

Nietzsche for Kids

by Thomas E. Woods, Jr.

The Letters of Ayn Rand
 Edited by Michael S. Berliner
 New York: Dutton;
 681 pp., \$34.95



It is a rare polemicist who makes a successful career in fiction. But in *The Fountainhead* (1943) and *Atlas Shrugged* (1957)—and with all the subtlety of dropping a grand piano on her reader's head—Ayn Rand conveyed her harsh philosophy to a broad audience and gained what has invariably been described as a cult following. Rand's philosophy of Objectivism, which championed reason, egoism, and capitalism, viewed man as a "heroic figure." Anything that detracted from his proper stature it cast furiously aside. The church was thus a frequent target of Randian invective, for just as man should not subordinate his will to that of the mob, as the socialists demanded, neither should he kneel before any god.

While legendary for her ideological rigidity, Rand was not entirely without her virtues. In a collectivist age, she understood what made leftists tick. In her published work and now in her *Letters*, she acknowledged the impotence of mere economic theory against an onslaught that was fundamentally moral and ideological. And as an inveterate enemy of any kind of religion, she was acutely sensitive to the kind of secular eschatology and millennialism so common in socialist theory. (Rand thus dismissed both Christians and socialists as "mystics.") Hence her criticism of Ludwig von Mises, perhaps the greatest economist of the 20th century. She was a great admirer of Mises, to be sure, but, like Murray Rothbard, Rand denied that the economist *qua* activist could divorce economics from ethics and still hope to be persuasive. Mises "did prove, all right, that collectivist economics don't work," she wrote. "And he failed to convert a single collectivist."

But Rand took this appreciation of ideology to absurd lengths. In her per-

sonal life, even trivial events became charged with ideological significance. Her letters reveal, among other examples, a telling incident in which her young niece innocently asked her aunt and uncle to lend her \$25. An extremely reluctant Rand agreed to lend the money, with a fixed repayment schedule, along with the following warning: "If, when the debt becomes due, you tell me that you can't pay me because you needed a new pair of shoes or a new coat or you gave the money to somebody in the family who needed it more than I do . . . I will write you off as a rotten person and I will never speak or write to you again. . . . I would like to teach you, if I can, very early in life, the idea of a self-respecting, self-supporting, responsible, *capitalistic* person."

Setting aside the pros and cons of lending this particular sum, the very idea of natural obligations was utterly foreign to Rand. "No honest person believes that he is obliged to support his relatives," she wrote. "I don't believe it and will not do it." For Rand, *every* human relationship took on the character of a market transaction. She repeatedly denounced the idea, for example, that children necessarily owe their parents even respect or love. Everything in life must be *earned*. Anything else would be irrational, and therefore anathema.

Her understanding of Christianity—from her erroneous interpretation of the injunction to "love thy neighbor as thyself" to her ignorant and contemptuous dismissal of Original Sin—was simply embarrassing. But to explain such things to Rand would have been a waste of time. She had made up her mind. For the most part, she evaluated Christianity not as a creed that could be shown to be true or false but as a violation of her own private ethical system. Indeed, while Voltaire believed that if God did not exist, it would have been necessary to create him, Rand seems to have agreed with Bukharin: if God did exist, it would be necessary to destroy Him.

This is not to suggest that Rand believed nothing that could be described as religious. Her outlook, as she explained in her introduction to the 25th anniversary edition of *The Fountainhead*, was one of "man-worship," a belief system shorn of religion's "man-debasing

aspects." Protagonist Howard Roark, she explained to Frank Lloyd Wright, "represents my conception of man as god, of the absolute human ideal." It is revealing that Rand's ex-boyfriend, Nathaniel Branden, now writes books with titles like *The Power of Self-Esteem* and *The Psychology of Self-Esteem*. Man-worship must be depressing work.

If Russell Kirk was correct that the conservative shuns the confines of ideology, Rand did well to disassociate herself from the conservative movement. Here was a woman who formulated a distinct ideology and, to the exclusion of all else, proceeded to order her life, down to the smallest detail, according to its demands. Her letters will stand as a curious postscript to an exceedingly strange chapter in the history of philosophy.

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Patriotic Gore

by J.O. Tate

America First! Its History,
 Culture, and Politics

by Bill Kauffman
 Amherst, New York: Prometheus Books;
 296 pp., \$25.95



This volume is particularly notable for readers of this journal for two reasons: First, some of it has appeared in these pages, and, secondly and more importantly, the truths it conveys have been a part of the core vision of *Chronicles* as, literally, a magazine of American culture. But I think too that there are certain flaws in Kauffman's version of the essential American culture—that culture, like others, having shown contradictions we might attribute more to human nature than to political theory.

Bill Kauffman deserves much credit for the good he has done in revising some of the clichés, the received opinions that,

dominating the media and the academy, have distorted our sense of American history. Going back to original sources, reading neglected texts, and rethinking old issues, he has refreshed our sense of ourselves and of our sense of nonsense. In doing so, he has stepped on many a toe, for there are a host of political reasons why convenient myths are broadcast today with religious fervor. The self-evident collapse of liberalism has exposed to everyone what a few have long known; the rationale of Big Government, if it was ever justified, no longer holds.

A primary rationale for Leviathan has been the warmaking power, which is why Kauffman has devoted much attention to the America Firsters of 1940-41. I think it is here that Kauffman, as a revisionist who has reconstituted the sense of forgotten days, has done his best work. He has revived some of the leaders of that movement as thinkers and as individuals, restoring them to our historical imagination. His treatment of Hamlin Garland and Amos Pinchot shows a background to isolationism that has roots both populist and patrician, and personal qualities that are appealing. His reconsideration of the literary side of isolationism is revealing, uniting in his view Robinson Jeffers, Kathleen Norris, Edgar Lee Masters, Edmund Wilson, John P. Marquand, John Dos Passos, Sinclair Lewis, and William Saroyan. His point is that before Pearl Harbor and Hitler's declaration of war, America First was a rational and respectable movement that had precedence in the best American traditions as sanctioned by Washington and Jefferson—and even Hamilton—among the founders, and by widespread and thoughtful opposition to the “splendid little war” of 1898. Kauffman has made his point, and in so doing he has examined the charges of anti-Semitism that have been leveled against the America Firsters. His conclusion, based on the evidence, is to dismiss most of those charges.

Was there indeed a movement to precipitate America's entry into the Second World War? Kauffman's look at Anglophile Hollywood reminds us of the celebration of the British Empire that was mounted by Hollywood, and shows us that subsequent revelations by William Stephenson and Michael Korda have literally vindicated the charges brought by Senator Nye. His amusing essay on Alice Roosevelt Longworth re-

minds us that not everyone was reverential about FDR. His book reminds us that neither was, or is, everyone reverential about the Popular Front mentality that seems to have rewritten the national history. In such pages, and others devoted to such individualists and rambunctious reformers as the late Edward Abbey and the alive and kicking John McClaughry, Kauffman is as entertaining as he is informative.

I must say that I am less satisfied with other aspects of Kauffman's presentation. His remarks on Ross Perot and Pat Buchanan have been already rendered obsolete by events, though I think Kauffman's sense that there is a national grassroots movement in the direction of isolationism has much truth to it. Application of theory is contingent at best, anyway. But I cannot share Kauffman's admiration for Gore Vidal, whose interminable rehashes of American history that everyone should know always recur to celebrating the ineffable wonderfulness of Gore Vidal, and whose fictions are either exercises in camp or, what is worse, boring historical novels that make Thomas B. Costain look like Shakespeare.

I cannot share either a related though unnecessary hostility to William F. Buckley, Jr., who, it must be said, has written the best column in this country for decades, who has been an indispensable leader of the conservative movement for those same decades, and who, more than any other prominent American in the last 40 years, has personified the once unquaint term *gentleman*. While I am at it, neither do I believe that there is any such thing as a “Catholic Right,” that “gay-bashing” is an adequate term for resistance to homosexual aggression, or that anticommunism was a pretext for imperialism.

On the whole, I think that Bill Kauffman's vision of a yeoman America that looks after itself is authentic and in the best tradition of our country. But we must admit as well that there are other, baser traditions that go deep in our history—in our national psyche. Washington was tough with the Whiskey Rebellion. Jefferson—Jefferson!—precipitated Manifest Destiny and empire with the Louisiana Purchase. Who, seeing such an opportunity, would have turned it down? Why did Vermont farmboys burn houses and steal chickens in Virginia? Why did Alabama farmboys fight for independence while their leaders

eyed Cuba, and more of Mexico? Americans have not resisted the masked temptation of power, and have always been contaminated by it—like the rest of humanity. Our biggest mistakes have been the subtlest ones, and insofar as they were inevitable, they were tragic.

One of Bill Kauffman's most powerful implications is that untruth is no basis for reform. Another is that now is the time to undo the damage that has been done at home. At the end of the Cold War, we have a chance to rethink our policies—and our national mythology as well. Toward that end, Kauffman has made an important and very readable contribution.

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Equal Time by Philip Jenkins

God: A Biography
by Jack Miles

New York: Alfred A. Knopf;
446 pp., \$27.50

The Origin of Satan
by Elaine Pagels

New York: Random House;
214 pp., \$23.00



If the best-seller lists are any guide, something odd is stirring in American attitudes toward religion, and specifically toward the Judeo-Christian tradition. For decades, it has been a commonplace that religious belief represents a critical demarcation line in class and intellectual belief, and that educated elites not only do not believe, they do not care. Recently, though, religious books of varying quality have been in vogue, and not just feathery items about obnoxious angels.

Far from suggesting an imminent religious revival, such works ostensibly rest on the assumption that we are now sufficiently removed from the religious dream to be able to revisit it with objectivity. God and Satan are not only dead, they are so far back in history that even their surviving relatives should not object to a frank biography. However, the two books reviewed here suggest a very