dillard's reaction is part and parcel of her own cultural, anti-lowbrow mentality. For example, she spent a year "attending Mass at [a] Catholic church" and she records "how shockingly often have I exhausted myself in church from the effort to keep from laughing."⁷⁴ In the same book she acknowledges: "I would rather...undergo the famous dark night of the soul than encounter the dread hootenany..."⁷⁵ She can't help recording that at a baby baptism, the infant wore red socks and blue tennis shoes.⁷⁶

Secondly, her view of "mute" witness is perfectly in line with her view of God's resounding silence (as deduced by her from nature and catastrophes). In her first blockbuster book Dillard remembers reading "about an Eskimo hunter who asked the local missionary priest, 'If I did not know about God and sin, would I go to hell?' 'No,' said the priest, 'not if you did not know.' 'Then why,' asked the Eskimo earnestly, 'did you tell me?'"⁷⁷ On the basis of Romans 1-3 the priest's answer is questionable. At any rate it is one of the rare instances where Dillard mentions the theological concept of "hell."

To sum up, then, Annie Dillard proclaims the agnostic to be her target reader. And while she raises good questions to get the agnostic thinking, she does little to point the agnostic in the right direction. To the contrary, she often lays roadblocks instead. She offers glints of a hidden Maker and creation's beauty, yet she states: "one of the few things we know about the Absolute is that it is relatively inaccessible."⁷⁸ If we're

⁷² Ibid., 97-98.

⁷³ Ibid., 75.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 37-38.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 51.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 53.

⁷⁷ Dillard, *Three by Annie Dillard*, 120-121.

⁷⁸ Dillard, *Teaching a Stone to Talk*, 37.

talking about God (as “the Absolute”), then she has misdirected the reader, for God is unquestionably accessible through faith in His Son (John 5:37-40; 7:28-38; 14:6; Heb 11:6). Admittedly she is not writing specifically about eternal life, but she raises the question: “Is history purposeful? Is the universe of matter significant?” Her answer is far from an orthodox Christian one: “I am sorry; I do not know.”⁷⁹

IV. CONCLUSION

Liberal Harvard NT critic Kirsopp Lake once criticized Westcott and Hort’s textual theory of the NT as a “failure, though a splendid one.” A similar response flashes through the orthodox Christian analyst’s mind upon reading Annie Dillard’s brilliant poetic prose. Ingenious, full of flair, provocative—all these descriptive adjectives are apt descriptions for much of Dillard’s writing.

However, the orthodox Christian is saddened by Dillard’s non-acceptance of fully inspired Scripture and (barely) theistic evolution. Though various other Christian writers have also embraced similar views, for the most part, these other writers held fairly orthodox views concerning God, Christ, and salvation. Here is where Annie Dillard moves further to the left of, say, C. S. Lewis or G. K. Chesterton. She seems content to pass along any and all religious views (except more spacey New Age ones) without ever offering an evaluative adjective or tell-tale tidbit as to where she stands. Writers, such as Lewis or Chesterton, in many theological areas offer little that is objectionable. But with Dillard the orthodox analyst is left either shaking one’s head in bewilderment or sensing something positively negative in her provocative silence and transcriptions of various religious traditions.

There is nothing wrong in learning valued lessons from Communists, Hasids, Jehovah’s Witnesses, or whoever—if the lesson or experience is unobjectionable from a biblical standpoint. However, if the reader is left with the understanding of an ogriish orientation to God or a vague notion that all religions are pretty much acceptable, then this can hardly be labeled a biblical or Christian orientation.

So often the reader is left either in the regions of the murky or in the bog of the positively erroneous (if we take Scripture as our standard).

⁷⁹ Dillard, *Living by Fiction*, 185.

With sad regret the orthodox Christian feels that Annie Dillard falls into the category of 2 Tim 3:7 (KJV): “Ever learning, and never able to come to the knowledge of [biblical] truth.”