

*The Swanson Lectures in Spirituality*  
Sponsored by the Chair of Christian Thought

***Of Holy Men and Holy Wars:  
John Bunyan Reads Bush and Bin Laden***

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Reading can make you holy. It is a large claim, but I will argue this evening that John Bunyan, author of *The Pilgrim's Progress* and model of a fully reformed protestant preacher, believed it to be true. What is more, Bunyan offered his own imaginative fictions to the English people at a time when political tensions ran high, and many of his kinsmen were devising more direct and violent paths toward personal and civic reform. It was bold to suggest that reading, at best a quiet act of personal piety, might be an appropriate response to the grand, dangerous events of his day. It was stranger yet to suggest that imaginative fiction might serve as fit material for serious reflection.

Tonight, I would like to begin by sketching the political circumstances in which Bunyan produced his major works of imaginative fiction. In many important ways they are circumstances very much like our own. Then, as now, rumours of terror abounded. God was invoked as madmen plotted violent acts and as heads of state responded in kind. The battle between good and evil was writ large over the politics of the day, and the many were called to make sense of the staggering and often incomprehensible actions of the few.

Once we have established the context of Bunyan's writing, I will then introduce you to the theological concept of *psychomachia*, or, as it was anglicized, psychomachy, which literally translates to mean Holy War, -- the battle of the mind and the soul. This concept was vogue in

Bunyan's day, and it explains how people become holy. By the word "holy," Bunyan would have meant "dedicated to God, and set apart for his purposes." In that word we should also hear its etymological link to its root word in Old English: *halig*,<sup>1</sup> which means to be whole. In the following discussion I will show how Bunyan believed this process of sanctification, or change toward holiness, could be harnessed by books and made effective for his readers.

Finally, in an indulgent flourish of my own imagination, I will suggest how John Bunyan might read the events of our day. In his wit and his wisdom, Bunyan might offer words of consolation and warning to George W. Bush and Osama Bin Laden, and words of encouragement to the rest of us: "if we seek true reform," the preacher might say, "the site and nature of the battle must be changed. External violence must be replaced by internal vigilance. Godly nations can be built with nothing other than godly people. True holy war, the greater Jihad, happens within the individual hearts and minds of believers, and reading can help make it happen."

John Bunyan wrote his four major works of literary fiction between 1675 and 1684, during an era when terror hung like a dense fog over the English people. *The Pilgrim's Progress*, published in 1678, was written while Bunyan was in prison; *The Life and Death of Mr. Badman*, was published in 1680; *The Holy War*, followed in 1682; and, finally, *The Pilgrim's Progress, Part Two* was published in 1684. No doubt you can recall some of the characters and events that make up England's history at this time, but let me refresh your memory about the specifics. England endured a civil war at the mid-part of the century, a war in which Bunyan participated. He was sixteen when he joined the Cromwellian army to wage war against King Charles I and his royalist troops. The Cromwellian forces eventually won, at least in the short term. They

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<sup>1</sup> This definition as per Oxford English Dictionary.

chopped the head off of King Charles I. Cromwell formed a Protectorate, and he and his forces ruled without a King for the next eleven years.

Once the blood had cooled after those furious battles to establish power, however, Cromwell discovered to his frustration that there was little consensus about how to proceed. He lived to experience the prophetic words Christ spoke in the garden of Gethsemane: “those who take up the sword, by the sword must die.”<sup>2</sup> Cromwell was reduced to unspeakable violence in his bid to keep the ground he won for his reformed Protestant state, both in Britain and in Ireland.

Cromwell himself escaped a violent death, but when death came naturally in 1658 it was followed within two short years by the dissolution of most he had achieved. A new king was restored to his throne in 1660, and Charles II was less inclined to Protestant reforms than even his father had been.

In the years following, tensions continued. Charles II was rumoured to have Catholic sympathies. As the Head of the Church of England, however, he had to keep those sympathies well hidden, especially from the more reformed-minded branches of his own government. There was, of course, no division between church and state. The governing forces were besieged from both sides: on the left, they were kept busy monitoring the practices of the large numbers of sometimes-violent non-conformists. On the right, they felt the threat of Catholicism within the Royal family itself and from abroad, especially from France. It helps to remember that at this point in British history the Pope was commonly depicted as the Anti-Christ, and Catholicism was anathema. Most Britons understood Catholics to be a dangerous and violent lot, although many knew neighbours and friends who professed this faith. Many Britons shared similar fears about

the dissenting Protestant communities. The problem was that you could not always tell the moderates from the radicals. Catholics were proven to be behind the gunpowder plot of 1625, and were accused, falsely, of having started the Great Fire of London in 1660. In the wake of the utterly bogus accusations in 1678 by Titus Oates and Israel Tonge, no horror was beyond imagination. Everywhere, comments Bunyan, were “fears of cutting of throats, of being burned in our beds, and of seeing our children dashed to pieces before our eyes.”<sup>3</sup>

The terror provoked by madmen begat an equally violent reaction from the heads of State. Traitors were hung. The disobedient were thrown in jail. Civil liberties were restricted and curtailed on all sides. John Bunyan ranked among the disobedient, and suffered accordingly. He was arrested on November 12, 1660 for failing to show up for the Divine Service at the state sanctioned church and for being “an upholder” of “unlawful meetings and conventicles.”<sup>4</sup> In other words, he was preacher, and he persisted in holding church services that were not sanctioned by the government. He stayed in prison this first time for 12 years. He was back in prison again for a six-month stretch in 1675, and it was then that he wrote *The Pilgrim’s Progress*. Although he did not end up in prison a third time, he wrote his remaining three literary fictions and lived out the final 13 years of his life under the looming threat of incarceration.

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<sup>2</sup> See Matthew 5:43-48.

<sup>3</sup> John Bunyan, *Israel’s Hope Encouraged* in *John Bunyan: Miscellaneous Works, volume XIII*, ed. W.R. Owens (Oxford: The Clarendon University Press, 1994), 21. The references in this discussion point you to the most recent and authoritative editions of Bunyan’s works. These volumes are available in most university libraries. There are, however, several websites that offer full texts of all of Bunyan’s work from an earlier series edited by George Offor. See, for example, <http://johnbunyan.org/>

<sup>4</sup> See *A Relation of the Imprisonment of Mr. John Bunyan* for Bunyan’s own story about his first arrest. This document is included in the Clarendon edition of Bunyan’s works in the volume edited by Roger Sharrock and entitled *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1962).

In Bunyan's day, as in our own, the battle for good and evil was no mere theological abstraction. All sides whether Catholic, Church of England or non-conformist, claimed that God fought for them. Representatives from all sides proved time and again that they were willing both to die and to kill in order to see their particular understanding shape the nation's agenda. And while few on any side ever participated directly in the violence, the tension and the stress affected everyone. John Bunyan wrote directly into this situation. He wrote volumes of sermons, preaching and teaching on significant points of theology and practice. He also wrote imaginative fiction wherein his doctrines were clothed in pleasing fictions, and readers were encouraged to "find the Grace that in them be."<sup>5</sup> How could he justify using such "dark and cloudy" words to speak about such important matters? How did he imagine that reading, and especially reading fictional stories, could constitute appropriate action in times such as these? The answer lies in part in a theological concept called psychomachy.

The term psychomachy derives from the Latin word *psychomachia*, which, in turn comes from the Greek words meaning battle of the soul and spirit. The name *psychomachia* is most memorably applied to the title of the very first sustained allegory, a Latin work by a fourth-century poet named Prudentius. The *Psychomachia* chronicles the battles of personified virtues and vices that fight to the death in a series of loosely connected duels. The story traces the progress of a soul from a first encounter with faith toward a full conversion. Through the use of the allegorical mode, Prudentius manages to render the invisible tensions of the human heart and mind as concrete, tangible forms. In doing so, he is merely expanding upon the allegorical scheme that St. Paul uses in the sixth chapter of his letter to the Ephesians where he warns the

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<sup>5</sup> John Bunyan. "Apology to the Reader" in *The Pilgrim's Progress, Part One*, ed. James Blanton Warey and Roger Sharrock (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1967), 4. All subsequent references to this text will be made from this edition, and the title will be abbreviated to PPI.

faithful to put on “the full armour of God.” By expanding the allegory about a battle between virtue and vice, Prudentius’s story realises in fictional form a theory about how spiritual growth happens, a theory so compelling and ubiquitous that it becomes a habit of mind that is traceable throughout early English literature. Before the advent of a secular understanding of human psychology, all operations of the human mind are understood in theological terms. Madness is often explained by the possession of an evil spirit. Likewise, mental uncertainties and moral dilemmas were taken to be the result of promptings from forces of good and evil. In brief, cosmic wars between good and evil were believed to work themselves out quite literally within people’s hearts and minds. Good angels and bad angels both vie for supremacy, whispering words of advice to their human hosts who have to decide between them. Which voice they choose decides the immediate fate of their souls: a step toward virtue is taken when the good angel holds sway; a step toward vice is made when evil counsel is followed.

Early Renaissance plays, including Shakespeare’s *Richard III* and Marlowe’s *Dr. Faustus*, provide solid evidence that this theory about how human morality develops was undergoing a change in the mid-to-late Renaissance period. The solemn seriousness of its treatment in earlier literary works begins to be replaced in popular literature by more comic and less theologically rigorous developments of the theme. Concurrently, as the continental winds of protestant reform begin to blow over the English isle, however, the more serious theological understanding of psychomachy is revived. By the mid 1500’s the first serious English tracts on spiritual warfare begin to emerge. Before long, reformers of all stripes begin to resurrect a more theologically sound version of the idea. In fact, the Oxford English Dictionary records the first use of the English word psychomachy – where the “ia” of the Latin ending is exchanged for a “y” –in 1629. The anglicized version of the word comes into use as popular appetite for the concept grows.

John Downname's *The Christian Warfare*<sup>6</sup> is among the earliest of these works to experience significant popularity. The first part of the treatise is published in 1604. The second, third and fourth parts are published in 1611, 1613, and 1618 respectively. Many of these volumes continue to be reprinted until 1634, and in the meantime, many other writers enter the field. Volumes by William Gurnall, William Gouge and Richard Sibbes<sup>7</sup> are among the most popular. Each of their works also went into multiple editions. Increasingly, the experience of the interior battle between virtue and vice is itself a mark of election for communities deeply informed by Calvinist tenants. As John Downname puts it, "there was never any of Christ's souldiers in the Militant Church which have not been exercised in this warfare; there was never any so strong in faith but Satan durst encounter him. . . ."<sup>8</sup> Thus, for the reformed churches of 17<sup>th</sup> century England, the personal struggle between good and evil is understood to be the mechanism by which sanctification – the process toward holiness -- takes place.

Earnest preachers like Downname, Gouge, Gurnell, Sibbes and others set out to teach how that battle should be waged. Their tracts are most often structured around a line-by-line examination of the Pauline Ephesians chapter on the "whole armour of God." Their textual commentaries exhort readers to think deeply about the implication of each line, the nature and significance of each piece of armour that Paul describes, and the identifying characteristics of Satanic wiles that the faithful are sure to encounter. In the process of their specific meditations on the Ephesians

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<sup>6</sup> John Downname, *The Christian Warfare* (London, 1634).

<sup>7</sup> Gurnall, William. *The Christian in Compleat Armour*. . . The first Part (London. 1655); The Second Part, (London, 1658); The Third and Last Part (London, 1662.) Multiple printings of each of these three parts also exist. William Gouge. *The Whole Armour of God*. . . (London: J. Beale, 1616). A second expanded edition is issued in 1619 by Beale, and a two volume edition appears in 1627. Richard Sibbes *The Soules Conflict With Itself* (London: M. Flesher for R. Daulman, 1635). This, too, went into multiple editions. Sibbes also published sermons on the Ephesians passage.

passages, these preachers branch out to teach the themes, characters, plots and specific language of Scripture as a whole. The militaristic metaphor, then, provides a concrete framework upon which more abstract biblical concepts are hung.

There is little reason to wonder why a concept like psychomachy that makes the intangible mechanisms of spiritual refinement explicit would experience such popularity at this time. It is also no mystery why the sermon-style prose tracts that seek to teach about spiritual warfare while also teaching scripture itself would become so popular. Neither of these facts accounts for Bunyan's decision to use imaginative fictions, "lies", as they were uncharitably called by many members of the reformed communities, to teach the vital themes and concepts of spiritual struggle.

Bunyan works hard to make the reasons for his choice of method and style clear to his readers. Each of his four major works of fiction begins with an address to readers wherein he maps his strategy and charts out a path around his opponents' objections. Bunyan argues fictions provide occasion to move readers beyond the text and toward virtuous action. He argues that the fictions, by their appeal to fancy, also open out the opportunity to practice knowledge taught in sermons and non-fictional expositions. Over the course of the years between the time that Bunyan wrote his apology to the first part of *The Pilgrim's Progress*, and time he wrote his apology for *The Holy War*, he becomes increasingly confident in his claims for fictions, and the claims themselves become broader in scope. In *Badman* and *The Holy War*, Bunyan draws an overt connection between the narratives' potential for individual reform, and their potential through individual reform, for the reform of the nation. As the plots and themes of these stories make

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<sup>8</sup> Downname, John. *The Christian Warfare*, 4.



clear, Bunyan is an enthusiastic subscriber to the notion that the spiritual life is a battleground. Yet his preacherly concern for the state of the individual believer's soul does not mean that he disregarded or ignored the trials of the corporate soul -- England as a body politic. Bunyan, the persecuted man of conscience, did not retreat from the world to find solace in a fugitive and cloistered interiority. On the contrary, Bunyan regards the interior battle as the means by which the national body can be cured of its afflictions.

The Apology to the first part of *The Pilgrim's Progress* provides the most fulsome and direct response to the objections that Bunyan received to the method and style of his latest work. Evidently, when Bunyan conducted a straw poll among his first readers, opinion was split about whether or not he should publish his work. He tells us that many were edified by the story, but that many others complained that the allegory itself was dark, and that fiction lacked the weight and seriousness of his prose writings. The readers who objected to the work cited a well-known and well-accepted critique of imaginative literature. Reformed communities had eschewed the allegorizations of the medieval Catholic church, interpretations that tended to diminish the centrality of Scripture and direct interpretation toward the shifting ground of patristic tradition or the caprice of the ordained clergy. These communities were more than reticent to see the plain truth rendered in anything other than the clearest terms.

Bunyan's response to these objections addressed the root anxiety directly, and used the Bible itself as justification for his form. Bunyan avers that Scripture itself uses dark metaphors and tropes. He argues indirectly by way of the similes and metaphors that his fiction is a spiritual food of a more rare variety, more likely to be valued because the difficulty and struggle required to obtain it. The truths wrapped in his metaphors and tropes are like the sweet, tender meat

picked from the bone. They are the crops that are watered by the dark clouds of metaphor, crops that can be harvested if one will learn how to plough. They are the cherished catches of the artful fishers who grope and tickle to achieve their prizes, and of the persistent and resourceful fowler. Finally, in a turn stunning for its brevity and poignancy, the metaphor becomes the “truth in swaddling clouts.” The spiritual food is connected with its source: Christ, the Word, the swaddled babe.

In addition to teaching the truth of scripture, Bunyan’s stories also aid the retention of the truths. “Art thou forgetful?” asks the author of *The Pilgrim’s Progress*. “Wouldst thou remember/ From New Year’s Day to the last of December? Then read my fancies” he advises, “they will stick like burs.”<sup>9</sup> In the opening to the second part, Bunyan reiterates the point: “I also know,” he says “a dark similitude/ Will in the fancy more itself intrude/ And will stick faster in the heart and head,/ than things from similes not borrowed.”<sup>10</sup>

More fascinating than these two claims, however, is his third: reading these fictions can move readers beyond reception and memorization and into action. In the beginning of *The Pilgrim’s Progress* we are told:

This book will make a traveler of thee,  
If by its counsel thou wilt ruled be;  
It will direct thee to the Holy Land,  
If thou wilt its directions understand:

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<sup>9</sup> John Bunyan, PPI, 7

<sup>10</sup>John Bunyan. “Apology to the Reader” in *The Pilgrim’s Progress, The Second Part*, ed. James Blanton Warey and Roger Sharrock (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1967), 171. All subsequent references to this text will be made from this edition, and the title will be abbreviated to PPIL.

Yea, it will make the slothful active be;

The blind also delightful things to see.<sup>11</sup>

Bunyan assumes readers' active involvement in each of his apologies. Readers are either traveling, in *The Pilgrim's Progress I&II*, or discerning whether they are "treading in Mr. Badman's path," or, finally, they are "working" with the author's key to see if they "wouldst know" his riddle in *The Holy War*. But while readers' active participation is assumed, Bunyan's apologies do not say how the fictions generate action, move readers into an actual experience of the doctrines expounded in the texts. Fortunately, this explanation is provided elsewhere. In a prose tract entitled *The Greatness of the Soul*, which was written in the same year as *The Holy War*, Bunyan speaks in detail about the process of spiritual battle through which the imagination moves thoughts of good or evil through the soul and into action. When a motion or thought of sin is noticed by the soul it goes directly to the fancy or imagination. If that imagination is on God's side, it will present the sin to the rest of the soul, that is to the faculties of reason and will, as a truly ugly thing and discourage all further consideration. If, on the other hand, the imagination is evil, it will "helpeth the motion of, and to, sin towards the act, even by dressing of it up in that guise and habit that may best delude the understanding, judgment and conscience."<sup>12</sup> For, says Bunyan "the imagination is such a forcible power, that if it putteth forth itself to dress up and present a thing to the soul, whether that thing be evil or good, the rest of the faculties cannot withstand it."<sup>13</sup> Therefore, fictions that actively engage the imagination and fancy in turn actively engage the whole reader. Bunyan's stories are designed to train readers' imaginations to recognize good and discern evil by involving them in the reading process. In this way, the stories

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<sup>11</sup>John Bunyan, PPI, 6.

<sup>12</sup>John Bunyan, *The Greatness of the Soul* in John Bunyan: *Miscellaneous Works*, volume IX, ed. Richard L. Greaves (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1981), 194.

<sup>13</sup>John Bunyan, *The Greatness of the Soul*, 195.

themselves serve as testing ground for the variety of spiritual experience that brings about sanctification.

The connection between the individual reader's sanctification by way of imaginative fiction and the sanctification of the nation is foregrounded in each of the three works that follow the first part of *The Pilgrim's Progress*. As has often been observed, the second part of *The Pilgrim's Progress* is a communal journey, the journey of the church, as some critics would have it. In the apology that precedes the *Life and Death of Mr. Badman*, Bunyan dwells on the terrible effect that evil actions have upon the state. "England shakes and totters already," he says "by reason of the burden that Mr. Badman and his friends have wickedly laid upon it."<sup>14</sup> In the opening of *The Holy War*, readers are taken by the narrator to a position of height and perspective from which they can observe the history of Mansoul and recognize in the account both the personal, interior realities of the battle, and also the civil implications of all actions for the town corporation. Imagination is powerful, argues Bunyan. When readers' imaginations are activated by the story and refined by trials that bring about its sanctification, the power is felt first in the person and next in the state. In *Of Antichrist and his Ruine*, another late prose work that is also dated around the time of *The Holy War*, Bunyan addresses the stresses and anxieties of the day directly and makes the connection between the private and the public explicit:

I conclude then, first with a word of counsel, and then with a word of caution.

First, Let us mend our paces in the way of Reformation, that is the way to hasten

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<sup>14</sup>John Bunyan, *The Life and Death of Mr. Badman*. Ed. James F. Forrest and Roger Sharrock (Oxford: The Clarendon Press), 2. All subsequent references to this work will be made from this edition. Hereafter the title will be abbreviated to *Badman*

the downfall of Antichrist. Ministers need reforming, particular Congregations need reforming; there are but few Church-members but need reforming.<sup>15</sup>

Societal change happens as individuals change. Individuals change as they undergo the sanctifying experiences of spiritual battle that teach them to discern good from evil and to strengthen their resolve for good. Reading, particularly, reading imaginative fiction, hastens this process of experience by moving readers to action within the safe confines of the text.

Let's take a few minutes now to see how this process might work in specific examples from *The Pilgrim's Progress*, *The Life and Death of Mr. Badman*, and *The Holy War*. As we read these passages, we will be looking for structural elements of the fictions that draw readers in. In some cases, they are moments of deliberately designed textual adversity, moments of ambiguity or struggle that force the reader to puzzle through the circumstance in order to make sense of the action. In others, they are more subtle choices of narrative format and content, the gossip dialogue in *Badman*, for example, and the rigorous intellectual challenge provided by the complex, multi-layered allegory of *The Holy War*. We'll be watching to see how Bunyan allows the full motions of the imagination to engage with his fictional events. We have argued so far that Bunyan saw his imaginative fictions as opportunities for him to move beyond the instruction he and others provided in sermons and in psychomachy tracts about how to tell good from evil, and how to stand against evil once it has been identified. The imaginative fictions are designed to involve readers, to force them to become active in the pursuit of knowledge that is elsewhere simply announced.

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<sup>15</sup> *Of Antichrist and his Ruine* in *John Bunyan: Miscellaneous Works*, volume XIII, ed. W.R. Owens (Oxford: The Clarendon Press), 427.

Witness, for example, the episode at the “resting place” on the “Hill Difficulty” in the first part of *The Pilgrim’s Progress*. This episode, I will contend, sets out to teach by experience an idea that the psychomachy tracts relate by academic argument: the critical distinction between sanctioned “rest,” and sinful “sleep.” Christian encounters the hill soon after he leaves two fellow travelers, Formalist and Hypocrisy. Formalist and Hypocrisy, we are told, when they saw that the Hill was “steep and high” resolved to go around it on paths named “danger” and “destruction.” Christian, however, heads straight up the hill where “he fell from running to going, and from going to clambering upon his hands and his knees, because of the steepness of the place.”<sup>16</sup> Let’s take a close look at what happens next:

Now about midway to the top of the Hill, was a pleasant arbour, made by the Lord of the Hill, for the refreshing of weary travellers. Thither therefore Christian got, where also he sat down to rest him. Then he pull’d his Roll out of this bosom, and read therein to his comfort; he also now began afresh to take a review of the Coat or Garment that was given him as he stood by the Cross. This pleasing himself a while, he at last fell into a slumber, and thence into a fast sleep, which detained him in that place until it was almost night, and in his sleep his Roll fell out of his hand.

“Good for Christian,” readers might say to themselves as they watch their beleaguered hero. The poor fellow has made the difficult choice, but the right one, unlike his two companions. He has struggled hard to clamber to this sanctioned place of rest. But no. Readers are brought up short with the marginal note that accompanies this final line.

His \*Roll fell out of his hand.            \*He that sleeps is a loser.

Christian is awakened with the words “Go to the ant, thou sluggard, consider her ways, and be wise,” a quotation which, if we did not recognize first ourselves, is helpfully referenced in the

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<sup>16</sup> John Bunyan, PPI, 42.

margin: Proverbs 6:6. It turns out that this Arbour is a place of rest, not of sleep. Just as the story of salvation written on the Roll slips out of Christian's hand as he slides into somnambulant inattention, so too does the sense of Bunyan's storyline fall out of readers' reach if they are not alert to the dangerous change that occurs when "rest" becomes "sleep." Of course this readerly misstep is not obligatory, although Bunyan does seem to go a few steps out of his way to make the misreading possible if not probable. Christian's previous encounter with Simple, Sloth and Presumption taught readers to regard sleeping as a dangerous pastime – these three slept in the presence of immanent danger from the roaring Lion, you might recall. It is also true that the equation of sleeping with spiritual sloth was a well-established trope in the psychomachy tracts of the day. As William Gurnall warns in *The Christian in Compleat Armour*, "the Saints' sleeping time, is Satan's tempting time." Spiritual soldiers must be alert if they are to be "fully armed."<sup>17</sup>

Whether or not readers of *The Pilgrim's Progress* are caught in this particular textual trap, or the many others like it that occur throughout the story, the disruption in expectations serves as an alarm to wake sleepy readers. In this way, Bunyan engages readers' imaginations, and allows the intellectual matter under discussion – the need for vigilant attention at all times, and the immanent danger of being seduced into inattention – to be replicated and brought into readers' own experience through the process of reading. The very nature of allegory itself requires readers to be vigilant, attentive interpreters if they are to make sense of both the literal narrative and the figurative import of this story. Although Bunyan always provides readers with the reasoning behind his narrative action, guides their process of allegorical decoding with specific biblical touchstones in the margins, he is often content to allow a struggle before the explanation is offered. In this way, Bunyan's writing stimulates within readers the type of internal, holy

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<sup>17</sup> Gurnall, *The Christian in Compleat Armour*, The Second Part, 19.

warfare that the psychomachy tracts can only describe. *The Pilgrim's Progress* offers an opportunity within the safe confines of the text for readers to test their skills of discernment, to find out by their individual responses to the text whether or not they are spiritually watchful, or whether they, like Christian, have fallen asleep when they were only invited to rest.

An appreciation of how the doctrine of psychomachy works in imaginative fiction goes a long way to answer the age-old question of *The Pilgrim's Progress*' enduring appeal. When the story is viewed as a series of challenges in which the reader is prompted to anticipate or explain the actions of the text, Bunyan's dusty allegory can be appreciated as the 17<sup>th</sup> Century cultural equivalent of the game show. We can imagine Bunyan's first readers hunched over the book, watching over the long passages of dialogue exchanged between Christian and his companions with a Jeopardy-like fascination: they read the answer to the spiritual dilemma, can they predict the question? They read the question posed by one to the other: can they identify the scriptural key that will inform the correct response? The action sequences are of equal fascination; they become a game of "Spiritual Survivor" wherein readers assess their own decisions and actions against those of the protagonists. Who will win this round? How will the invariably predictable winners orchestrate their victories? These books become spiritual workouts of a more rigorous sort. Intellectual skills, heart knowledge and discernment are all put into play, put to the test.

In *The Life and Death of Mr. Badman*, however, the subject is evil, and Bunyan's narrative strategy is very different. Since this story is far less well-known than *The Pilgrim's Progress*, let me provide a sketch of the plot line. Two gentlemen, a Mr. Wiseman and a Mr. Attentive meet one another on a morning stroll. Mr. Wiseman notes a look of concern in his neighbour's face



and asks if he has “lost any of [his] cattle”<sup>18</sup> or experienced something equally distressing. Mr. Attentive’s cattle, we hear, are fully accounted for, but he says that he is indeed concerned. The “badness of the times” has upset him. Mr. Wiseman makes the sage comment that the times will be bad as long as the men who make the times are bad. This comment about the connection between personal reform and civic reform sets the stage for a gossip-filled conversation about a recently deceased neighbour, Mr. Badman. In the 150 or so pages that follow, readers listen in as Wiseman relates the sad story of Badman’s life and death.

Bunyan’s objective in writing *Badman* is similar to the objectives of the psychomachy tract writers: he wants to make evil easy to see. Because he is using fiction, he also needs to ensure that he does not make the evil look attractive. Accordingly, Bunyan devises a fascinating hybrid form. He takes real-life examples of evil as he has seen it acted out in the community around him, and he condenses these tales into the fictional and allegorically named character of Badman. By condensing the events, Bunyan makes them readily apparent as incidents of evil. The evil is easy to spot because it is uncomplicated by incidences of virtue. The narrative itself is also nearly devoid of allegory: there are no “dark similitudes”<sup>19</sup> included here. In order to ensure that Badman and his evil ways do not seduce readers, Bunyan distances them from the characters and the action of Badman. Our principal narrator, Mr. Wiseman, tells the story of Badman’s life to Mr. Attentive, but never once do we hear Badman speak, nor are readers given many descriptive details. The tales of Badman’s life are told in fragments, interspersed with stories about other, unrelated people. Each anecdote about Badman becomes an occasion for a mini-sermon by Mr. Wiseman. Notice, for example, how a particular discussion about Mr. Badman’s good master

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<sup>18</sup>John Bunyan, *Badman*, 13.

<sup>19</sup>John Bunyan, PPII, 171.

becomes the occasion for a detailed discussion in five parts about bad masters and how they corrupt young apprentices:

**Wise.** Indeed some children do greatly mend when put under other men's roofs; but, as I said, this naughty boy [Badman] did not so; nor did his badness continue because he wanted a master that both could and did correct it. For his master was a very good man, a very devout person. [Mr. Wiseman continues here to name the good practices that Badman's master followed. Mr Attentive expresses surprise.]

**Atten.** Say you so! This is rare. I for my part can see but few that can parallel, in these things, with Mr. Badman's master.

[Mr. Wiseman concurs with his neighbours assessment and cites a few of the more common faults. Mr. Attentive then makes his request for a more fulsome discussion.]

**Atten.** The more is the pity. But, pray, now you have touched upon this subject, show me how many ways a master may be the ruin of his poor apprentice.<sup>20</sup>

The five-part sermon follows, each element of which is helpfully numbered. Notice how little attention is paid to Mr. Badman in the preceding discussion. Bunyan borrows key features of the sermon form in order to enrich the discussion of evil, and he employs fictional elements to sustain readers' interests and move them through the story. Once again, readers are encouraged to follow along with the discussions, to anticipate the answers given to the variety of questions, but there are very few moments of adversity, moments of textual trickery, when readers are challenged to anticipate or make sense of seemingly puzzling elements of the plot. As Bunyan says in his preface to Badman's story, he intends this tale to be a looking glass, a mirror into

which his readers “mayest . . . behold with thine eyes the steps that take hold of hell: and also discern, while thou art reading of Mr. Badman’s death, whether thou thyself art treading in his path thereto.”<sup>21</sup> This objective is accomplished in large measure by the dialogue itself, which gives shape to the subject material and provides readers with a narrative hook to move them through a variety of discussions. Whereas the poetic detail and the linear, uninterrupted narrative of *The Pilgrim’s Progress* produce deep emotional engagement with Christian and allow readers to identify with him, the spare descriptions, episodic plot and dialogue structure of *Badman* keep readers emotionally at arm’s length, but intellectually stimulated. Only the truly vigilant will see reflections of themselves in the text, but there is no doubt that many of Bunyan’s first readers were indeed spurred to profound vigilance, if not by a saintly desire to reform, then by neighbourly curiosity.

In the preface, Bunyan is very clear about the sources for his fiction: “all of things that I here discourse of,” says the author, “have been acted upon the stage of this world.”<sup>22</sup> In other words, all of this badness really occurred, and Bunyan is about to disclose details. He has changed names to protect families in some cases. Where the sins of the offender have become public knowledge, however, their names have been used. Thus Bunyan manages to reel readers into a detailed and particular examination of the evil within his own community without allowing them to become seduced by the character of evil itself. Bunyan’s parodic funeral sermon for Badman manages to engage its readership in a rigorous, and, perhaps personal, examination of the principles of evil, the wiles of the devil that psychomachy tracts writers can only discuss in the abstract. His object is for the story to “light upon many,” to force in his readers the self-

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<sup>20</sup>John Bunyan, *Badman* 38-39.

<sup>21</sup>John Bunyan, *Badman* 1.

identification that creates the opportunity for “God [to] stir up witnesses against them, that they may either convert or confound them.” As Bunyan says at the outset, his object is to move his readers, to “kill them to Mr. Badman’s course, and make [them] alive to the Pilgrim’s Progress.”<sup>23</sup>

The last example we will look at comes from one of Bunyan’s later works of fiction, *The Holy War*. This complex allegory not only incorporates the strategies of the psychomachy tracts, but also meditates on the theme directly. The story of *The Holy War* is set in the town of Mansoul. In the allegorical levels of this fiction, Mansoul is at once the Garden of Eden, in which the first battle against sin is lost, everyman’s soul where these battles continue in the present day, and contemporary England. Although many regard *The Holy War* as Bunyan’s masterpiece, it was never as popular as *The Pilgrim’s Progress*. A brief plot outline is in order here too.

The story begins with the fall of Diabolus (Satan) and his rebel angels from heaven. The Diabolonian forces resolve to take revenge on the town of Mansoul for their expulsion, and they trick the town into opening its gates. Once inside, the Diabolonians oust key members of the town corporation including Mr. Recorder (the town’s conscience), who is replaced by Mr. Forget-Good; the Lord Mayor Lustings replaces the Mr. Understanding. Shaddai, (representing God) decides to take back Mansoul. First he sends an army of forty thousand (which represents the Mosaic law and the Old Testament), but the town is not completely turned to good until Shaddai sends his son, Emmanuel. Emmanuel and his army succeed in retaking the town. A new charter is issued, and Lord Chief Secretary (the Holy Spirit) is made the town’s preacher. Not all

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<sup>22</sup>John Bunyan, *Badman* 1.

<sup>23</sup>John Bunyan, *Badman* 2.

of the Diabolonians are removed from the city, however, and in the events that follow, they attack, and are in turn defeated for a total of three times. The story concludes with a long speech from Emmanuel wherein he commands the townspeople to “hold fast until I come.”<sup>24</sup>

Of the two works we have discussed so far, *The Holy War* most resembles *The Pilgrim's Progress* in its form, but it does share some characteristics with *Badman* as well. Like *The Pilgrim's Progress*, this later work is a thoroughgoing allegory. Here, too, detail is supplied in abundance; readers can see and hear, smell, taste and feel the events that are related to them by the narrator. But as was the case in *The Life and Death of Mr. Badman*, there is no one central and compelling focus for the drama – no one character upon which readers can centre their experience of the story. At one level of the allegory, the reader is Mansoul in its entirety. The remaining levels of allegory require yet more engagement and attentiveness if readers are to catch the fleeting references that connect the literal level of the text to these symbolic allusions. Readers are required to understand and keep track of the entire cast of characters if they are to stay engaged and oriented. Compared to *The Pilgrim's Progress*, this deeply complex story is a lot of work to read. It both demands and rewards the extra level of attentiveness and care needed to decode Satanic wiles and stratagems, and to understand the multiple significances of the Godly defences. Where the psychomachy tracts talk about these issues, Bunyan's allegory takes its readers into the web of confusion itself where they struggle with the aid of marginal notes to understand and appreciate all that is set before them. When it is successful, the effort invested in reading yields real pleasure, a pleasure that is acknowledged and discussed in the fiction itself.

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<sup>24</sup>John Bunyan. *The Holy War*. Ed. Roger Sharrock and James F. Forrest (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1980), 250. All subsequent references will be made to this edition. The title of the work will be abbreviated to HW.

In celebration of Emmanuel's first conquest of the town, a party is held. Following the feast, Emmanuel, we are told, entertains the town with "some curious riddles."

The Holy  
Scriptures

These Riddles [glossed as the Holy Scriptures] were made upon the King Shaddai himself, and upon Emmanuel his Son, and upon his wars and doings with Mansoul.

Emmanuel also expounded unto them some of those riddles himself, but Oh how they were lightened! They saw what they never saw, they could not have thought that such rarities could have been couched in so few and so ordinary words.<sup>25</sup>

In this passage Bunyan's characters enjoy a pleasure analogous to that which his readers experience at the very moment they read about this pleasure in the story. Mansoul is taught by Emmanuel to decode the language of scripture so its citizens can see a picture of their Prince. Or, in other words, they are taught to read in a New Testament style that allows all of Scripture to be understood in the life of Christ. At the very moment that this learning is acquired by the characters in the story, Bunyan's readers are busily decoding their own riddles and puzzles with the marginal notes, enjoying an analogous pleasure with the characters, and learning similar wisdom.

And so, in each of these three examples we see how Bunyan believed that stories could provide readers the experiences they need to become holy. Each of these three stories seeks to lift the doctrines of soul struggle off of the page and into the hearts and minds of their readers. These

fictions were Bunyan's response to the threats and terrors of his day. As a young man he fought in the civil war and lent his physical energy to the "holy war" for the reformation of his nation. As a mature man, he put aside his arms and discouraged others who threatened to reach for theirs.

Bunyan appears to have arrived at the same conclusion as his contemporary, the Leveller, Richard Overton, who stated directly that *Ephesians* chapter 6, verses 10 through 18, the core text for the psychomachy tracts wherein Paul exhorts his readers to "Put on the whole armour of God", "tells us that the only weapons to be used for spiritual matters are spiritual weapons, not force."<sup>26</sup> In answer to terrorism Bunyan exhorted the faithful to read, and he lent his intellectual and creative gifts to the cause to produce books worth reading. He changed his focus from the external holy war that sought to produce reform out of coercion, to the internal holy war that sought to reform the state by reforming the hearts and minds of the people within the state. In writing good books, Bunyan attempted to make the state holy by making the people within it holy.

It is a bold plan, an optimistic strategy vulnerable to the whims of individual readers, divorced from any clear and dependable plan for regime change on a predictable timeline. I am sure every one of us can imagine what George W. Bush or Osama Bin Laden would make of it were John Bunyan to put this proposal before them both. At first glance the idea is laughable, sheer pie-in-the-sky liberal nonsense. But what if we take a second glance? The story of what happened next in Bunyan's England gives even contemporary military analysts cause to pause.

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<sup>25</sup> John Bunyan, HW 116.

<sup>26</sup>Richard Overton. *An appeal . . . To The Free People* (London:July 17, 1647).

By the time that Bunyan had completed his major works, prospects for a stable Protestant Monarchy and parliament looked even bleaker. King Charles II died leaving the throne to his younger, Catholic brother, James. Plots were hatched to forcibly exclude James, but they failed. James II was crowned in 1685, and within the year his overtly Catholic reforms led to revolt in Scotland and in England. Within the short span of three years, however, something miraculous happened. The people of England began to form consensus about this new King and their desire for Protestant reform. The workable agreement that Cromwell had attempted to produce developed quietly, peacefully, as individuals came to their own reasons for reform. A series of non-violent, direct action campaigns began to take effect. Courtiers and Bishops simply refused to work for James. The ability to rule, James discovered, was dependant upon the will of his people to carry out his orders. They simply refused. Eventually, James II's Protestant daughter, Mary, and her husband, the Dutch Prince William of Orange, made a move to take over the government. William arrived in England in November of 1688, months after John Bunyan's death. A stand-off ensued between the two armies, and although each was prepared for a fight, it never happened. James fled to France, and William and Mary ushered in a permanent, Protestant monarchy and Parliament that has endured to the present day. Not a drop of blood was shed in what was later called the Glorious Revolution of 1688.

In the end, we might say, Bunyan's humble plan for reform won out. Did the English people develop consensus in the wake of long hours spent reading *The Pilgrim's Progress* and other works of fiction? Certainly many of them did read Bunyan's first book, and no doubt it made a contribution to the growing good that Bunyan hoped it would. It is not necessary, however, to draw these direct links to make the larger point. What Bunyan knew to be true has been demonstrated time and again over the course of world history, particularly recent world history:



you can bomb the world to pieces, but you cannot bomb it into peace. The variety of reform desired by the leaders of Bunyan's day and the leaders of our own is only accomplished by consensus. This is not to say that armed resistance to direct violence has no place. Indeed, the reforms established in 1688 were defended militarily when they were challenged by James's army in 1690. But the reforms themselves, the deep-seated agreement among the people of England to resist Catholic influences and to facilitate a Protestant takeover of the government happened slowly, quietly and peacefully.

So, how might John Bunyan read Bush and Bin Laden? No doubt with a great deal of care. To Bin Laden he might begin by acknowledging that he too knew what is meant to live with the moral threats of an external enemy. The Great American Satan of Bin Laden's world might look a lot like the Great Catholic Anti-Christ of Bunyan's day. But Bunyan would be quick to denounce the senseless acts of violence perpetrated against innocent people that Bin Laden has orchestrated. He would, no doubt, be swift and firm in his reminder that, to what ever degree Bin Laden's attacks have been motivated by a desire to eradicate the threat of evil, his plans are profoundly misguided. Bunyan would join the chorus of contemporary Muslims who assert that a holy Islamic people will happen when spiritual issues are dealt with by way of spiritual means. The real holy war, the greater Jihad, takes place within.

And to Bush? Bunyan would perhaps begin by acknowledging that he also knew what it meant to suffer under threats of terror, and he knew what it took to bring a man to bear arms against another in the hope of changing the world for the better. But, make no mistake, Bunyan would also be quick to remind President Bush that offensive military campaigns designed to force political reform and eradicate internal powers of evil simply don't work in the long run.

Interestingly, the advice that we imagine Bunyan might offer is also echoed by an increasing number of contemporary voices. In his recent book entitled *The Unconquerable World*,<sup>27</sup> New York author Jonathan Schell joins a growing number of people who are rejecting traditional militarism as a viable solution to world conflict. Schell tells the story of the Glorious Revolution of Bunyan's day in the midst of numerous other examples where the will of the people has defeated the world's most powerful military machines. Experiences like the fall of the Raj in India, the defeat of the Americans in Vietnam, the collapse of the Soviet empire, and of the Berlin wall have proven that the largest army does not always win, and that true, lasting reform depends upon the complicity of those who would be ruled by it.

In offering his imaginative fictions, Bunyan set out on an alternate path toward reform. He believed fervently that a good book could do more to create lasting change than the barrel of a gun ever could. No doubt he would share this wisdom with today's leaders and exhort them to consider other strategies.

Bunyan's message is ultimately one of great hope, of hope substantiated by history. We need not return to the antiquated theories of soul struggle and psychomachy to affirm the redemptive power of a story well told. No doubt each one of us could point to a book that changed our views, opened our hearts and built our capacities for compassion and personal resolve. For all people whose faith is centred in text, the sacred Scriptures will always be the primary, most important reading project. As Bunyan's example show, however, we need not restrict ourselves

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<sup>27</sup>Jonathan Schell. *The Unconquerable World: Power, Nonviolence and the Will of the People*. (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2003).

to these books. The edifying, soul testing textual adversity that Bunyan offers in *The Pilgrim's Progress* can be, if we take the right spirit to the project, found in any number of more recent books. The non-linear approaches taken in many post-modern novels seem a good place to start. As for the condensed, easy to recognize portrait of evil Bunyan offers in *Badman*, any good fantasy novel might serve us as well. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* has been a recent favourite in this category. And finally, the complex depiction of the soul and the nature of spiritual battle offered in *The Holy War* may be found, by those willing to look, in any story that challenges us to know ourselves and each other more deeply.

And so, the challenge is set. Whether we are *Reading Lolita in Tehran*,<sup>28</sup> or Rumi's<sup>29</sup> poetry in New York, the opportunity for real exchange, for personal holiness, and through this, consensus building among the people, is before us. Let John Bunyan's example lead us toward the manifold strategies for conflict resolution that only await our sustained interest and commitment to become effective. The last word here belongs to Bunyan's Wiseman:

They are bad times, and bad they will be until men [and women] are better; for bad [people] make bad times; if [people], therefore, would mend, so would the times.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Azar Nafisi, *Reading Lolita in Tehran* (New York: Random House, 2004)

<sup>29</sup> Rumi is a 13<sup>th</sup> century Persian poet whose works have experienced renewed interest in recent years. Excellent translations of his works are widely available.

<sup>30</sup> John Bunyan, *Badman* 1.