



EXCERPT



Reading the Times

A Literary and Theological Inquiry into the News

June 8, 2021 | \$24, 200 pages, hardcover | 978-0-8308-4185-1

When we read the news, we are not merely informed—we're also formed. In this refreshing call to put the news in its place, Jeffrey Bilbro helps us gain a theological and historical perspective on the nature and very purpose of news. Offering an alternative vision of the rhythms of life, he suggests thoughtful practices for media consumption in order cultivate healthier ways of reading and being.

Building Community Through Media Consumption

Looking at some exemplars might help us envision what a healthy interplay between media and community can look like. While there are many people I could highlight as models of faithful belonging and redemptive publishing, it would be hard to top Frederick Douglass and Dorothy Day. For both of them, reading books and newspapers transformed their lives, introducing them to new communities of discourse and action. Their reading led them to imagine new possibilities for joining with and working among the members of their own places. This membership, in turn, led them to speak publicly on behalf of their communities, challenging others to belong redemptively to their own neighbors and to address the pressing issues of their time.

In his autobiography, Douglass describes the arduous process by which he learned to read, first through the good graces of a naive slave mistress, and then by giving poor White boys bread in exchange for lessons. At the age of twelve, he read *The Columbian Orator*, a classroom anthology of speeches and poems that includes an imagined dialogue between a master and his slave. The slave made such good arguments for his emancipation that the master granted his manumission. Douglass was, of course, drawn to these arguments: "They gave tongue to interesting thoughts of my own soul, which had frequently flashed through my mind, and died away for want of utterance." As Douglass goes on to explain, he didn't even know the meaning of the word *abolition*—much less that there was a whole community of abolitionists agitating for the end of slavery—until he read a newspaper account of abolitionist activities.

After his reading brought the abolition community to his consciousness and helped him articulate a case for emancipation, Douglass devoted his energies to educating his enslaved friends. Once he had "created in them a strong desire to learn how to read," he held a Sabbath school and taught any enslaved people who were interested. Their school was eventually discovered and broken up by White masters; these men knew the grave danger that reading posed to the institution of slavery. As Douglass testifies, this learning community provided a rare opportunity for these downtrodden people to behave like "intellectual, moral, and accountable beings." Eventually, Douglass escaped to the north, but instead of feeling free, he felt terribly lonely and vulnerable. He was particularly grateful for the aid of other free Black persons and abolitionists who helped him find a home in New Bedford.

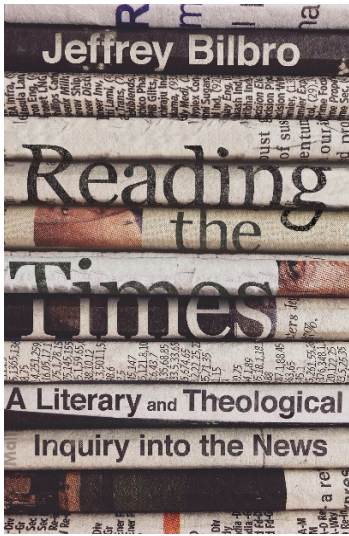
This community, and the support it provided for its vulnerable members, motivated Douglass to take a more active role in sustaining it. He describes an incident where a free Black person had a dispute with a fugitive and threatened to betray him; the entire community came together to send the traitor away and protect the fugitive. It is this camaraderie and solidarity that inspired Douglass to move into the public sphere and advocate for the abolition of slavery and the empowerment of free African Americans. He tells of his joy when he was able to pay for a subscription to the *Liberator*, William Lloyd



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Garrison's abolitionist paper. This paper, Douglass attests, "became my meat and my drink. My soul was set all on fire." And it soon gave him an "idea of the principles, measures, and spirit of the anti-slavery reform." At the urging of others, he began to speak at churches and abolitionist meetings, and his eloquence and testimony soon made him a popular speaker.

Douglass eventually separated himself from Garrison's paper and speaking circuit and founded his own newspaper, the *North Star*. In the opening editorial, he situates the paper as a communal endeavor, arguing that the Black community "must be our own representatives and advocates, not exclusively, but peculiarly—not distinct from, but in connection with our white friends." Thus it will not be committed to an ideology but to a community, which he names as "our long oppressed and plundered fellow countrymen": "We shall cordially approve every measure and effort calculated to advance your sacred cause, and strenuously oppose any which in our opinion may tend to retard its progress." Rather than being narrowly antislavery, it will also discuss issues such as "Temperance, Peace, Capital Punishment, Education. . . . While advocating your rights, the *North Star* will strive to throw light on your duties. [W]hile it will not fail to make known your virtues, it will not shun to discover your faults. To be faithful to our foes it must be faithful to ourselves, in all things." This language of rights and duties is common in republican discourse, but it emphasizes that Douglass was committed not just to an ideology or an interest group but to the formation of a healthy community.

Though he disagreed with Garrison about the best political strategy to achieve abolition, Douglass shared Garrison's religious convictions. One version of the *Liberator's* masthead depicts Christ in his role as liberator, proclaiming, "I come to break the bonds of the oppressor." Similarly, the motto of Douglass's *North Star* declares, "Right is of no sex—Truth is of no color—God is the Father of us all, and all we are brethren." If Douglass belonged to his fellow oppressed countrymen (and women—he was an early supporter of the suffrage movement), he belonged equally to the biblical prophetic tradition. As his biographer David Blight puts it, "Douglass not only used the Hebrew prophets; he joined them." Douglass consistently "rooted his own story and especially the story of African Americans in the oldest and most powerful stories of the Hebrew prophets." Douglass's political and social advocacy is unintelligible without a theological understanding of the fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of all people.

Ultimately, Douglass strove to build a community keyed to the gospel rather than to political trends. He failed at times, getting drawn into heated and sometimes petty political disputes and caring more about wielding political power than about standing as a faithful witness, but the very existence of his papers helped people imagine a community of Christians committed to living out the gospel's valuation of each person—regardless of their race—as a child of God. Papers like the *North Star* can help us see those neighbors whom we might otherwise overlook; they can help us imagine ourselves as members of a community that cares about the plight of the enslaved and others who are oppressed and that takes action to participate in God's ongoing redemptive work.

—Taken from chapter eight, "Belonging Outside the Public Sphere"



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Q & A



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Jeffrey Bilbro (PhD, Baylor University) is the editor-in-chief of *Front Porch Republic*. He is also the author of *Loving God's Wildness: The Christian Roots of Ecological Ethics in American Literature* and *Virtues of Renewal: Wendell Berry's Sustainable Forms*, and coauthor (with Jack Baker) of *Wendell Berry and Higher Education: Cultivating Virtues of Place*.

How Is Our News Consumption Forming Us?

What led to your interest in and now sharing about a Christian response to the news?

Jeffrey Bilbro: In some circles there seems to be an assumption that being informed is a moral duty. I wanted to articulate a practical theology of the news that might help Christians in particular—and thoughtful people in general—consider what they are obliged to attend to. My primary audience then is Christian news junkies, people who have become increasingly caught up in the news cycle but who may have nagging questions about whether it's healthy to begin each day with the latest outrage. It should be of interest also to thoughtful Christians who feel like they should care about the news but aren't sure why. This book will help such readers develop a theology of the news and evaluate their own relationship to the news.

What is your main thesis in *Reading the Times*?

Bilbro: Too often the light of the news media competes with the divine light instead of serving it. While the *Washington Post* claims that "democracy dies in darkness," much foolishness also dies when the media's bright lights turn off. But acknowledging the vapid nature of most news today doesn't mean that Christians should simply ignore contemporary events. Instead we can discern a long tradition—stretching from the Old Testament prophets to Jesus to the church fathers to many saintly contemplatives and social advocates—that models a way of responding wisely to current affairs. Framing the importance of the news in terms of democracy may not offer sufficient guidance—after all, how much do we really need to know in order to fill out a ballot every year or two? But as Christians, our citizenship in heaven and God's call to love our neighbor have far-reaching implications for how we should attend to the news. What do we need to know to love our neighbors well? Or to frame the question differently, To what do we need to attend in order to live faithfully in this place and in this time? These are the questions the gospel calls us to answer, and they are much more compelling and difficult questions than asking simply what we need to know to be informed voters.

How do you hope your book contributes to Christian discussions on the news?

Bilbro:

- Recover voices from the past, particularly the nineteenth century when industrial technologies were transforming the news industry, to help us better navigate our digital media ecology
- Assess recent proposals to address fake news and a post-fact world and suggest these are symptoms of deeper problems regarding the way we form communities through digital media
- Digest the implications of Erich Auerbach's *Mimesis* and put it in conversation with theological reflections on time in order to propose how we should interpret and value current events



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