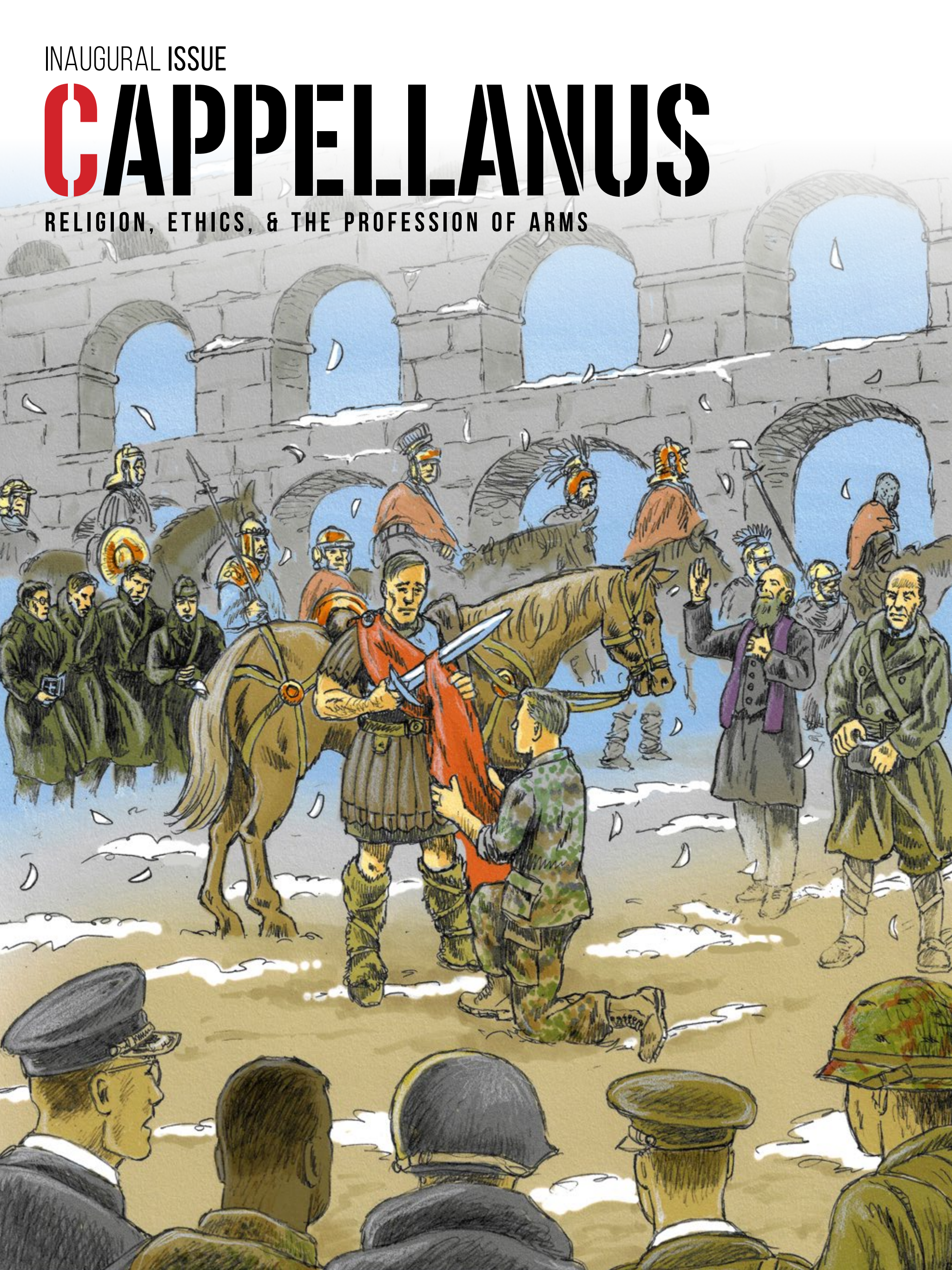
INAUGURAL ISSUE

CAPPELLANUS

RELIGION, ETHICS, & THE PROFESSION OF ARMS



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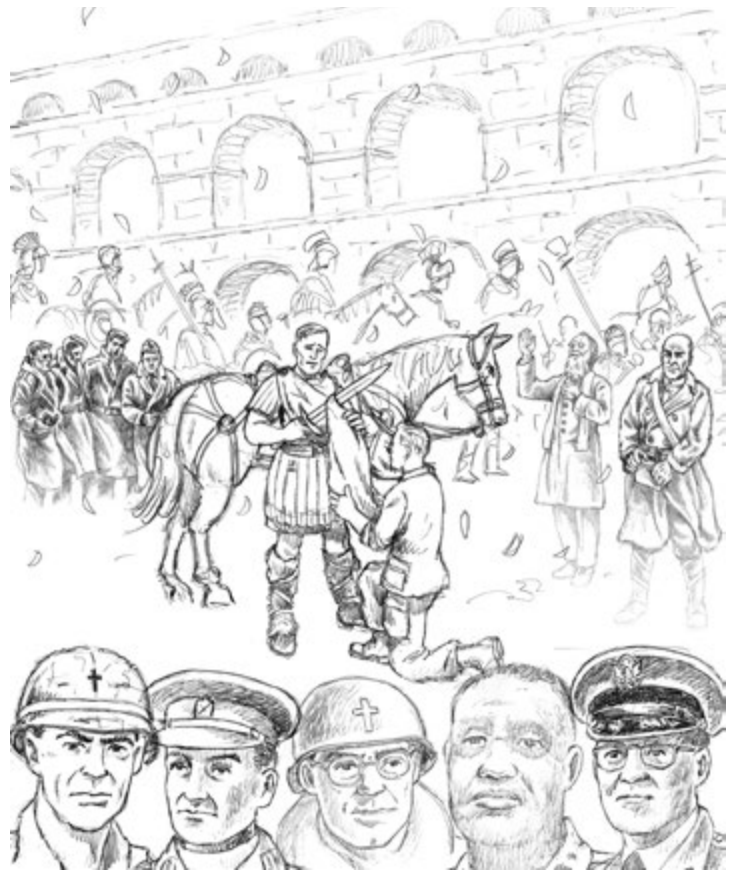
We are thrilled to have an original drawing by Wayne Vansant illustrate our inaugural cover. Wayne is an American comic book artist with over 30 years of experience drawing and writing about military history. His near-exclusive devotion to military themes is fueled by a life-long fascination with the history of warfare and the men and women who fight. The son of a WWII veteran, Wayne's childhood was nourished with stories about the great conflict. He was told them by adults, found them in the books he read, and saw them depicted in the movies to which he was drawn.

Following his own stint in the Navy during Vietnam, Wayne enrolled in art school. Over time, his artistic and military passions found shared expression in comics. He built his reputation drawing for Marvel's gritty cult-favorite war title *The 'Nam.* Much-admired for his exhaustive realism and attention to the minutiae of uniforms, equipment, and terrain, Wayne's interests naturally led to a focus on comic depictions of *historic battles and personalities.* He has illustrated and written books on the invasion of Normandy, the Battle of the Bulge, the Civil War rivalry of Grant and Lee, the Red Barron, and *much else*. His most recent work is a hefty collection of stories returning him to the world of graphic fiction. *Katusha: Girl Soldier of the Great Patriot War,* features a Ukrainian partisan and Russian T-34 tank commander during WW2. Seen through the perspective of a young girl, ***Katusha*** is described as both a coming-of-age tale as well as a meticulous depiction of a turbulent and critical moment in the 20th century. Watch for a future review.

Wayne's cover illustration captures the 4th Century St. Martin of Tours in the moment he is dividing his military cloak. Only this time, instead of a poor mendicant, Wayne places before Martin a military chaplain. As explained in the editorial greeting on the following page, Martin's sharing of his cloak has come to symbolize the vocation of the chaplaincy in the profession of arms. Chaplains are unique in both military and faith communities. They comprise the only group of officers whose primary identification is with a nonmilitary institution and they are the only clergy who—***as*** clergy—are commissioned officers in a military institution. The two pieces of Martin's cloak represent this twinned calling to serve as both spiritual leader as well as force multiplier. The chaplain, as it's sometimes said, has one foot in heaven and the other in a combat boot.

In our illustration, Martin is surrounded not only by the contemporary warriors of his day, but by a host of representative



characters drawn from the history of military chaplaincy. To the viewer's left, behind Martin's horse, we see a tight cluster of army chaplains. Reverends George Fox and Clark Poling, Rabbi Alexander Goode, and Father John Washington are collectively known simply as the Four Chaplains. In 1943, they died helping save some 230 men on the doomed troop transport SS ***Dorchester.*** Near the horse's head stands the Union Army's Revered Willian Corby. To the right of him is Father Francis Duffy, best known for his service on the Western Front in WW1. At the bottom of the illustration, seen from the back, are five additional chaplains. In the version on this page, Wayne's given them an about-face. From the left: Father Vincent Capodanno, Marine infantry chaplain in Vietnam; Britain's WW1 hero Padre Theodore Hardy, representing our partner-nation chaplaincy corps; Navy chaplain Father Joseph Callahan; Chaplain (COL) Khallid Shabazz, active duty and the highest-ranking Muslim chaplain in US military history; Charles Carpenter, first chief of chaplains for the US Air Force.

Collectively, these men represent a portion of the scope of the US and partner-nation chaplaincy. There is much more to it. In future issues, we will tell the individual stories both of these and other remarkable chaplains. ■

NIGEL **BIGGAR**

THE HORROR OR THE GLORY: WHAT'S MORE BASIC?

Editor's note: 2018 marked the 20th anniversary of Terrence Malick's extraordinary film *The Thin Red Line*. Set in the closing days of the Battle of Guadalcanal in the Pacific Theatre of the Second World War, Malick's film is a meditation on suffering, loss, and the seeming momentariness of both human existence and those loved things that give existence meaning. It is a profound exploration of being human, set in the cataclysm of war. In observance of the anniversary of its release, I sat down with the just war scholar and Oxford professor Nigel Biggar to discuss a film we both love. You can listen to the podcast of our conversation here: *Dark Ops Provcast: The Thin Red Line*. Below, you'll find a sermon about Malick's film that Biggar delivered in Oxford in 2013. ***ML***

I take as my topic, the ambiguity of human existence. I take as my question, "what sense are we make of it?" And I take as my text … a Hollywood movie. Now, lest you should worry that I am about to take the pulpit hurtling down-market, let me reach for a fig-leaf of academic respectability and mention that the director of this film, Terrence Malick, has the distinction of being the author of what is still the standard English translation of one of the works of that existentialist Colossus, Martin Heidegger.

The film I want to talk about was released in 1998 and it bears the (rather odd) title of '*The Thin Red Line*' --odd because, in spite of having watched it eight times and having

skimmed through the book upon which it is very loosely based, I still can't see any connexion between the title and the content --except for the bare fact that they both have to do with soldiers in wartime.

I expect that that some of you will have seen the film, but probably fewer than have seen 'Saving Private Ryan'. The reason I say that is that ***The Thin Red Line*** was much less popular than ***Saving Private Ryan*** in the US and in the UK; partly because it came out in ***Private Ryan's*** wake; but also, I think, because ***Thin Red Line*** is not at all patriotic. It's more disturbing of cosy, reassuring, this-worldly assumptions and it's therefore a lot more profound. Indeed, I'd go as far as to say that *The Thin Red Line* is *the* most seriously religious film that I've ever seen.

Whereas ***Saving Private Ryan*** is set in the early days of the Normandy landings in 1944, ***The Thin Red Line*** tells a story about the gruelling struggle of American troops to wrest the Pacific island of Guadalcanal from the Japanese in 1942. But it's not a conventional war story at all, because it uses the experience of war to raise deep questions about the nature of human existence and human destiny—or, to put it more exactly, it asks about the nature of human destiny, about what our ***prospects*** as human beings are, ***ultimately*** speaking, and therefore, in the light of that, it asks about the meaning of human existence.

So the focus of ***The Thin Red Line*** is not really the conventional one of the exploits of particular characters and their relationships; it is, rather, the solitary spiritual struggle of individuals, and the different ways in which different men respond to the extreme ambiguity of human existence—to its bizarre combination of breath-taking beauty on the one hand and heart-stopping horror on the other.

At the film's centre is an ongoing conversation–or, rather, a philosophical debate—between two characters, Sergeant Welsh and Private Witt.

Welsh responds to the horror of war around him by trying to harden himself with cynicism. "In this world", he tells Witt, "a man is nothing. And there ain't no world but this one.... We're living in a world that is blowing itself to hell as fast as everybody can arrange it. In a situation like this, all a man can do is shut his eyes and let nothing touch him –look out for himself".

But Witt resists this option. He is captivated by the memory of the serenity with which his mother faced her own death--a serenity in which he believes he's seen "the key to immortality"; and he refuses to permit the arbitrary horrors of war to eclipse the ***equal*** fact of profound beauty in the world--the beauty of nature, of good people, and of happy social life. "You're wrong", he says to Welsh. "I've seen another world".

But this is really only the surface of his answer; indeed, on most occasions Witt meets Welsh's cynical questions with silence. The ***real*** substance of his response is practical, rather than verbal. His ***real*** answer is his refusal to harden himself, his persistence in caring for those around him, in gazing with compassion upon the agonised faces of comrades dying in his arms, in letting himself feel the pain, the awful tragedy, in remaining vulnerable.

In the end, Witt himself is killed as he deliberately draws the enemy away from a wounded soldier—"Greater love hath no man"—and Welsh, later crouching at his graveside, asks, "Where's your spark now?"--that is: "What does the hope that enlightened you add up to ***now***?"

But everything hangs on the tone here. Is it the mocking voice of triumphant cynicism, "***Where's*** your spark ***now***?"; or is it a genuinely open, quizzical, "Where ***is*** your spark now?"?

My own judgement is that it edges toward the latter; partly because Welsh, in spite of the all-too evident cheapness of human life around him, just can't stop himself caring, and therefore can't stop himself yearning for something beyond mortality.

The last words he speaks in the film, uttered in the privacy of his own soul, are these: "If I never meet you in this life, let me feel the lack. A glance from your eye, and my life will be yours".

Who's he speaking to? It can't be Witt himself, because Witt he certainly has met; it seems to be rather the Source of Witt's hope, the Original Fire of Witt's frail, but vital, spark. Sergeant Welsh is ***praying***: "If I never meet you in this life, let me at least feel the lack. A glance from your eye, and my life will be yours".

One of the reasons that ***The Thin Red Line*** is such a very persuasive, compelling film is that it offers no clean and easy resolution of the ambiguity of things. As one character puts it: "One man looks at a dying bird, and thinks there's nothing but unanswered pain, that death's got the final word, laughing at him. 'Nother man sees the same bird, and feels the ***glory***, feels something smiling through it".

Still, it seems to me that the film does venture a statement, implicit but nonetheless definite. Or maybe it would be better to say that the film ***shows us a sign***. The sign that it shows is the face of Witt: vulnerable, compassionate, gentle, but not at all weak, most of all not afraid of death. A shining face. A face of arresting beauty; so beautiful, in fact, that to call it the face of a fool, would be, I think, an act of sacrilege. But if it's not the face of a fool, and it's not the face of an immortal, then what is it?

I think that the film presses us to see it as a ***sign*** of what it calls '***glory***'. Now 'Glory' here is not the same as in ***Saving Private Ryan***. There the suffering and death of soldiers is justified, is given this-worldly meaning, by their service of the ideals of liberal democracy, which is represented at the beginning and end of the film by the wind-blown flag of the United States. Now, you probably all know that one of the nicknames for the American flag is 'The Stars and Stripes'; but you may not know that another nickname is 'Old Glory'.

The Thin Red Line, however, thinks that human suffering needs a 'glory' far bigger than that for its justification. Here, 'glory' clearly lies far beyond the nation and political ideology (however noble), and indeed beyond the world of time and space altogether. 'Glory' here speaks of that place where human life flourishes free from the secular ravages of war, betrayal, and disease.

This glory does have its moments of presence in this world. ***The Thin Red Line*** opens on an island in the South Pacific in a village, where children gambol, where adults smile and laugh, and where the whole village sings hymns in perfect harmony. (And if you listen carefully, you'll notice that the music that accompanies this scene is, in fact, Fauré's *In Paradisum*)--one form of the presence of 'glory'. Another is Private Bell's reveries of his beautiful young wife, of their love-making, and of her awaiting his return back home--reveries that sustain Bell as he risks his life in battle--another instance of the presence of 'glory'. And then there's the shining face of Witt himself.

But all of these moments of 'glory' are shown by the film to be vulnerable, ephemeral, mortal: the village is struck down with strife and disease; Bell is stunned by a letter from his wife announcing that she's leaving him for another; and Witt, as I've said, is killed.

So, the question arises: are these moments of 'glory' merely illusions masking a basically brutal reality or are they ***signs*** of a reality far deeper and more enduring than any of the brutal things that life can throw at us? What's more basic: the horror or the glory?

There are no certainties here, no proofs one way or the other, and ***The Thin Red Line*** is wise not to pretend that there are. But it nevertheless gives us a reason, I think, to bet on signs rather than illusions. What is this reason? It's the sheer, commanding beauty of the faces of those, like Private Witt, who trust and hope that the fragments of glory in this world–fragments of beauty, fragments of love, fragments of joy—are better clues to the origin and destiny of things than the forces of destruction.

Now whether we find this at all convincing will depend on whether we see beauty as mere decoration or as authority; but in favour of beauty as authority is the long philosophical tradition, beginning with Plato, that associates what's beautiful with what's true--a tradition reflected these days in the inclination of many natural scientists to take mathematical beauty as a measure of scientific truth.

What ***The Thin Red Line*** is saying is very close indeed to the heart of Christian faith. What it's saying, first of all, is that what's good in the world is more real, more basic than what's brutal; what's good in the world is not an illusion, but a sign of the glory that lies on the far shores of suffering and death; and that therefore there is hope for us who suffer and die.

Second, ***The Thin Red Line*** says that there is a connexion between hope and love —a two-way connexion. On the one hand ***from hope to love***: in that those who are hopeful, are prevented from the cynicism that hardens and kept open for having care and compassion--it's no coincidence that Private Witt, like Jesus, was both hopeful and compassionate. On the other hand, there's also a movement ***from love to hope***: in that those who dare to care for what is vulnerable and perishable (as all worthwhile things in this world are) find themselves compelled to hope, to yearn for the glory that surpasses this world.--"If I never meet you in this life, let me feel the lack".

The Thin Red Line graphically expresses the heart of the Christian vision of things and its meaning can be happily married to a modified version of the words of St Paul:

Who shall separate us from the love of God that has been shown us in Jesus?

Shall tribulation, or distress or persecution or famine or nakedness or peril or sword … or gun or bomb or the warfare between our parents or the mockery of our peers or betrayal by our friends or academic and professional failure or any other kind of injury that lacks redress in history? No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am sure that neither death, nor life; nor angels, nor principalities; nor things present, nor things to come; nor powers; nor height, nor depth; nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God shining in the face of Jesus, who had faith, who had hope, who had compassion, who was raised from the dead, and whom we now follow. ■

Nigel Biggar, *Regius Professor of Moral and Pastoral Theology, and Director of the McDonald Centre for Theology, Ethics, and Public Life, at the University of Oxford; and Canon of Christ Church Cathedral, Oxford. This essay was first preached on May 26, 2013, at Oriel College Chapel. An audio recording of the sermon is found here.*

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Cover illustration: Wayne Vansant

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