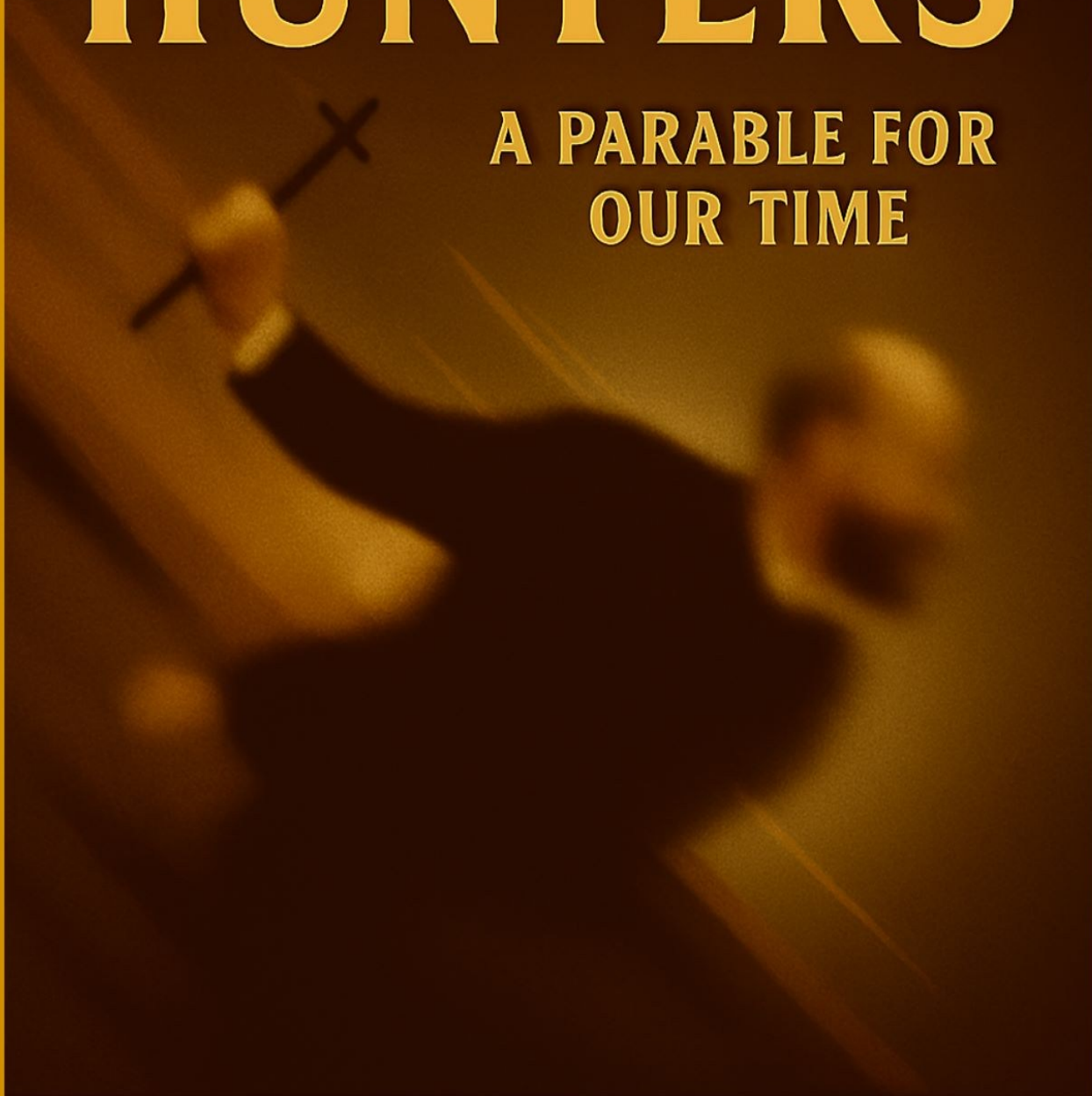


THE HERETIC HUNTERS

A PARABLE FOR
OUR TIME



PETER FAUR

Caleb Sets the Trap

On the last day of fall semester, 2024, Hillman Gehrke invited any final questions from his Religions of the World students. One of them, a senior who sat in the back row and always wore a clerical collar despite not being ordained, raised his hand.

“So, Dr. Gehrke, you believe people other than Christians can be saved. Is that right?”

Gehrke suspected ulterior motives of his questioner. The professor knew who the student’s father was, but he didn’t care. Gehrke trusted his God, was confident in his beliefs, and besides, he had tenure. He wasn’t about to pull punches with some brash undergraduate. He had something to say, and he saw no reason not to say it.

He walked to the whiteboard at the front of the room. He paused for a bit, wanting to make sure everyone focused on him. Then, with a flourish, the Oberhausen University professor drew a line that spanned the board.

“Okay, this line represents all the people who have ever lived on earth.”

Next, he made a mark about ten percent in from the line’s starting point.

“Everything to the left here, that’s all the people alive today.”

The next mark fell about a third of the way along the remaining segment.

“This third here, that’s all the Christians in the world today. About 2.6 billion in all.”

His final mark left a microscopically small segment.

“That’s all the members of the Confessional Lutheran Church in America, which runs your university. If you think only CLCA Lutherans are saved, however you define that word, you’re nuts! If you think only Christians are saved, you’re nuts!

“What does ‘saved’ mean, anyway? I know, most people think it means you’ll die and go to heaven, and okay, I believe that too. I say it every week in church. ‘I believe in the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting.’ I do. I believe there’s hope, and truth, in the promise that death doesn’t have the final say over us.

“But ‘saved’ means so much more than that. It means you’re set free from having to live in fear. It means you’re redeemed to live beyond yourself, to do what you can to make life better for those around you. It means you’re given grace, power, and humility to love and be loved.

“Some people in the CLCA think the way to salvation is through pure doctrine, as if you

can trade your intellectual understanding and your affirmation of Christianity for your ticket to heaven. But isn't that saying your salvation depends on something other than God's love for you? I tell you, most people don't have a clue about doctrine, or even Christianity, but God loves them, regardless. And if they can live for people and things other than themselves, then yes, I'm willing to say they're 'saved.'

"Take a look at I John 4 sometime. 'Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love.' I think that's a strong indication that God knows and loves even those who haven't heard of Jesus, and they know and love him too, even if not by name."

The student in the clerical collar wasn't satisfied.

"But Dr. Gehrke, Jesus himself said no one comes to the Father except through him. Are you denying that?"

"Not at all. But we Lutherans say people don't find God, can't find God. God finds them. And scripture says God is love, and God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself. Did you hear that? The *world*!

"Jesus also told the story of the shepherd who had ninety-nine sheep in the fold and went back for the missing one. Who are we to say God isn't trying to bring everyone to himself now, despite the religious traditions they're born into or follow? And who are we to say he won't succeed, on this side of the grave or even the other side? I don't think it's our business to judge God's relationship with anyone else.

"And I'll tell you this. I have friends who are secular humanists, downright atheists, not religious at all. Most days I'd rather spend time with them than with some of my fellow clergy. I'd encourage you to seek out people who've lived life outside the confines of the CLCA. Be in the world, and despite what they tell you, don't hesitate to rub shoulders with the world! You'll be much richer for it, more thoughtful, more useful, more complete.

"Now, before we call it a day, let me leave all of you with a question. If Christ took a week to live among you today, would he spend his time sorting out complicated doctrinal controversies, or would he try to teach people more about how to love and help one another? What did he do when he lived among us? Cogitate on it for a while, and send me an email once you have your answer. I hope you all have a great Christmas vacation."

With that, the 54-year-old theologian donned his tweed sportscoat, gathered his papers, and left the lecture hall to walk into the frigid December air of Des Moines. He had introduced yet another semester's worth of students to the thirteen principles of faith articulated by Jewish philosopher Moses Maimonides, the Hindu notion that truth must be sought in multiple sources, and the Buddhist understanding of life's four noble truths. A sizable number of his colleagues in the CLCA would have characterized those religions as fatally flawed, but Gehrke didn't countenance that kind of talk.

An eavesdropper on the murmuring he left behind would have seen a microcosm of the CLCA itself. A few students stood fully behind Gehrke's comments. Most, those who came from the small Midwestern towns that embraced a quiet, conventional Lutheranism, knew they'd heard something outside their experience, but they resolved to cogitate on Gehrke's thoughts, as he would counsel them to do. Some disagreed with Gehrke but saw no reason to cause trouble. And one, Caleb Haller—Mr. Clerical Collar—smirked as he pocketed his iPhone. He had just videoed a storehouse of evidence for his father, the Reverend Otto Haller, who was rapidly building a reputation as the CLCA's premier heretic hunter.

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