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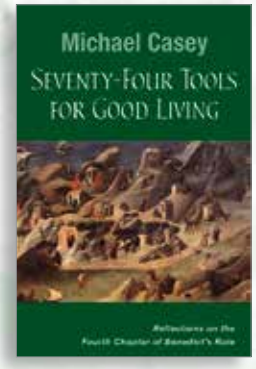

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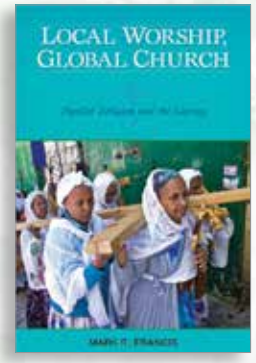

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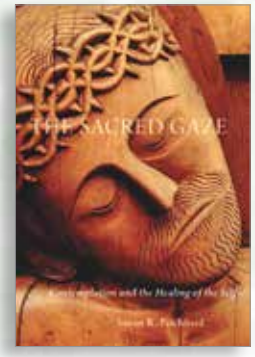

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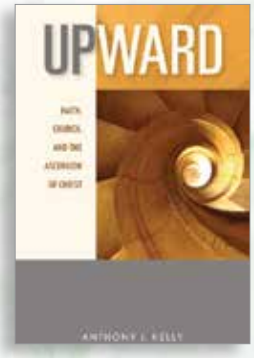

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Advertising Manager
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commonwealads@gmail.com
540-349-5736

Publisher
Thomas Baker

Commonweal [ISSN 0010-3330], a review of public affairs, religion, literature, and the arts, is published biweekly, except in April, July, August, and November, when it is published monthly, by Commonweal Foundation, 475 Riverside Drive, Rm. 405, New York, NY 10115. Telephone: (212) 662-4200. E-mail: editors@commonwealmagazine.org. Fax: (212) 662-4183. POSTMASTER: send address changes to *Commonweal*, P.O. Box 3000, Denville, NJ 07834-9982.

Commonweal is indexed in Reader's Guide to Periodical Literature, Book Review Digest, and Book Review Index. *Commonweal* articles are available at many libraries and research facilities via ProQuest and OpinionArchives. Serials Data program No.: ISSN 0010-3330. Periodicals postage paid at New York, NY, and at additional offices.
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Cover design: Cecilia Guerrero Rezes

LETTERS

Unbelief; just war; celibacy

INCONVENIENT NEWS

Terry Eagleton's essay on Nietzsche, "An Unbelieving Age" (March 21), made for bracing Lenten reading. I fear that my own thinking about the church and the Scriptures often fits into Eagleton's category of "hubristic humanism." Distracted by its poetry and history, I find it all too easy to forget that the Gospel is the story of God's willing death.

But there have always been a few who not only get it but actually live it, and somehow the church still manages, at times, to communicate the "grossly inconvenient news" that we must change our lives.

Of what might such a change consist? In her recent book *Resisting Structural Evil*, Cynthia Moe-Lobeda offers Christian responses to the Union of Concerned Scientists' call for religion to evoke "a new ethic…for caring for ourselves and for the earth." I recommend the book to anyone who was as inspired as I was by Eagleton's piece.

ELIZABETH POREBA
New York, N.Y.

THE LEAST OF THESE

Thank you for publishing Terry Eagleton's "An Unbelieving Age." If I understand him correctly, in the end he claims that the solution to the hypocrisy of religion rests in a practicing of the gospel of the poor and the powerless. The Catholic Worker thinkers have recognized this without smugly calling out their capitalist Christian neighbors—as Eagleton does, quite convincingly.

DICK GAFFNEY
New York, N.Y.

TOO PROTESTANT

I find little to disagree with in Ronald E. Osborn's "Just-War Illusions" (March 21). I am not sure why he should see my own "just war" argument against attacking Syria ("Don't Attack Syria," September 5, online) as something he wishes to denounce. If I were primarily keen on reaching "policy-makers," as he seems to think, why would I have chosen a leading Catholic magazine as my venue?

In fact, I was hoping to use just-war criteria to persuade nonpacifist Christians that the apparently imminent bombing of Syria was morally and politically unjustifiable. In any case, I think just-war pacifists ought to be able to do more than urge us all, rather lamely, "to work for peace." In that spirit let me offer a modest proposal.

As a Protestant, I have found that when I try to address my nonpacifist co-religionists about the injustices of any particular war, I first have to explain to them what the criteria are by which to make an assessment. Educated Catholics, by and large, can be counted on to know at least that much. Nevertheless, my problem with the just-war tradition as understood by the Catholic Church is that it is simply too Protestant. Not unlike Osborn, it is finally too willing to leave everything up to individual discretion.

What is needed is an institutionalized mechanism of discernment. Why should it not be possible, at least in the most extreme cases, for an authoritative body of the church to state that no Christian can justifiably take part in a particular unjust war? As the U.S. bishops' pastoral letter on war and peace (*The Challenge of Peace*,1983) recognized, the just-war tradition, when thought through, is essentially a theory of selective conscientious objection. Just-war pacifists might do well to work for the day when the church is equipped to call all believers, when necessary, to the costly discipleship of massive and communal noncooperation.

GEORGE HUNSINGER
Princeton, N.J.

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From the Editors

Voting Rights & Wrongs

President Barack Obama recently joined former presidents George W. Bush, Bill Clinton, and Jimmy Carter at the President Lyndon Baines Johnson Library in Austin, Texas, to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of the passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act. It is no exaggeration to say that the Civil Rights Act, and the Voting Rights Act of the following year, were the most transformational political developments of the past century in the United States. It was a difficult, often violent struggle, but in the end what was implicit in the nation's founding documents finally became explicit in federal law. The Civil Rights Act made it illegal to discriminate on the basis of race, color, religion, sex, or national origin in public accommodations. The Voting Rights Act addressed discrimination in elections, ultimately dismantling a system that had shut African Americans out of voting booths for nearly a hundred years.

A few days after his Austin speech the president was in New York City to speak to Rev. Al Sharpton's National Action Network, and he took that opportunity to remind his audience that the struggle for equal rights never ends and to call attention to a disturbing political development. "The right to vote is threatened today in a way that it has not been since the Voting Rights Act became law," Obama said. "Across the country, Republicans have led efforts to pass laws making it harder, not easier, for people to vote." With uncharacteristic severity, Obama has called the effort to restrict voting "un-American."

The president's words were not partisan hyperbole but an accurate description of what some Republican governors and legislatures have been doing. In 2006, the Senate reauthorized the Voting Rights Act by a 98–0 vote, a rare example of bipartisan consensus. Unfortunately, that did not stop the Supreme Court's five Republican-appointed justices from ruling Section 4 of the act unconstitutional last June. In doing so, the Court removed the requirement that states with long histories of voting discrimination get preapproval from the Justice Department before changing their voting regulations. As a consequence, Republicans in nine states have pushed through laws with strict photo ID requirements as well as a variety of limitations on early voting, extended voting hours (including weekends), same-day registration, and absentee voting. All of these restrictions would disproportionately affect minority voters. Many African Americans, especially those living in cities, do not have the state-issued photo IDs, such as driver's licenses or passports, required by the laws. Many cannot get to the polls until early evening. Sunday voting, often organized around church services in African American communities, is especially important for increasing turnout. How can prohibiting Sunday voting, as Ohio has just done, be anything but discriminatory?

This concerted effort to narrow the voting base has been especially prominent in so-called swing states such as Ohio, Wisconsin, and North Carolina. The Justice Department has already filed lawsuits in North Carolina and Texas to prevent dubious restrictions from taking effect. Attorney General Eric Holder has made it clear that protecting access to the ballot box will be a priority, and he has even called for expanding the voting rights of felons who have paid their debt to society. That is not likely to be a popular cause, but it is a just one.

Whatever one's political allegiance, transparently partisan attempts to undermine the Voting Rights Act should be worrisome to all Americans. Republicans have long maintained that stricter regulations are needed to curb voting fraud, but evidence of such corruption is almost nonexistent. Now Republicans argue that limiting access to the polls is needed to bring about greater "uniformity" in how voters in different parts of a state are treated. Yet that too sounds like a solution in search of a problem. When it comes to voting, the first priority of those in both parties should be removing unnecessary obstacles and encouraging as many Americans as possible to exercise the franchise. As Fr. Theodore Hesburgh, former chair of the U.S. Civil Rights Commission, once put it, "Voting is a civic sacrament."

Republican legislators should think twice before stifling the voice of the people they seek to represent, for even if partisan advantage is won in the short term, alienating the majority is a sure route to political irrelevance in the long term. Some within the party recognize that danger. Wisconsin state senator Dale Schultz has suggested that his fellow Republicans are digging their own grave in this reckless effort to restrict the voting rights of others. "Making it more difficult for people to vote," he said, "is not a good sign for a party that wants to attract more people."

Democracy is first and foremost about the challenge of self-government: citizens not only have the right to select the nation's lawmakers but also have a responsibility to participate in making those decisions. Trust and faith in the electoral process is as essential as it is fragile. So it is especially disheartening when democratic means are used to ensure undemocratic ends, as these new laws attempt to do. You might even call it un-American. ■

Rita Ferrone

Room at the Font

IS THE RCIA STILL WORKING?

It's the night of the Easter Vigil. After the lighting of the new fire, the glow of candles in a darkened church is a vivid reminder that the light of Christ, shared in baptism, lights up our common life. The restoration of the baptism of adults to its primary place in the church's ensemble of rites for the Easter solemnity underscores the treasure we have, and share, in baptism. But baptism is in trouble in the United States. Not only is infant baptism declining throughout Catholic dioceses, but adult baptism has been diminishing too—and at a startling rate.

In 2000, the U.S. bishops published a scientific study (the only one to date) about how the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults (RCIA) is faring. The news was encouraging. Seventy-five percent of U.S. Catholic parishes were using it. Most people who participated rated their experience "good." RCIA was also shown to have the best retention rate of any sacramental preparation process in the church today: 64 percent of Catholics who went through RCIA attended Mass weekly after initiation; 50 percent were active in parish ministries and committees.

The bishops affirmed that the RCIA "has the power to transform parishes when implemented as the rite is intended." No other rite of the postconciliar era has received such a strong evaluation, but the bishops' praise seemed fitting when one saw what was happening. The active involvement of sponsors, parishioners, and teams of laypeople, as well as clergy and pastoral staff, produced a revitalization of the parish from the base up. For many, RCIA was perceived not merely as a means of adding new members to the rolls, but as a way of rejuvenating the faith and increasing the joy of those already in the pews.

According to Balthasar Fischer, chairman of the committee that reformed the rites of baptism after Vatican II, those who worked on the new rites thought a lot about the idea of *mater ecclesia*. They hoped that the renewal of baptism would eventually—certainly not in their lifetimes—lead to a deeper sense of the whole church as the bearer of new life. Yet as early as 1987, when Fischer visited the United States and was introduced to examples of RCIA in parishes, he remarked with astonishment that it was already happening.

The bishops mandated the rite in 1988, and the number of candidates steadily increased. Then the bottom dropped out. From 2005 to 2010 adult baptisms fell by 41 percent. Those losses were masked by a slight gain in the number of adult receptions into full communion—those already baptized in another Christian community. But then those totals began to fall too.

The dropoff has slowed, but the losses were never regained. There are 49 percent fewer adult baptisms today than there were in 2000. In 2013, the North American Forum on the Catechumenate, the premier agency for training in the ministries of Christian initiation, closed its doors for lack of participants in its institutes. The bishops have not given much sign of having noticed; their attention seems focused elsewhere.

Why the sharp downturn? It's not for lack of talk about "the new evangelization." Short of another survey, however, one can only speculate. The sexual-abuse crisis has taken its toll in morale and money. Still, it's worth noting that despite sustained media accounts of the scandal beginning in 2002, the number of adult baptisms held steady for three more years. The decline did not begin until John Paul II died and Benedict XVI was elected. Perhaps people who were considering becoming Catholic perceived a change in direction in the church and decided, "This is not for me."

Will the "Francis effect" reverse this trend? Early reports are promising, but the number of adults seeking baptism would have to double in order to reach pre-2005 levels in absolute terms, and increase even more to hold its own relative to the growth of the Catholic population as a whole. To bank on Pope Francis as some sort of deus ex machina without a corresponding effort to rebuild the conditions that made adult baptism grow before 2005 would be absurd.

No, we need to return to what spurred the growth in the first place: hospitality, a sense of faith as a journey we undertake together, reliance on the word of God and human experience over textbooks, and the celebration of rites that boldly use symbols. If we are to revive the mandate of *mater ecclesia*, the bishops must embrace the liturgical reforms of Vatican II, instead of paring them away. ■

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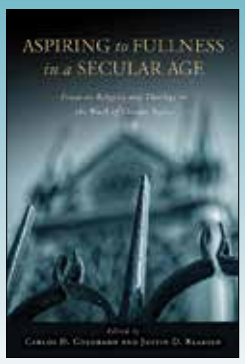

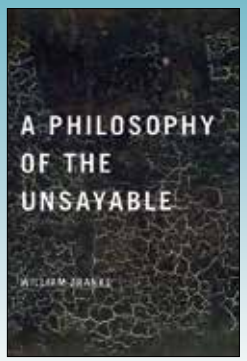

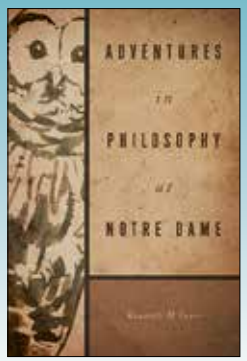

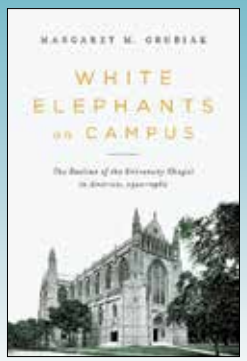

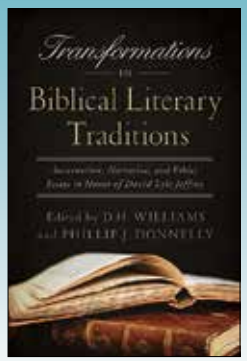

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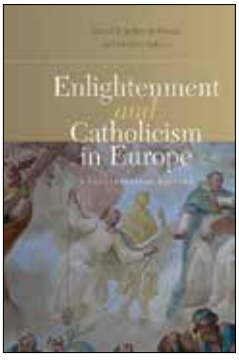

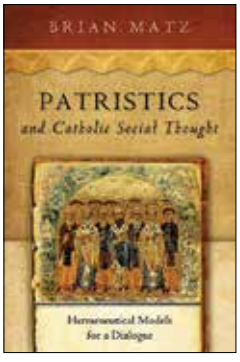

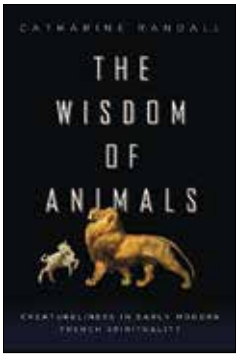

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Charles De Wolf

Abe's Second Chance

LETTER FROM JAPAN

"Even the heart free / Of all longing for this world / Is moved to sadness, / When in the autumn twilight / The snipe rises from the marsh." So wrote Sato Norikyo (1118–90), who at the age of twenty-two abandoned the Heian court and his position as a Palace Guard to become a Buddhist monk, taking the name Saigyo. The pensive mood of his poetry no doubt reflects the turbulent times in which he lived. Power had passed from the refined but effete nobility to the ruthlessly competing warrior clans, their struggle culminating, five years before the poet's death, in the triumph of the Minamoto (Genji) over the Taira (Heike) in a famous sea battle off the coast of southern Japan and the drowning of six-year-old Emperor Antoku.

Political transitions in Japan today are far more peaceful, but something of the spirit of Saigyo and of his fellow monks remains. In the wake of the earthquake and tsunami of March 11, 2011, there is, to be sure, the ubiquitous slogan *Nihon ganbare* ("Carry on, Japan!"), along with the Chinese character read *kizuna* ("the ties that bind"). But the Japanese are an old people, both historically and demographically, and the youthful cry of "Yes, we can!" fits neither their character nor their culture.

In late 2012, fifty-nine-year-old Shinzo Abe returned to power, having previously served as the youngest postwar prime minister from 2006 to 2007, before abruptly resigning for reasons of poor health and low popularity. When his two successors floundered, Japan appeared to be on the verge of a genuine two-party system: the voters turned for the first time to the Democratic Party of Japan. The experiment was, however, short-lived: disillusioned with three DPJ prime ministers, they have given Abe a second chance. Vowing to pull the nation out of the economic doldrums, he has managed to maintain the support of a still wary public.

Shinzo Abe

PHOTO: OGIYOSHISAN

Like his father and paternal grandfather before him, Abe began his political career as a representative of Yamaguchi, the southernmost prefecture on Japan's main island of Honshu, where his family had long prospered as both landlords and brewers. His maternal grandfather and great-uncle were both prime ministers; his father was postwar Japan's longest-serving foreign minister. Though arguably born with silver chopsticks in his mouth, Abe has had to struggle to prove himself. His father, Shintaro Abe, was admitted to Tokyo Imperial University before even finishing secondary school, only to find himself drafted into the Imperial Navy in the midst of the Second World War. He eventually completed his studies in 1949, with Japan still under the Occupation. Defying his father-in-law, then Prime Minister Nobusuke Kishi, Shintaro Abe ran for office and was elected to the Diet at the tender age of thirty-four.

The younger Abe graduated from Seikei University, a much less prestigious private university on the outskirts of Tokyo, before studying for a time at the University of Southern California and then working in the steel industry and various government positions. Two years after Shintaro Abe's death in 1991, Shinzo Abe won the seat that both his father and his paternal grandfather had held. His efforts on behalf of Japanese citizens abducted by North Korea during the late 1970s and early '80s were a major factor in his rise to prominence; he faced not only fierce denials from the North Korean regime and the Japan Socialist Party but also the foot-dragging of the notoriously self-protective Ministry of Foreign Affairs. It was only in 2002 that the North Koreans finally admitted that Japanese citizens had indeed been kidnapped.

Abe's economic policies, quickly labeled "Abenomics," call for a lower yen as part of an effort to end deflation, Japan's own version of stimulus packages, and deregulation as a means to spur economic growth. Abe has wasted no time with the first of these policies. The U.S. dollar, which at one point in 2011 fell to 75 yen, is now fluctuating between 101 and 103. That has been good news for exporters such as Toyota but mixed news at best for importers and budget-conscious housewives. In early autumn, Abe confirmed the government's intention to raise the consumption tax, currently 5 percent, to 8 percent. The change is scheduled to take

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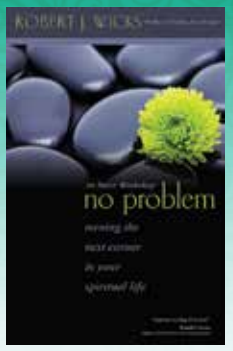

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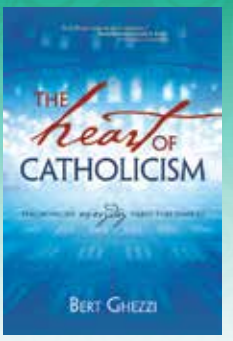

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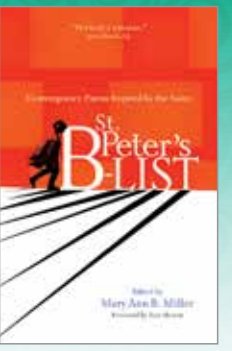

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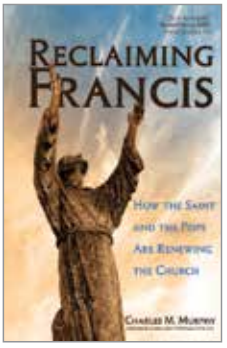

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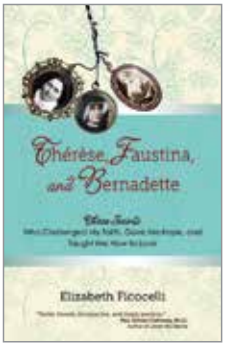

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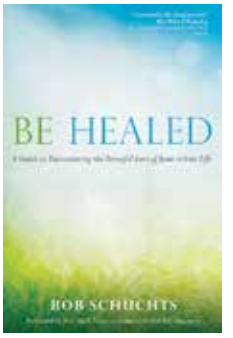

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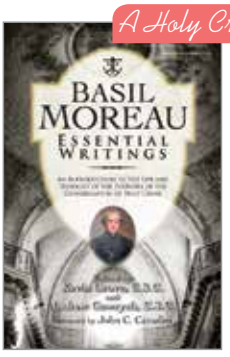

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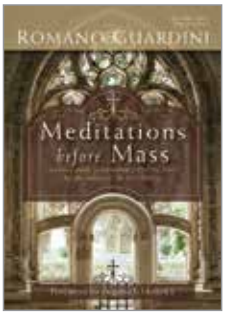

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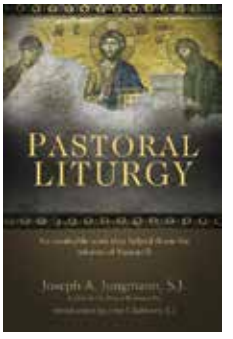

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effect this month. Most Japanese seem to have accepted the government's argument that this move is necessary because of Japan's internal debts and the cost of supporting a rapidly aging population. The phrase one hears again and again is *shi-kata-ga-nai* ("it can't be helped"). But the Japanese left remains adamantly opposed to the tax hike, insisting that the revenues are most likely to be used for pork-barrel public-works projects, not the ailing welfare system.

There is more controversy over the Abe government's support for the free-trade agreement known as the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), now being negotiated by Australia, Brunei, Chile, Canada, Japan, Malaysia, Mexico, New Zealand, Peru, Singapore, the United States, and Vietnam. Japan's farmers, who have been staunch supporters of Abe's Liberal Democratic Party, are opposed to the proposed agreement. So is Japan's overwhelmingly urban Communist Party. Both the farmers and the Communists fear that TPP's chief beneficiary will be the United States and that the long-term result will be further cultural homogenization and loss of national sovereignty. For those Japanese who support the agreement, two major attractions are tariff-free automobile exports and cheaper imports of liquid natural gas.

Abe is commonly described in the foreign media as a neonationalist. He has dabbled in revisionist thinking about Japan's militarist past, called for revision of the constitution to allow Japan to have an official military force, and insisted on Japan's territorial claims in the face of challenges from both China and South Korea. Overriding fierce resistance from the opposition in the Japanese Diet, the ruling party passed the *tokutei-himitsu-hogo-hōan*, the Special Intelligence Protection Bill. The day after Christmas, Abe marked his first year in office by paying an official visit to the controversial Yasukuni Shrine—it was the first time a prime minister had done so since 2006. Though he insisted that he was not there to "pay homage to war criminals" and that Japan must never again resort to arms, China and South Korea both reacted angrily. The Obama administration, already cool toward Abe, has expressed its "disappointment" with Japan's new assertiveness. But doubts about the ultimate reliability of the United States as Japan's protector have led hardliners to reason that they have nothing to lose: *Doku wo kurawaba, sara made* ("If one must take poison, one might as well eat the dish as well.") Still, there are no signs that the Japanese people as a whole are in any mood for militancy. Polls clearly suggest that they voted for an improved economy, not for further squabbling with the country's neighbors.

The now elderly minority with personal experience of the war is dwindling, but its terrible lessons, reinforced by sixty-eight years of pacifist education, remain deeply embedded in the collective memory. Japan's ultra-nationalists, including the thuggish demonstrators who drive through the streets in trucks blaring militarist songs from the bad old days, have drawn a lot of attention from Western journalists, but they remain a fringe phenomenon, loathed and despised by the great majority of their fellow citizens.

At Waseda University in Tokyo, where I teach once a week, a student with a loudspeaker stands in front of a large placard, speaking in ardent opposition to any revision to Article 9 of the Japanese Constitution: "Aspiring sincerely to an international peace based on justice and order, the Japanese people forever renounce war as a sovereign right of the nation." He has no audience, and passersby seem not to pay him the least attention. My own students in the Faculty of Law appear indifferent to political questions in general. Asked whether they would imitate the South Korean students who swim their way to contested islands to claim them for their country, my students look at me as if I had made a particularly feeble joke.

The announcement in early September that Tokyo has been selected to host the 2020 Olympics has been greeted with near universal jubilation. And in late November, close to the fiftieth anniversary of her father's death, Caroline Kennedy arrived in the capital to take on her duties as America's new ambassador. A diplomatic novice with little knowledge of Japan, she faces knotty issues, including the territorial conflict with China and the future of the locally unpopular Futenma Marine Corps Air Station on Okinawa. Still, the appointment was treated in the media with great fanfare, with photographs of her childhood in the White House and unprecedented coverage of her horse-drawn carriage ride to the Imperial Palace, where she was formally received. For a while there was much talk of a new era in U.S.-Japan relations, but then came Abe's Yasukuni Shrine visit, followed in late January by a tweet from Ambassador Kennedy, in which she condemned the annual dolphin hunt in Taiji, a coastal town in western Japan. Even Japanese with their own doubts about the practice were dismayed at what they saw as self-righteous interference in Japan's internal affairs, especially as the statement appeared to put both the ambassador and the U.S. government on the side of Japan-bashing Sea Shepherd, an extremist environmentalist group. Yoshihide Suga, the Abe government's soft-spoken chief cabinet secretary, responded with a defense of the Taiji fishermen, calling dolphins "a very important water resource."

The third anniversary of the Great East Japan Earthquake has now come and gone. Spring is in the air. Unofficial talks are taking place between Japan and North Korea, even as Prime Minister Abe joins hands with the United States and the European Union in condemning the Russian occupation of Crimea. Tomorrow, Vernal Equinox Day, Japan's department stores will be full of holiday shoppers, eager to make purchases before the consumer-tax hike takes effect. Amid the many vicissitudes of Japanese life, some things, it seems, are certain. ■

Charles De Wolf *is a linguist and translator of Japanese literature. He is professor emeritus at Keio University, where he continues to teach linguistics and comparative culture.*

'Being Prepared for Joy'

An interview with Christian Wiman

Anthony Domestico

Christian Wiman is the former editor of Poetry *magazine and a current faculty member at the Yale Institute of Sacred Music. He is the author of three collections of poetry, the most recent being* Every Riven Thing, *as well as a translation of Osip Mandelstam's poetry. In 2013, he published* My Bright Abyss: Meditation of a Modern Believer, *a work of prose that Marilynne Robinson described as possessing "a purifying urgency that is rare in this world." His new collection of poems,* Once in the West, *will be published by FSG in the fall.* Commonweal *literary columnist Anthony Domestico conducted the following interview by e-mail.*

Funding for this interview was provided by a grant from the Henry Luce Foundation.

ANTHONY DOMESTICO: You edited *Poetry* magazine for ten years. That grueling, very public, frequently controversial work must have influenced everything from the kinds of poetry you were reading to the hours in which you were working on your own stuff. How has your life—as a poet and as a reader—changed now that you're the former editor of *Poetry*?

CHRISTIAN WIMAN: Oh, Lord, my life has completely changed. Not only do I no longer have a hundred emails in my inbox every day, I'm also not buried up to my eyeballs in contemporary poetry.

I didn't like editing *Poetry* at first—or, more accurately, didn't like being known as the editor of *Poetry*. It didn't ac-

WITNESS

Typically cryptic, God said three weasels
slipping electric over the rocks
one current conducting them up the tree
by the river in the woods in the country
into which I walked
away and away and away;
and a moon-blued, cloud-strewn night sky
like an x-ray
with here a mass and there a mass
and everywhere a mass;
and to the tune of a two-year-old
storm of atoms
elliptically, electrically alive—
I will love you in the summertime, Daddy.
I will love you...in the summertime.

Once in the west I lay down dying
to see something other than the dying stars
so singularly clear, so unassailably there,
they made me reach for something other.
I said I will not bow down again
to the numinous ruins.
I said I will not violate my silence with prayer.
I said Lord, Lord
in the speechless way of things
that bear years, and hard weather, and witness.

—Christian Wiman

cord with the "image" I had of myself, for one thing, but I also didn't like negotiating the politics and personalities of the job, and I absolutely hated having to reject my friends. I would have resigned after two years had I not become sick. That trapped me—and, in a way, saved me. The great enemy for all of us is the "I" we interpose between ourselves and experience, the self we mistake for our soul. Nothing but difficulty destroys that "I."

I learned to look outward more, learned to think of the magazine as a means to support poets and poetry and not as some absurd extension of my own ego. I never felt quite myself in the job, but I did love the people I worked with, both inside and outside of the office. I'm proud of what we accomplished there, proud of the writers we discovered and what they've gone on to do, and I feel extremely grateful that I was given enough time to see things more clearly.

Now—poof—it's all gone, and I spend my days among people who don't know anything at all about the poetry world. (Some of them know quite a lot about poetry, but that's not what I mean.) It's frightening sometimes to have my familiar world, and my place in it, just vanish. But mostly it's a relief. There's a clarity of purpose to what I am doing now, which is engaging literature and religion with budding ministers and musicians and professors and social workers so that they can go out in the world and teach the word of God in ways this desperate and deafened culture can hear. It feels like a great privilege to be here and to have these students, and I am working hard to be worthy of it.

AD: You currently teach at the Yale Divinity School and the Yale Institute of Sacred Music, and you've taught previously at a host of other schools—Stanford, Northwestern, Lynchburg College, and the Prague School of Economics. How, if at all, has teaching changed your writing and reading? And how does teaching at a divinity school compare with teaching poetry within an English department?

CW: I wouldn't say that teaching (or editing) has ever had an effect on my writing, aside from the obvious way of demanding time. I work, when I work, in an iron cage of inspiration (if that metaphor sounds strange to you, you should try living it), and for better or worse I am impervious to the world when the world, through my work, is most available to me. I'm talking about poetry here, not prose, which is an altogether different order of experience.

Teaching at a divinity school is not at all similar to teaching in an English department, or at least teaching at Yale Divinity School isn't (for the record, my primary appointment is with the Institute of Sacred Music). I have enjoyed some of the courses I have taught in the past, but there has never before seemed to be so much at stake. This past fall I taught a seminar called Poetry and Faith, and we all read poetry as if our lives depended on it. Which, I suppose, they did. We had our last meeting in a chapel and ended that meeting with an unplanned prayer. Yes indeed, I'd say teaching here is a bit different from more secular situations.

Still, there are dangers for an artist in any academic environment. Academia rewards people who know their own minds and have developed an ironclad confidence in speaking them. That kind of assurance is death for an artist. The great thing about the Institute of Sacred Music in particular is that it is founded upon the assumption that art is essential to any creative life of faith, so a certain amount of existential stuttering is not simply allowed but actively encouraged.

AD: You're currently teaching a course called "Accidental Theologies," which you define as the kind of theology that gets done in seemingly nontheological texts—letters, poems, and novels, for example. Why are you drawn to this kind of

writing? What in particular interests you about the kind of theology that gets done in, say, the novels of Fanny Howe or Marilynne Robinson? And how do the pleasures you get from accidental theology differ from the pleasures you get from the more traditional theology of a Karl Barth or Hans Urs von Balthasar?

CW: I seem immune to ideas that have no concretion to them. Most systematic theology—modern theology, I should specify, like Barth or Balthazar—just bounces right off the stone of my brain. I don't mean that I don't enjoy it—I do—but it seems not to stick with me in any meaningful way, seems ungraspable the minute I've closed the book.

Embodied theology, though, ideas about God that have some music and physicality to them, ideas, that is to say, that aren't primarily ideas—these sorts of works I understand and love and am able to carry with me in my life and faith. I'm not ranking the ways one does theology, though; just diagnosing my own magpie method, which has its own strengths and weaknesses.

AD: Very broadly—and maybe reductively—speaking, we might classify Christian poets as falling into two camps: those who emphasize the Incarnation (W. H. Auden, for instance, and the Hopkins of "God's Grandeur") and those who emphasize the crucifixion (Geoffrey Hill and the Hopkins of the dark sonnets). Where would you locate yourself? Or do you resist that kind of categorization altogether?

CW: I would have thought myself resistant to such a categorization, but the way you've framed it is compelling—though perhaps we should add poems of the resurrection, like Stevie Smith's "The Airy Christ" ("For he does not wish that men should love him more than anything / Because he died; he only wishes they would hear him sing"), or Mary Karr's "Descending Theology: The Resurrection" ("it's your limbs he comes to fill, as warm water / shatters at birth, rivering every way"), or Geoffrey Hill's "Lachrimae Amantis":

> So many nights the angel of my house
> Has fed such urgent comfort through a dream,
> Whispered "your lord is coming, he is close"
>
> That I have drowsed half-faithful for a time
> Bathed in pure tones of promise and remorse:
> "Tomorrow I shall wake to welcome him."

This may not constitute a third category, since the resurrection is the seed, meaning, and final fruition of the incarnation.

In any event, I feel that there is a great deal of joy in my work of the past ten years, but I do get letters from people telling me to ditch the sackcloth and ashes, and I get tired of my own grimace in mirrors. Can one really just decide to be more joyful, though? One aspect of joy is the suspension of will—the obliteration of will, really—though probably there is an element of discipline in being prepared for joy, just as there is in being prepared for poetry. "Iridescent readiness," W. S. Di Piero calls it. And there are these lines from Richard Wilbur:

> Try to remember this: what you project
> Is what you will perceive; what you perceive
> With any passion, be it love or terror,
> May take on whims and powers of its own.

The thing is, we are always going to feel God's absence more than his presence. We are always going to feel the imprint and onslaught of necessity, which is the crucifixion, more than we feel the release and freedom of pure joy, which is the resurrection. The first we experience; the second, even when it emerges out of experience, we believe. In that tiny gap of grammar is an abyss of difference. Suffering we know and share intimately with Christ (it's how we bear it). Faith and hope are always imaginative—that is to say, projective—acts: "Tomorrow I shall wake to welcome him."

AD: Speaking of Hopkins, so much of your poetry channels his music, from your poem in *Every Riven Thing* (2010) "And I Said to My Soul, Be Loud," which begins, "Madden me back to an afternoon / I carry in me / not like a wound / but like a will against wound," to your 2012 translation of Osip Mandelstam's "Black Earth," which begins, "Earthcurds, wormdirt, worked to a rich tilth." What is it that draws you to Hopkins? Is it his music, his formal adventurousness, his accidental theology?

CW: You're not going to believe this, but I don't really think of Hopkins as a significant influence. I read him years ago and memorized a few poems, but I've hardly returned to him over the years.

Influence is a much more complicated and chaotic process than critics tend to realize. ("You have no idea of the trash that goes into making a poem," said Anna Akhmatova.) Recently I was having a drink with a friend, the fabulous poet Atsuro Riley, whose work really is elaborately Hopkinsesque, or at least it seems so. Yet he told me that when people asked him this question he always said that Hopkins was way too strong a drink to take straight up. He got his Hopkins through Seamus Heaney, who has also been an enormous influence on me. (For sheer sound, though, I'd give more credit—or blame—to Basil Bunting, Lorine Niedecker, and Robert Frost.)

As for Mandelstam—that's a different case. I don't speak Russian. I translated Mandelstam with the help of Ilya Kaminsky, who kept telling me that the Russian sounded so much like Hopkins that it was uncanny. So the sounds in those poems, especially the later ones, are quite intentional.

Have I evaded the question? There is certainly an energy and passion in Hopkins to which I feel very sympathetic, a sense of religious rapture raveled up with linguistic intensity, an understanding that art isn't a diversion but a divine

refraction, that in the finding of a form for experience one's whole soul can be at stake. This is why one sometimes wants it all to go away, and why poems can be pleas in several different ways at once. "I want the one rapture of an inspiration," Hopkins says. And then, piercingly: "My own heart let me more have pity on, / Let me live to my sad self hereafter kind."

AD: What other poets do you find yourself returning to again and again?

CW: Not poets so much as poems, which I find here and there and cling to as I can. I don't really believe in Collected Poems. They're almost always bad. The bad so far outweighs the good, I mean, that you're left with a negative impression of even truly great poets like Frost or Stevens. And poets who wrote tons of poems but only one or two real gems just get totally lost—like James Dickey, for instance, whose poem "At Darien Bridge" is like a tiny diamond in a huge mass of hog slop. But what a diamond!

So I tend to think in terms of poems, not poets, and I tend to be forever desperate for something new. This was the great thing about editing *Poetry*, the discoveries. Lately I have been thinking a lot of this deceptively plain little piece by the Polish poet Anna Kamienska, which is called "A Prayer That Will Be Answered." The translation is by Clare Cavanagh and Stanislaw Baranczak.

> Lord let me suffer much
> and then die
>
> Let me walk through silence
> and leave nothing behind not even fear
>
> Make the world continue
> let the ocean kiss the sand just as before
>
> Let the grass stay green
> so that the frogs can hide in it
>
> so that someone can bury his face in it
> and sob out his love
>
> Make the day rise brightly
> as if there were no more pain
>
> And let my poem stand clear as a windowpane
> bumped by a bumblebee's head

What does it mean to pray as Christ prayed in the garden, to ask not for release or rescue but that one's will be conformed to the will of God? This poem is one answer—which, by the way, is not as nihilistic or ironic as it may seem, since we readers are "bumping our heads" on this poem that has indeed been made clear as a windowpane. No doubt the day after Anna Kamienska's death (May 10, 1986) was much like the day of it, and so her terrible prayer was indeed "answered." Yet another part of that prayer asks for an art adequate to the implacable fact of matter, and the consummation of that art sends a little ripple of something right back through that implacability. The uncanny clarity of this poem makes one believe, while the poem is having its way with you, that that "something" just might be a soul.

> The desert is a good purgative for the moister emotions: self-pity, treasured gloom, spiritual lassitude. I didn't grow up among much of this. People were tough as old mesquite trees, and just as vulnerable to the spiritual elements—bare, forked creatures before a quite palpable and demanding God.

AD: There's been a lot of handwringing lately about how few contemporary novelists and poets grapple with religious belief in their work. More specifically, people like Paul Elie have pointed to the vibrant Catholic literary culture of the mid-twentieth century, when Flannery O'Connor, Walker Percy, and Graham Greene were all writing, and have lamented how far we've fallen. Do you agree with this gloomy picture of contemporary literature's unwillingness to engage with religion seriously?

CW: I love Paul Elie's work but don't quite see things as he does. One could argue that the best living poets are all seriously engaging religion in their work—Richard Wilbur in this country, Anne Carson in Canada, Geoffrey Hill in England, Les Murray in Australia, Adam Zagajewski in Poland (in Polish, I should say, as he lives here). And of course there is the Israeli poet Yehuda Amichai, who died in 2000, and the Irish poet Seamus Heaney, who told me over dinner not long before he died that he felt caught between the old forms of faith in which he had been raised and something else that had not quite emerged. Among American prose writers, there is Richard Rodriguez, Annie Dillard, Frederick Buechner, Fanny Howe, Mary Karr, Cormac McCarthy, Jamie Quatro, Marilynne Robinson, Denis Johnson—how many does one need?

But this list-making misses the point. What Paul Elie is really responding to, I think, is two things: the diffuseness of American literary culture in general, which makes it

impossible to feel any voices as anything other than singular, and the weakening of religion's hold on the definition of faith. Is this really a new thing? Flannery O'Connor's letters and talks are full of articulate expressions of these exact anxieties. History's greatest distortion is coherence. It may be that the future will see our religious writers as a recognizable milieu, whereas we are all experiencing spiritual isolation amid cultural chaos. And properly so, I might add: "The burden of proof, indeed the burden of belief, for so long upheld by society, is now back on the believer, where it belongs." That's Paul Elie—at the end of his wonderful book *The Life You Save May Be Your Own*.

Underneath this sociological question is an existential issue of greater consequence. We all live in an agony of unbelief, and we all survive it by solidarity with others, including those minds we meet only through their works. I suppose no artist has the duty to make his or her faith available to an audience, but just think how heartening it is when one does. My existence on this earth is made easier (by which I mean more fruitfully difficult) by the examples of Terrence Malick, John Tavener, Makoto Fujimura, or Marilynne Robinson. By the same token, it is disheartening when an artist I admire specifically for his Christian intensities—Geoffrey Hill, for example—refuses any notion that his work is Christian because he doesn't want to be defined by that. Of course I understand the impulse: "religious" writing—like religion in general, actually—is mostly embarrassing. Still it feels to me, especially at this particular historical moment, like a flinch.

AD: What differences do you see between the Catholic literary imagination and the Protestant literary imagination?

CW: I hope it doesn't seem like I'm pandering to my audience if I say that, to the extent that art is great, it tends to become more Catholic. Perhaps I could add, by way of pissing off all parties equally, that in the times that we are in, religious art, in so far as it is also great art, tends to become less obviously religious.

Let me try and explain. Art is essential to Christianity because it doesn't simply remind us of the incarnation but makes us feel the truth of that encounter—God and matter—in our bones. Catholicism takes the sacralization of matter quite seriously, as it does the possibilities of mystical encounters with God. Protestantism is allergic to mysticism, because it thinks of God as absolutely beyond. For Protestants, a line like this from Meister Eckhart—"The eye with which I see God is the same eye with which God sees me"—is heresy. (Of course, Eckhart himself was considered a heretic by the Catholic Church, so its embrace of his visionary insights has been, as usual, a bit belated.)

How does this play out in poetry? Here is a bit of obviously Protestant poetry, courtesy of Richard Wilbur. These lines follow a long and very beautiful description of a brook:

> Joy's trick is to supply
> Dry lips with what can cool and slake,
> Leaving them dumbstruck also with the ache
> Nothing can satisfy.

Here is a similar idea—what is human joy and what does it have to do with the divine?—recast through the Catholic imagination, in this case the Irish poet Patrick Kavanagh:

> Leafy-With-Love banks and the green waters of the canal
> Pouring redemption for me, that I do
> The will of God, wallow in the habitual, the banal,
> Grow with nature again as before I grew.

For Wilbur, an experience of nature elicits a very real joy, which then elicits a very real pain that the joy is not enough, that matter is not enough: God is beyond. For Kavanagh, redemption inheres in seeing matter as matter, which is to say as divine; to be joyful is to fully inhabit "the habitual, the banal," which is a mystical order of experience—not a grand visionary epiphany such as saints have, but one available to anyone who will simply pay attention and be.

This is an accurate distinction, I think, but it's also somewhat contrived. Much of the best of Wilbur is concerned with "the blind delight of being" in a way that resists any specific religious codification. Similarly, Kavanagh's chief theme is an innocence that is existential but not specifically religious, as in these lines in which the adult speaker suddenly finds himself back in a childhood that is more than mere imagination:

> I do not know what age I am
> I am no mortal age;
> I know nothing of women,
> Nothing of cities,
> I cannot die
> Unless I walk outside these whitethorn hedges.

My point is this: Poets are still guardians of the truths of faith, but poetry has less and less to do with the institutions that presume to name that faith. This makes some religious leaders think they do not need poetry, when in fact they need it now more than ever, because within poetry is the same anarchic energy and disabling insight that causes people to seek religion at all. It is the aboriginal energy of existence itself that is missing from most religious services these days. Art has this energy in abundance.

AD: Last year, you published *My Bright Abyss*, a beautiful, moving account of your journey back toward the Christian faith and, just as crucially, of the relation between poetry and faith. You open that book with a description of how you usually come to know your own mind: "feeling through the sounds of words to the forms they make, and through the forms they make to the forms of life that are beyond them." This idea—that sensual and

aesthetic experience ("the sounds of words") ultimately suggests and makes present that which is beyond them ("the forms of life that are beyond them")—strikes me as a very sacramental understanding of language. What role have the sacraments played in your life, either as a believer or as a poet?

CW: I'm not sure I have a sacramental understanding of anything except language. I have never felt anything but self-consciously inadequate when taking the Lord's Supper, for instance (and not even morally inadequate, which at least might mean something; I mean inadequate in the sense that I can't muster up any feeling for what I am doing).

No doubt how I was raised has something to do with this. Baptists, at least the ones I grew up among, don't even use the word "sacrament." The Lord's Supper is an "ordinance." We sat in our pews and ate saltines and drank grape juice from tiny plastic vials, and we did that only once a month. It didn't seem too mysterious.

But would fancier mechanics really make any difference? Flannery O'Connor, despite her famous avowal about the Real Presence—"If it's a symbol, to hell with it"—seems to have had her own indifference to contend with. "When you go to Communion," she wrote in a letter, "you receive grace but you experience nothing, or if you do experience something, what you experience is not the grace but an emotion caused by it." This is a helpful separation of grace from feeling, but it remains at a purely intellectual level for me. (I am not helped by the realization that that was precisely O'Connor's point.) I assume there is grace in the sacraments, because so many people I admire tell me it is so. But I have to take it on trust.

Poetry is different. With poetry I experience the world almost as I once did, before the calamity of meaning. The enchantment of childhood is due to the fact that there are no metaphors. One lives the fluid truths and strange adjacencies that metaphors can only suggest. (To argue that something is or isn't metaphorical is to be hopelessly on this side of the divide.) Art is charged and charmed for me in ways that religion never seems to reach. I'm not proud of this. It is a great sadness in my life—that religion remains inert, I mean, that I can't seem to feel anything in the forms of it. The closest I have come is the daily chapel service at the divinity school. Something is freed in me there—perhaps because there is usually poetry involved, perhaps because these are the people I work with, perhaps because so many of them seem willing to admit the same spiritual insufficiencies and bare needs.

AD: In his new book *Darling*, Richard Rodriguez describes the God of Christianity, Judaism, and Islam as a "desert God," a God who "demands acknowledgement within emptiness." So much of your poetry is steeped in the west Texas landscape of your childhood—its endless plains and endless horizons, its harsh winds and bitter dryness. What connection do you see between this landscape and your own faith? Between this landscape and your poetry?

CW: The connection is intimate, difficult, and durable—for better or worse. The desert is a good purgative for the moister emotions: self-pity, treasured gloom, spiritual lassitude. I didn't grow up among much of this. People were tough as old mesquite trees, and just as vulnerable to the spiritual elements—bare, forked creatures before a quite palpable and demanding God. I admire that intensity now, and miss it. Of course there were also plenty of self-righteous zealots and fire-eyed maniacs, who also seem to thrive in waste places. Them I don't miss so much.

I can certainly see the ways in which my poetry has been shaped by both of these forces, both formally and thematically.

In the end, as that quote from Rodriguez suggests, I simply experience literally what every modern believer experiences metaphorically. "We have to be in a desert, for he whom we must love is absent." That's Simone Weil, whom I first read in my twenties while staring balefully into the null nowhere of Colorado City, Texas, where I was living in a tiny trailer in my grandmother's backyard. In some ways—again, for better or worse— I've never left that little trailer. "We must take the feeling of being at home into exile," says Weil. "We must be rooted in the absence of a place."

AD: You published your first collection of poems, *The Long Home*, in 1998. A lot has happened to you since then, both professionally (you edited *Poetry* for ten years) and personally (you got married, had twins, and were diagnosed with a rare form of cancer). How do you see yourself as a different poet from what you were in 1998?

CW: I was a bad poet in 1998, but rather than hoist up that particular piñata, which I have whacked all to hell in my own head (no goodies therein!), let me concentrate on the differences.

I spent a decade discovering the whole notion of a formal imagination, learning to recognize it in what I read and trying to figure out what it meant that my nerves and my words were in some weird and potentially saving sync with each other. Then I spent another decade certain that the only authentic energy in art was the energy of absence, that even an aubade was made of pain. "Light writes white," as the saying goes.

Then I got a tidal wave of real pain that tested all of my ideas pretty severely—and found them wanting. It wasn't as if I had to relearn how to write poems. It was as if I had to finally deploy the whole arsenal, which includes abundance, extravagance, and inexplicable joy.

But are the poems actually better? I feel freed from having to worry about that. I take that freedom to be an act of authentic grace in my life, for which I am immensely grateful. ■

Writing a Life

What Should Literary Biography Do?

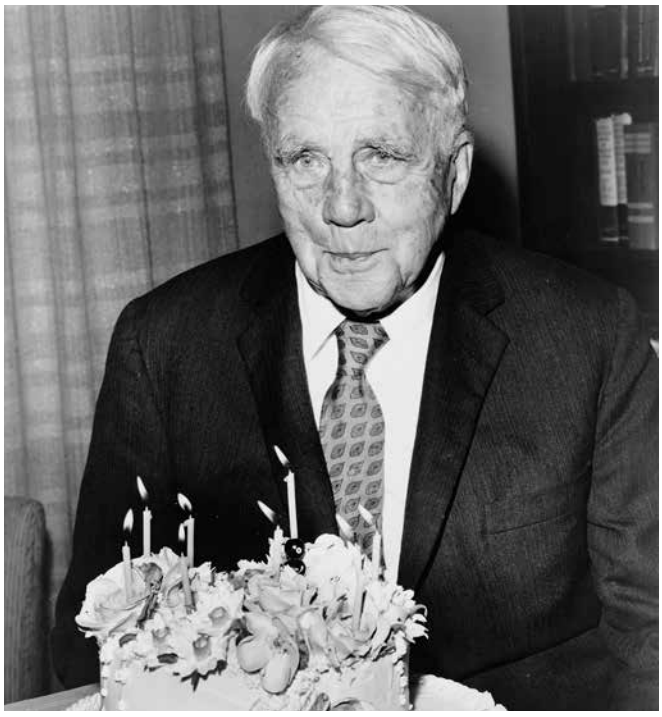
Robert K. Landers

Last fall, Robert Frost appeared to undergo a savage attack at the hands of acclaimed novelist Joyce Carol Oates. In a fascinating short story, "Lovely, Dark, Deep," published in the November issue of *Harper's*, Oates evoked an imaginary encounter between the seventy-seven-year-old Frost and one Evangeline Fife, a young blond interviewer from a journal called *Poetry Parnassus*. The interview takes place at the Bread Loaf Writers' Conference in Vermont in 1951, and leads to the elderly poet being felled by his demonic inquisitor.

Initially coming upon Frost "slack-jawed and dozing on a porch swing," Fife whips out her camera and surreptitiously takes seven "humiliating" snapshots of him, later to be sold to a private collector. She then wakes the great man up. Pretty and dressed "like an earnest schoolgirl," Fife has prepared assiduously for the interview. Where a savvy interviewer would defer any questions that might put the interview itself at risk until she had gotten answers to her less provocative ones, Fife makes an early aggressive thrust connecting Frost's poems to his life. Was the death in 1899 of his and his wife's first son at age three—the subject of his poem "Home Burial"—"a death that might have been prevented except for the mother's Christian Scientist beliefs?" Frost stares back "with something like hatred."

The moment passes, and after some unseemly salacious sallies by the old man, Fife turns to her "list of questions aimed to draw from the poet quotable remarks." She receives well-worn answers, and as the interview proceeds, her questioning becomes more pointed. She tells Frost that his poems "are filled with images of darkness and destruction." She passionately objects to the failure of his patriotic 1942 poem "The Gift Outright" to take Native Americans into account. She suggests that instead of the "homespun New England bard" his audiences imagine, he may in fact be "[an] emissary from dark places," proudly defending "the very worst in us."

At this point, we read, "a fierce light shone in the poet's faded-blue eyes," and Evangeline Fife is "suffused with a sort of ferocity, too." Speaking in a "throaty, thrilled voice that hardly seemed the voice of a young virginal woman," she indicts his indifference to his children, a failing reflected in his "sly, coded poems." Remorselessly, she hurls graphic examples of Frost's mistreatment of his children, accusing him of being unable to love them, of loving only himself. As the story nears its end, the enraged Frost hits back at his tormentor: "All you can do, people like you, contemptible little people, spiritual dwarves, is to scavenge in the detritus of the poet's life without grasping the fact that the poet's *life* is of no consequence to the poet.... You fail to realize that only the *poetry* counts—the poetry that will prevail long after the poet has passed on and you and your ilk are gone and forgotten." Frost then rises to his feet, stumbles down the porch steps, and falls heavily to the ground, as his inquisitor vanishes. Lying helpless in the grass, the old man draws his notebook to his chest, a shield to protect "his loud-thumping heart...from harm, from the assault of his enemies."



WALTER ALBERTIN, WORLD TELEGRAM STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Robert Frost at 85

Robert K. Landers *is the author of* An Honest Writer: The Life and Times of James T. Farrell *(Encounter).*

"Lovely, Dark, Deep" provoked a widespread reaction. Many readers agreed with the *Washington Post*'s Ron Charles, who judged Oates's story "a wicked takedown" of Robert Frost. Several Frost biographers objected to the story's portrayal of him, as Alice Robb reported in the *New Republic*; one, William H. Pritchard (a frequent contributor to *Commonweal*), called the story "utterly preposterous and quite distasteful." But I surmised that Oates—who long ago coined the term "pathography" to characterize literary biographies that dwell excessively on the "sensational underside" of their subject's life—wrote the story to condemn interviewers, and by extension biographers, who do just that. And indeed, Oates has come to her own defense, telling Jennifer Schuessler of the *New York Times* that her story is "really about the sensation-mongering, 'malicious' personal and biographical accusations that are made against a poet," despite the fact that "poetry and the life should have nothing to do with each other."

Seen in this light, the story does not indulge a bogus approach to literary biography, but rather satirizes it. Poets and novelists like Oates want their works to be judged solely on their literary merits, not subjected to reductionist simplification by biographers bent on finding the "real-life" sources of their art. Yet the same poets and novelists also claim credit as the "authors" of their works. How, then, can they deny that biographical explorations might yield insights into their art?

Literary biographies at their best can indeed provide such insights—but, of course, in doing so, they can also cast doubt on the artists' transmutation of the particulars of their own lives into the universals of their art. Although readers of biographies are the beneficiaries of these illuminating inquiries, poets and novelists remain understandably wary—and fearful that their own imperfect lives may in the end overwhelm their works. That fear is well-grounded, as a question posed by Irish novelist Edna O'Brien in her brief biography *James Joyce* (1999) suggests. "Do writers have to be such monsters in order to create?" O'Brien asks at one point. "I believe that they do. It is a paradox that while wrestling with language to capture the human condition they become more callous, and cut off from the very human traits which they so glisteningly depict."

Oates's notion of "pathography" first surfaced in her 1988 *New York Times* review of a biography of the novelist and short-story writer Jean Stafford (1915–79). As Oates defined it, the typical pathography of a distinguished writer deals in "dysfunction and disaster, illnesses and pratfalls, failed marriages and failed careers, alcoholism and breakdowns and outrageous conduct." Such biographers, she continued, "so relentlessly catalogue their [subject's] most private, vulnerable, and least illuminating moments, as to divest them of all mystery save the crucial and unexplained: How did a distinguished body of work emerge from so undistinguished a life?" Stafford's biographer seemed "well-intentioned," Oates conceded—unlike biographer Lawrence Thompson, in whose notorious *Robert Frost*, she charged, "a true malevolence seems to be the guiding motive." And how should a fair-minded biographer deal with a literary subject's "sensational underside"? The answer, Oates implied, lies in proportionality. In Stafford's case, instead of giving "her twenty-odd years of alcoholic crises as much weight as the earlier, productive years," her biographer should simply have "summarize[ed the] years of fitful dissolution in a brief space," leaving the spotlight trained on the "more scattered, and less dramatic, periods of accomplishment and well being."

I was aware of Oates's coinage of "pathography" (though I hadn't yet read the review in which it originated) when I was working on *An Honest Writer* (2004), my biography of novelist James T. Farrell. The concept hardly seemed relevant to me at first, since I admired Farrell's *Studs Lonigan* and his five O'Neill-O'Flaherty novels, as well as his courageous stand against Stalinism in the 1930s. I knew, of course, that Farrell had later fallen out of favor in the literary world. And I knew he'd had several failed marriages. But I hoped that a close look at his life and his best works would help restore him to his rightful place in the literary firmament.

As my years of research progressed, however, I came to see a less attractive side of Farrell. He was self-centered, even quite childish at times, and had problems with alcohol and drugs. During the late 1950s and early '60s, after leaving his longtime publishing house Vanguard, he railed defiantly against editors and publishers. The furies assailing him, I came to realize, reflected not merely the vagaries of literary fashion but also his own limitations as an artist. After *The Face of Time*, the excellent and unexpected fifth volume in the O'Neill-O'Flaherty series, was published in 1953, Farrell suffered a decade of literary, financial, and personal difficulties. Unable to provide Vanguard with any of the three additional novels he'd promised, he abandoned the firm in 1958, dreaming of a marvelous artistic rebirth. Swiftly signing a contract with Doubleday for four novels, he then found it hard to produce the first. It finally appeared in 1963, but *The Silence of History*, a portrait of the artist as a young man that was not very different from what Farrell had written before, gave clear evidence that his grandiose hopes for an artistic rebirth were to go unfulfilled.

Because the last quarter-century of Farrell's life was less important in terms of his literary achievement and less interesting in terms of his politics—and because I had less raw material—I covered it in three chapters, totaling seventy pages. The 1930s, '40s, and early '50s, in contrast, were covered in ten chapters, totaling more than 260 pages. To judge from Oates's criticism of pathography, I probably should have reduced my coverage of his decline even more. But I was interested, and assumed my readers would be too, in Farrell the human being, not merely Farrell the author. From the beginning, I wanted to see him as he was, and show him as he was, in the context of his time—the literary Farrell, the political Farrell, and the human Farrell.

Cleo Paturis, whom Farrell was fortunate to have as his

companion during the last decade and a half of his life (he died in 1979), was very supportive and helpful to me as I researched and wrote my biography. Besides allowing me to quote from his works, she gave me her time and her memories, and never tried to dictate what I should write. She was not small-minded. She once recalled that Farrell called her "the least petty person that he had ever known in his whole life"—and with good reason, I would add, based on my experience with her over more than a decade.

Cleo loved Farrell and admired all his works, but was certainly aware of his failings. After I'd learned from another source of his abuse of amphetamines and Valium, for example, she acknowledged the fact, and told me how she'd refused "to throw my cards in with him till he got off" the drugs. Eventually she told me about the lawsuit she'd filed against a physician who, unbeknownst to her, had prescribed amphetamines for Farrell for nearly three years before his death, quite possibly contributing to his fatal heart attack.

So, although I knew that Cleo wanted Farrell to be seen in the best possible light, I was hopeful that, when I gave her the manuscript of my biography in 2003, she would regard it as a fair-minded attempt by an admiring but not uncritical writer to see Farrell as he really was. Soon, however, I received a letter and was shocked and disappointed to read her verdict: my manuscript was "so anti-Farrell," Cleo wrote, she could only conclude that I "must hate" him. "Why on earth did you elect to write a bio on this man?" she asked me. "You don't like him, you don't like his work. I don't get it." She acknowledged that there had been an "awful period in his life," during the 1950s and early '60s, but noted that he'd lived some fifteen years after that. "And yet you seem focused on the lean and mean years."

No argument I could offer to the contrary—including citations of readers who found my portrayal of Farrell a sympathetic one—could change her mind. The high praise I lavished on *Studs Lonigan* and the O'Neill-O'Flaherty novels in *An Honest Writer* did not count; nor did my laudatory words about Farrell's "steadfast fidelity to his own high aspirations, his cherished integrity, his lonely struggle against the Stalinists, and his efforts for freedom at home and abroad." In retrospect, I think what may have wounded her most, along with my account of those "lean and mean years," was my dismissal of Farrell's Doubleday novels, most of them published during his years with Cleo. "None of the novels," I wrote, "would escape the confines of the minor." That did not mean, of course, that the novels did not have their individual merits—and, not wanting to lengthen unnecessarily an already too-long manuscript, perhaps I did not do them full justice. Even so, to my mind, that hardly spelled "pathography."

I next saw Cleo (for the last time, as it turned out; she died in 2010) the following February, at the New York Public Library, at an event she had organized to celebrate Farrell on the centenary of his birth. I and my book went unmentioned by the speakers, and, despite my publisher's best efforts, no sign of the first full-scale biography of Farrell was anywhere to be seen. Cleo was frosty to me at first, but she warmed up again—to me, anyway, if not to the biography. She said she didn't want to put any obstacles in my book's way—and, of course, she could have, by seeking to withdraw her written permission to me to quote from Farrell's writings, or by speaking out publicly against the book. But she did not. As Farrell said, she was not a petty person.

A quarter-century after the publication of the work that had occasioned Oates's reflections on pathography, I finally read it. David Roberts's *Jean Stafford* is a terrific biography. But don't take my word for it. Attend to what a friend of Stafford's, novelist Louis Auchincloss, had to say: "I should not have believed that any biographer could do what David Roberts has done: to weave together, into a pattern that makes sense, the tragic compulsions that disintegrated Jean Stafford's life with the development of her literary genius." Novelist Walker Percy praised the biographer for showing that "the tragedy [of Stafford's life] is somehow of a piece with her fiction." This unity between life and work—even a tragic unity—was important, Percy went on. "Perhaps her life could have been otherwise, different, less star-crossed—who knows?—but we would not want her fiction to be otherwise, different, less star-crossed."

Were these distinguished writers unable to recognize (and condemn) pathography when they saw it? Or did they just have a more complex view than Oates of the relationship between a writer's distinguished fiction and "undistinguished" life? Surely the latter, in my view. Furthermore, if we accept Oates's prescription for how literary biographies should be written—that is, with scant attention paid to the "sensational underside" of the subject's life—shouldn't we extend it to biographies of eminent people in other walks of life? Shouldn't biographies of, say, leading political figures focus on what they accomplished (and failed to) in the political realm, not on the "sensational undersides" of their lives? Shouldn't a biography of the late Senator Edward M. Kennedy, for instance, focus on his life as a legislator and politician, not on his disgraceful behavior in the fatal accident at Chappaquiddick and elsewhere in his personal life?

And if so, why stop with biographies? Shouldn't a novelist who writes a thinly disguised fiction about actual people be held to the same high standard? For instance, shouldn't a novel inspired by that 1969 Chappaquiddick accident, told from the point of view of the female victim—a novel that gives only a scant paragraph to the unnamed senator's "stubborn and zealous dedication to social reform"—be considered a novelistic exercise in pathography? Well, that novel exists—*Black Water*, published in 1992, by none other than Joyce Carol Oates.

In "Lovely, Dark, Deep," Oates did not even thinly disguise Frost, let alone create an entirely imaginary poet, with his own name and own set of hidden sins, to make her point about poetry and the poet's life. Perhaps the story was a wicked takedown after all. ■

The Bloody Details

Who Was to Blame for World War I?

James J. Sheehan

In October 1916, as the war in Europe was entering its third terrible year, President Woodrow Wilson remarked that "a hundred years from now, it will not be the bloody details that the world will think of in this war: it will be the causes behind it, the adjustments which it will force." He may have underestimated future generations' fascination with the "bloody details" of the fighting, but about our persistent interest in the war's causes and consequences he was surely right. As we get ready to mark the centenary of the outbreak of war in 1914, there is general agreement about its consequences: it was what George Kennan once called the twentieth century's "seminal catastrophe." The causes of this catastrophe, however, remain the subject of intense debate.

Disagreements about the causes of the war began before the first shots were fired, as the various belligerents rushed into print with documents that demonstrated their own innocence and their opponents' guilt. In 1919, the peace treaty imposed upon the defeated Germans contained an article that seemed to make them responsible for the war and its consequences. Within a decade, however, disillusionment with the peace settlement encouraged contemporaries to spread the blame to every government. In 1929, for example, Virginia Woolf did not distinguish between winners and losers when she recalled "the faces of our rulers in the light of the shell fire. So ugly they looked—German, English, French—so stupid." In 1961, the debate on the war-guilt question was given new energy and direction by the German historian Fritz Fischer, who asserted German guilt and thereby connected the catastrophe of 1914 with yet more horrific catastrophes of 1939–45. In a series of densely documented books, Fischer and his followers insisted that it was not collective stupidity that pushed Europe over the brink in 1914, but rather planned aggression that sprang from deeply rooted flaws in Germany's political and social structure. Although Fischer's work was vigorously criticized when it first appeared, and lacked unanimous support from historians, by the 1970s it had become the basis for a rough scholarly consensus that assigned Germany a predominate share of the blame for starting the war. Over the past decade, that consensus has begun to unravel. Four new books suggest that the centenary has reopened the question of why Europe went to war in 1914.

July 1914
Countdown to War
Sean McMeekin
Basic Books, $29.99, 480 pp.

The War that Ended Peace
The Road to 1914
Margaret MacMillan
Random House, $35, 784 pp.

The Sleepwalkers
How Europe Went to War in 1914
Christopher Clark
Harper, $29.99, 736 pp.

Catastrophe 1914
Europe Goes to War
Max Hastings
Alfred A. Knopf, $35, 672 pp.

Debates about the immediate causes of the war focus on the period between the assassination in Sarajevo of the heir to the Habsburg throne, Archduke Franz Ferdinand, on June 28, and the formal declarations of war five weeks later. Seven nations were directly involved: the great powers (Austria-Hungary, Germany, Russia, France, and Britain), the kingdom of Serbia, whose agents seemed to be behind the archduke's murder, and Belgium, whose invasion by German troops ensured British participation. In all those states, decision-making was in the hands of a relatively small group of men—heads of state and their advisers, senior ministers, diplomats, and military leaders. Sean McMeekin's helpful list of the dramatis personae contains eighty-five names. About what these men thought and did between June 28 and August 4 we know an immense amount—from government memoranda, diplomatic dispatches, newspaper reports, and a library of diaries and memoirs published after the war. Of course, as Christopher Clark notes, "there are treacherous currents in this ocean of sources." Even when they are not willfully misleading, the contemporary documents are necessarily distorted by their

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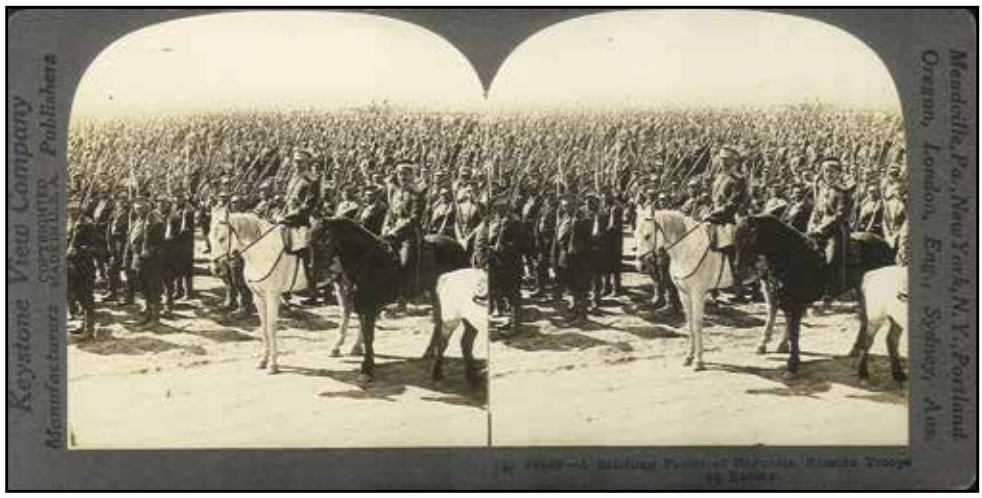
authors' personal foibles, political interests, and institutional bias. None of the major players fully understood what their counterparts were doing; none of them recognized the full implications of their own actions. And if the authors of these contemporary documents knew too little, when they penned their memoirs, they knew too much. Writing in the harsh light of the postwar disillusionment, every participant tried to minimize his own responsibility for the disasters.



Russian troops on review, World War I stereoptic view card

In *July 1914*, Sean McMeekin, an American historian who teaches in Turkey, provides a day-by-day, sometimes hour-by-hour, account of the crisis that began with the assassination in Sarajevo. By keeping his account close to the shifting contours of the crisis, he is able to capture its human dimensions. Better than any of the other books reviewed here, he gives his readers a sense of how events looked to the participants as they struggled to make sense of what was going on. At the same time, he carefully weighs each piece of evidence, offering alternative interpretations before stating his own firmly held opinion.

The first, and in many ways decisive, step toward war was taken in Vienna, when the Austrian government decided to move against the Serbs, whom it suspected, not unreasonably, of being involved in the archduke's murder. This, the Austrians knew, carried the risk of war, not only against Serbia but also against Russia, Serbia's patron and protector. This was a risk they could not take without German support, which they received early in July. Germany's unqualified willingness to back Austria was critically important for what happened next: as virtually every historian agrees, without it there would have been no European war. The disagreement is about German motivation. While Fischer and his supporters argued that Germany eagerly pushed for a war they had long wanted, McMeekin stresses the confusion and uncertainty that pervaded decision-making in Berlin. "Far from 'willing the war,'" he concludes, the Germans were dragged "kicking and screaming" into the conflict by their Austrian partner. Moreover, he does not assign Russia and Russia's ally France merely passive roles in the final crisis; in fact, they were "far more eager to fight than was Germany." Among these four authors, McMeekin is the most emphatic about the long-term significance of the July crisis. Without it, he maintains, there would have been no war in 1914 and perhaps not in the immediate future. If anything, when the archduke was killed relations among the great powers were getting better, not worse.

In contrast to McMeekin's disciplined, focused narrative, Margaret MacMillan's *The War that Ended Peace* takes us on a leisurely tour of European history in the decades before the war. A Canadian who is professor of international relations at Oxford, MacMillan displays the same virtues that made her *Paris 1919* so successful: graceful prose, a good eye for the telling anecdote and colorful personality, and a keen appreciation for the underlying ironies of the past. At times, she is distracted from her central story by the inherent drama of unrelated events: the Dreyfus affair, for instance, to which she devotes several stirring pages, had nothing to do with the origins of the war.

MacMillan provides a moderate, balanced analysis of why peace ended: Austria was the prime mover, with Germany its willing but not actively aggressive accomplice; Russia's impatient and provocative response to the Austrian challenge to Serbia made matters worse. France and Britain were reluctant and largely passive participants. She correctly notes a certain complacency among statesmen who thought the crisis could be managed, as had so many in the past, a complacency that was not dispelled until too late. And she is right to insist that the advocates of peaceful accommodation were everywhere more hesitant and divided than those who wanted to fight. At times, the emphasis and organization of MacMillan's book seem inconsistent with her explicit argument. Germany, and especially Germany's rivalry with Britain, gets a disproportionate amount of attention. The Anglo-German antagonism, however, while of great importance for how the war was fought and why the Germans lost, did not play a major role in 1914.

In *The Sleepwalkers*, Christopher Clark, an Australian who teaches at Cambridge, skillfully weaves together the unfolding of the July crisis with long-term trends in the international system. The foundation of Clark's achievement is his recognition that the place to look for the war's origins is where it actually began, in the unstable political landscape of Southeastern Europe. Clark begins his account not with the murder in Sarajevo (as do McMeekin and Hastings), nor with the burning of the Belgian city of Louvain by German troops (as does MacMillan), but with

the brutal murder of the Serbian king and queen by dissident army officers in 1903, which produced a profound shift in Serbia's international alignment away from Austria and toward closer cooperation with Russia. Serbia in the early twentieth century can be compared to present-day Pakistan: a fragile civilian government, a powerful military, unfulfilled territorial ambitions, and a security service that pursued its own agenda. Within a secret cell of Serbian officers the plot to kill Franz Ferdinand was hatched and implemented.

Better than any other book I know, *The Sleepwalkers* convincingly traces the causal chain that linked this isolated act of state-sponsored terrorism to the outbreak of the first war involving all of Europe's great powers since the defeat of Napoleon in 1815. The most important link in this chain was the system of alliances that divided Europe into two camps, whose political agreements were eventually supplemented by military cooperation. Once Anglo-French naval strategy and Franco-Russian mobilization plans became mutually interdependent, the chances of localizing a war between the great powers were substantially reduced. By 1914, France was willing to underwrite Russian engagement in the Balkans, where Ottoman decline fed the aggressive ambitions first of Italy, which launched a war of conquest against the Turks in 1911, and then of Serbia, Bulgaria, Rumania, Greece, and Macedonia, which fought the Turks, then one another, in 1912–13. Meanwhile, Germany, alienated from France, unable or unwilling to reach an agreement with Britain, and worried about Russia's growing military power, became increasingly dependent on its only reliable ally, Austria-Hungary. Not to support Austria in July 1914 was to risk being left alone to face a coalition of hostile powers.

None of those developments made war inevitable. There were, Clark shows, always other possibilities; chance, miscalculation, personal frailties all played a role. But in the end, policymakers did decide to stand up to their opponents, support their allies, and accept the advice of those who insisted that war was necessary, victory possible, retreat unthinkable.

My one complaint about Christopher Clark's superb book is its title. The men who led their nations to war were not sleepwalkers; they were wide awake, fully conscious of what they were doing. With varying degrees of enthusiasm, they all eventually decided that war was preferable to diplomacy. But of course the war that Europe's leaders actively sought or reluctantly accepted was not the war they got. Why this was so is the subject of Max Hastings's *Catastrophe 1914*.

After a relatively brief and rather conventional account of the origins of the war, Hastings turns his attention to the first four months of the fighting, which, as we should expect from one of the world's finest military historians, he describes brilliantly—no one is better at depicting the intimate details of combat without losing sight of the big strategic picture. Hastings points out that while all the armies suffered in these opening battles, none suffered as much as France, whose soldiers, still wearing the bright uniforms of an earlier era, were slaughtered at a truly appalling rate. In just three days, between August 20 and 23, forty thousand Frenchmen were killed. By August 29, with the war less than a month old, the French had suffered over a quarter-million casualties, including seventy-five thousand dead.

Hastings is unsparing in his criticism of the military leaders who prepared for and presided over this bloodbath. There was, he writes, a constant "mismatch between the towering ambitions of Europe's warlords and the inadequate means with which they set about fulfilling them." Hastings's treatment of the British commander Sir John French is particularly harsh, but surely the worst of this bad lot was Franz Conrad von Hötzendorf, the chief of the Austrian general staff, whose hearty appetite for war was matched by his extraordinary strategic incompetence. Only Joseph Joffre, the French general whose stubborn resolve managed to halt the Germans at the Marne River in September, earns Hastings's somewhat reluctant admiration.

By Christmas 1914 the war the generals had expected, a war of massive deployments and offensive engagement, was over. What they had not expected was that no one had won. Because neither side was able to break out of the strategic trap in which they were inexorably caught, the fighting dragged on until one collapsed. "Both armies," Hastings writes, "possessed unbounded power to inflict losses and grief upon each other; but as long as each had men and guns, the defense could be reinforced faster than the attackers could exploit local success."

Hastings is the only one of the four authors to argue unambiguously that, for all its horrors, the war was worth fighting and, once begun, had to be won. He sharply dissents from "the indulgent view of some historians that a German victory…would have represented the triumph of a nation and a cause morally indistinguishable from those of the allies." A German victory had to be prevented and, Hastings insists, the only way to do this was to defeat them on the battlefield. From the British perspective, that is a defensible if not wholly convincing argument. But viewed from the rest of Europe, it is difficult to imagine how anything, even a German victory, could have turned out to be worse than what actually did happen after 1918.

Such speculation suggests a question every bit as perplexing as why the war began: Why was it allowed to go on so long, consuming quantities of blood and treasure far beyond any possible advantage? While their young men died and their loved ones mourned, why did Europe's leaders persist in this folly? Why were so few voices raised against it? Why did every statesman continue to find that is was easier, more expedient, even more reasonable to demand ever greater sacrifices rather than to admit that the sacrifices made so far would be in vain? These failures of moral imagination and political will, spread across the political landscape from London to Petrograd, doomed Europe to three decades of totalitarian terror and racial murder. ■

Richard Alleva

Deluge & Delusion

'NOAH'

Hot on the heels of the impersonal and saccharine *Son of God* comes the daringly idiosyncratic and totally depressing *Noah* by writer-director Darren Aronofsky, a cinematic connoisseur of psychic and physical self-destruction (*Requiem for a Dream, Black Swan*). With this latest entry he may seem to be breaking into a new genre, the biblical spectacle. But rest assured: this master of misery is very much in his element as he envisions the sinful self-destruction of nearly the whole damned human race. Though there is much to censure in this movie, critics have taken aim at the one thing that should be most praised: the liberties the filmmaker has dared to take with the four-page biblical account. Why shouldn't Aronofsky, like any self-respecting artist, supplement, abridge, and transform his source material to make it reflect his own vision of life? Do we attack *Paradise Lost* because Milton invented a backstory for Satan so vivid that (as Bernard Shaw pointed out) people actually believe it's in the Bible? The real questions to be asked are: What sort of narrative does the adaptor evolve out of the original? Is it true to itself? Does it shed light on the human condition?

Scripture tells us that "the wickedness of man was great in the earth." Aronofsky, perhaps with Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* in mind or even TV's *The Walking Dead*, uses Icelandic locations as landscapes of sterility and violence across which barbarian hordes roam for plunder and practice cannibalism. For me, this is more convincing than portraying decadence as orgies of gluttony and sex à la Cecil B. DeMille. Also, Scripture tells us that "there were giants in the earth in those days," and the director daringly imagines these titans as angels who, against God's wishes, chose to live on earth as benefactors (or "watchers"), trying to mitigate humankind's post-Eden misery. They are therefore transformed by a pissed-off Jehovah into giants of stone, who look amusingly like Transformers and serve the same function—to squash villains threatening our hero. They also help Noah and his sons build the ark.

So far, so good: an ancient story reimagined for our pop culture–saturated times. But what about the characters who inhabit this story, including God? How have they been reimagined? The God of this movie is peculiarly silent, even sullen. In Genesis there is an ongoing dialogue between the Deity and humankind, and this interaction often softens the harsh-

PARAMOUNT PICTURES

Russell Crowe in Noah

THE DEVIL'S DELUSION

I lie on my back in the lawnchair to study
the trees claw up toward heaven.
They have all the sap I lack.

It's doubt I send rivering cloudways
in great boiling torrents, as if all creation
were a bad stage set I could wave
way away,

then I could cast my dark spells in a blink
and a flaming fingersnap—and
a universe de Mare pops up

so I win the everlasting argument against all
that was or will or tiredly is.
As if my soul would not in that blink

be obliterate. As if, as kids say.

—Mary Karr

Mary Karr's most recent books of poetry and memoir are Sinners Welcome *and* Lit, *respectively. She is the Peck Professor of Literature at Syracuse University.*

er episodes. The comforting paternalism of the Noah story may be what has made it a favorite for picture-book retellings. But in Aronofsky's movie, after God announces his flood to Noah in a wordless dream, he shuts up, leaving the patriarch completely on his own to guess how to proceed during and after the oncoming catastrophe. And it's just here that the film, unlike the ark, runs aground. Noah's major guess, becoming the crux of the movie, is that the creator ultimately wants all human life to be obliterated, and this includes all descendants of Noah. Our hero latches onto this notion while seeking a wife for his sexually starved younger son Ham. Visiting some sort of barbarian camp, whose inhabitants he sees practicing all manner of degeneracy, he concludes that Ham must stay celibate and that the already-pregnant wife of his elder son Shem may be allowed only a male child, who will one day bury his parents and then die himself, leaving the planet to the only true innocents, plants and animals. If a female baby is born, she will be killed.

Say what? I'm guessing that Aronofsky's Noah is meant to be a tragically wrong-headed figure like Shakespeare's Lear or Melville's Ahab, but even insane pride must have a logic of its own, lest the hero come across as just plain stupid. If Noah thinks God's purpose is the extinction of the human race, why doesn't he submit himself and his family to drowning instead of climbing aboard? What kind of God would save a few humans temporarily only to have them promote their own extinction? Is he ordering the building of the ark because he thinks Noah's family needs exercise? In truth, this whole plot twist seems concocted for the sake of (a) spinning the plot out and (b) providing some factitious suspense for an audience all too familiar with the original tale. For of course Shem's wife ends up giving birth to twin girls, and so we wonder whether Noah will do the grisly deed or not. And of course he can't bring himself to do it: "I looked down at those two little girls and all I had in my arms was love." Darren Aronofsky works up portents of righteous horrors but all he delivers is mush.

The visuals and the acting aggravate the screenplay's problems. Quite rightly, the director decided his dark take on Scripture needed a darker visual tone than most biblical spectacles have. But apparently something went wrong with Matthew Libatique's cinematography, and I strongly suspect it happened during postproduction in the computerized adjustment of color. For instead of lights, hues, and shadows taking on varied gradations to suggest contrasting emotions of hope and terror, compassion and hate—as even the low-budget *Beasts of the Southern Wild* managed to do—the digitalization here spreads an unrelieved, nearly monochromatic gloom over nearly every shot. The result is not only ugly, it's *boringly* ugly.

Also monochromatic is Russell Crowe's performance of the lead role. As recently as five years ago, Crowe was a vital, wide-ranging actor equally capable of getting into the skin of introverted scientists (*A Beautiful Mind, The Insider*) and extroverted warriors (*Master and Commander, Gladiator*). But here, as in the recent *Les Miserables, Robin Hood*, and *Man of Steel*, his voice has become a mystical monotone, and his face seems capable of no expression other than a bewildered sheepishness. The supporting cast is no better. Jennifer Connelly as Noah's wife throbs out her soap-opera dialogue without once finding a truthful note, and Emma Watson, who played Hermione in the *Harry Potter* series, still seems enrolled at Hogwarts.

A single good performance can sometimes throw an otherwise bad film further out of kilter rather than saving it. So it is here with Ray Winstone's role as a barbarian chief. Packing such zest and conviction into this embodiment of God-defying evil that he makes the heroes look like pious frauds, Winstone gets us to cheer for the wrong side. Though *Noah* is a moderately awful movie, it does at least feel like the expression of someone's unique (and dreary) worldview. By contrast, *Son of God* felt like corporation spawn—a Hallmark card blown up to screen size and set in motion. If I have to watch a failure, I much prefer to have someone's fingerprints on it. Nevertheless, my favorite modern version of the Noah story remains Bill Cosby's. God: "Thou shalt build the ark three hundred cubits long." Noah: "Right.... What's a cubit?" ■

Peter Steinfels

Goodbye to All That

Writing from Left to Right
My Journey from Liberal to Conservative
Michael Novak
Image, $24, 336 pp.

Michael Novak is now eighty years old. For almost half his life and nearly two-thirds of his public career, he has been a leading apologist, in the proper, nonpejorative sense of that word, for American-style capitalism. Judged by this account, those decades have been highly productive, intellectually satisfying, and richly rewarding in terms of influence and acquaintance with the great and powerful. Ronald Reagan, Margaret Thatcher, the presidents Bush, and Pope John Paul II all make cameo appearances here.

But that does not explain the "journey" of his book's subtitle. Michael Novak was a political radical, by his own dating, for four years, from 1967 to 1971, and except in some of his rhetoric a "guarded" (his word) radical at that, always insisting on nonviolence and never scorning electoral politics. Before that, he was a bright Slovak-American kid who entered the seminary in 1947, after eighth grade, and didn't emerge until he was twenty-six. In January 1960 he set out to make a career as a writer in New York City. Less-than-happy spells doing graduate work at Harvard were interrupted by unusual success as a reporter and interpreter of Vatican II, which in turn led to similar success teaching religion at Stanford. It was there, in 1967, that he became a tribune of the student-led opposition to the U.S. war in Vietnam. His criticism of the war morphed into harsh judgments on the United States, its culture, economy, and politics. This did not keep him from passionate engagement in the presidential campaigns of Eugene McCarthy and Robert Kennedy.

At the same time, Novak was alert to the backlash against the '60s among working-class and lower-middle-class white voters. In 1970, as a speechwriter for Sargent Shriver, Novak barnstormed the country for Democratic congressional candidates. Though the tour proved exhilarating, Novak witnessed the grassroots costs of Democratic association with cultural permissiveness and celebrity liberalism. He sounded an alarm with his 1972 book *The Rise of the Unmeltable Ethnics*. By that time, Novak's romance with radicalism was well behind him. Disillusionment had been clinched first by his 1968 migration from Stanford to the doomed utopian experiment of Old Westbury, a radical college on Long Island for radical students and faculty, a sinkhole of '60s folly: Paul Goodman meets *Lord of the Flies*. For his refusal to conform to the regimented nonconformity, he and his wife were subject to death threats and worries about the safety of their children.

If 1967–71 framed Novak's fling with radicalism, 1972 to 1977 was his period of withdrawal and recovery. For him, 1972 was less the year of Nixon's victory than of McGovern's defeat. (When Shriver replaced the unfortu-

Michael Novak

nate Thomas Eagleton on McGovern's ticket, Novak plunged into the campaign as Sarge's speechwriter.) Novak promptly signed on to the Coalition for a Democratic Majority, the emerging neoconservatives' vehicle for taking the party back from the McGovernites.

The second trauma of 1972 was the reception of *The Rise of the Unmeltable Ethnics*. Five years earlier, *Commentary* editor Norman Podhoretz had announced, at the close of *Making It*, that his book was "a frank, Mailer-like bid for literary distinction, fame, and money all in one package," only to have his bid crash and burn. (Among the more notable reviews was one by former *Commonweal* literary editor Wilfrid Sheed.) Novak made no such boast, but he seems to have entertained similar hopes, with more concern about political influence than fame or money. Although his book was filled with in-your-face assaults on intellectuals and liberal elites, "secretly," he records in *Writing from Left to Right*, "I wanted very badly in those days to be accepted by the cultural left, the gatekeepers all aspiring young writers must please if they are to be allowed into the national dialogue." After all, he was only trying to steer progressivism and the Democratic Party back onto course. "Naïvely, I thought this difficult analytic effort would be greeted with gratitude."

It didn't happen.

Memory of what he experienced as "the fury of the Left" blazes up in one of the few angry passages in *Writing from Left to Right*.

> I was thrilled when the *New York Times Book Review* called my publisher and said that my book was scheduled for a front-page lead review in two weeks. The great American gateway to literary fame! But when the scheduled issue arrived, my book was not on the first page. It was buried halfway through the magazine. And it was obvious why: It was a devastatingly bad review. Expecting to be exhilarated, I was crushed. Not only did that review not help my reputation; but the reviewer accused me of spreading hate (the insult our elites hurl when they are being unmasked).

This was "secular excommunication." In an essay written fifteen years after the event, Novak mentioned a review so hostile that "I took to my bed until I could gain composure to get back to work."

"The publication of *The Rise of the Unmeltable Ethnics* in 1972 marked my declaration of independence from the cultural left," Novak writes. He found sanctuary as a columnist at *Commonweal,* where, to my occasional exasperation as a fellow columnist, he spent the next several years—with only fleeting attention to Watergate, continuing warfare in Vietnam, and vice-presidential and presidential resignations—rehearsing and refining his attacks on various "elites."

However much those attacks mixed shrewd insights, personal resentment, and tiresome stereotypes, they were in keeping with Novak's insistence that cultural divisions rather than economic ones had become uppermost for politics. Which made it somewhat surprising when, as he puts it, "in about 1976 or 1977 I was ready to 'come out of the closet' as a capitalist." By 1982, with *The Spirit of Democratic Capitalism*, although nominally still a Democrat, he had become an enthusiast for Reaganomics and for every Republican administration to follow.

It may seem strange that Novak, at his age and eminence, should still be making his brief passage into and out of mild radicalism such a central drama of his life. But critics, like myself, cannot complain. We long waved the more inflammatory, dogmatic phrases from Novak's radical phase or evoked that memorable 1969 photo of him in white turtleneck and love beads on the back of *A Theology for Radical Politics* to insist that the fervent radical turned no less fervent capitalist explain himself. After all, many activists and writers, though radicalized to a degree by civil rights and antiwar struggles, nonetheless rejected the excesses of student militancy, the counterculture, black power, and radical chic—and many of us from traditional religious backgrounds bumped up against the respectable prejudices and unexamined orthodoxies of academic or progressive elites—without reversing our political worldviews.

So how well does *Writing from Left to Right* explain Novak's alternative path? It is, for the most part, a low-key, even bland book. There are interesting sections—on befriending the Catholic existentialist philosopher Gabriel Marcel at Harvard, on a perilous month as a journalist in Vietnam, on negotiating with the Soviets as ambassador to the United Nations Commission on Human Rights, an appointment Novak apparently got because of a pro-Reagan piece that *Commonweal* had asked him to write for the 1980 election. Those (like me) who have assumed that Novak was primarily a religious thinker pushed into political activism by the events of the time will be surprised to learn how early he evinced a desire to make a mark in politics, largely, as it turned out, as a speechwriter. Working with Shriver and speechwriter Bob Shrum, he learned the ingredients for a good stump speech: some facts, some laugh lines, a stretch of "tart mockery" evoking "the malignant presence" of the opposition, a "throat-tightener" or "one or two heart-throbbing episodes," and a "punchy" close. Oh, and "a touch of 'class'...a quote from a theologian, philosopher, or classic figure." Novak declares that he never became very good at this while nudging us with examples of his success.

Much of the book, however, is spent exchanging handshakes and air kisses with all the great and near-great Novak brushed up against: the "almost saintly" Shriver, of course, but also Eugene McCarthy ("my kind of Catholic"); Robert Kennedy ("the more the pundits and the experts called Bobby 'ruthless,' the more I liked him"); Henry "Scoop" Jackson ("how I admired him!"); Jack Kemp ("an extraordinarily gifted teacher"); George McGovern ("a good, brave, and true man"); Karl Rove ("especially quick and adroit"); George H. W. and George W. Bush ("kinder and more considerate men never served in the White House"); Steve Forbes ("has never really gotten

SARAH BAUMANN

credit for the intellectual substance of his contributions").

We meet Jeanne Kirkpatrick ("my friend and eminent colleague at the American Enterprise Institute"); "the brilliant Julian Simon"; "the careful historian Gertrude Himmelfarb"; Ben Wattenberg and Penn Kemble ("some of my best friends"); "my new friend Murray Weidenbaum"; "my brilliant and effervescent friend Michael Horowitz"; and so on.

Novak dinner parties include Bill Bennett, Charles Krauthammer, Mort Kondracke, Bob and Mary Ellen Bork, George and Joan Weigel, Midge Decter, Norman Podhoretz, Elliott Abrams, Henry Hyde, John McLaughlin, Pat Buchanan, the "great sociologist" Robert Nisbet, and Clare Boothe Luce ("perhaps our favorite guest").

There is much of course on Ronald Reagan ("*Gotta love the guy*") and even more on Margaret Thatcher ("as much a friend as I would ever have wished") and, finally, on his fellow Slav, Pope John Paul II ("my dearest and deepest friend").

Who cannot envy this capacity to find brilliance and friendship on every side? Unfortunately, it makes too many pages bring to mind Zelig or Forrest Gump.

Meanwhile there is virtually no account of the *thinking* that made Novak not only a cultural and political conservative but a man who expounded what he calls a "full-blown theory" of a good society, i.e. democratic capitalism, "composed of three interrelated systems: cultural, political, and economic, each dependent on the others; each checked and balanced by the others."

Novak repeatedly testifies to his own lack of grounding in economics: "Economists may find me wrong in these musings." "Maybe I am only an amateur." In the debate over supply-side economics, "I didn't yet know enough about economics [in 1980] to be sure who was right." He drops the names of a few past masters of economic and social theory, but does not dwell on what he drew from them or even whether this reading predated or postdated his radical phase. Instead, he tosses out homey examples about his or his wife's families and Slovakian or Norwegian forebears.

For all his claims about being "empirical," Novak remains uninterested or oblivious to the empirical objections to supply-siding; what others called "voodoo economics," he just calls "jujitsu." To recent waves of disturbing data about economic trends, he responds either not at all or with the lightest sprinkling of statistical boilerplate. To criticisms of his "full-blown theory"—that it is ahistorical; naïve in arguing that under capitalism culture, politics, and economics are nicely checked and balanced; and ultimately ambiguous regarding the place of the good in a society defined by liberalism, pluralism, and the market—he says nothing.

Again and again, such objections are washed away in Novak's animadversions against the left, socialism, and communism (too often lumped together) or in his recriminations against his earlier radical self or against those who turned against him when he moved to the right.

Ignazio Silone famously wrote that the crucial choice in politics is "the choice of comrades." One cannot help but feel that way about Novak's journey. Moved by the plight of those opposing and those ravaged by the war in Vietnam, he briefly chose a radicalism that actually had less to do with any socialism than with dread of a kind of antihuman technocratic future, Max Weber's "iron cage" of calculating rationality. In those days, he recalled in a 1987 essay, "my mind was stuffed with uncritically accepted information" that "very often exclusively derived from writers of the far left." Then, repelled by the disdain for ethnic and other middle Americans that he encountered among lifestyle liberals in the Democratic Party, Novak cast his lot with the neoconservative defenders of the business class as represented by the American Enterprise Institute.

But did his modus operandi change? Novak's writings since then are equally "stuffed" with information from the

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AEI and neoconservative sources. He repeatedly adverts to guidance from his colleagues there, especially Irving Kristol, who "was mentor to most of us." Recalling an encounter when Margaret Thatcher momentarily paid more effusive attention to himself than to Kristol, Novak exclaims, "that made me jump over the moon"—merely "being mentioned in the same breath with one of the most brilliant, highly respected, wisest, and most commonsensical men I had ever known."

It is possible that having learned his lesson, Novak approached his new comrades' mentoring more critically than he had his former ones'. There is little evidence of that here. And despite the large range of thinking about economies, their dynamics, and their human impact stretching between Novak's 1982 description of democratic capitalism and the socialisms he amalgamates and scorns, Novak apparently has had nothing fresh or striking to say about capitalism and its moral foundations over three decades.

He did have some influence on John Paul II's *Centesimus Annus*. This has made scholars of Catholic social thought nervous. Were the encyclical's positive words about markets and entrepreneurship an unsound innovation or, worse, one that somehow endorsed Novak's "full-blown theory." Only historians will settle this question, but I've never shared these worries about the passages at issue or the unlikely notion of endorsement. Novak's account of his indirect contribution to the encyclical's drafting strikes me as credible.

Two roads diverged in a wood, and Novak imagines that he took the one less traveled. Not quite. For reasons that I can sympathize with, he actually chose a well-trod route. Some of his consequent achievements are admirable, but they seem to me far less than they might have been. As a thinker, in particular, Novak turned out to be an excellent speechwriter. ■

Peter Steinfels *is the author of* The Neoconservatives *(Simon and Schuster), which has been reissued with a new introduction.*

Leslie Woodcock Tentler

Forgive Him, Father

The Dark Box
A Secret History of Confession
John Cornwell
Basic Books, $27.95, 332 pp.

In the late 1950s, John Cornwell—then an adolescent seminarian in the Archdiocese of Birmingham, England—was sexually propositioned during confession by a personable member of the seminary faculty. The man, evidently a serial offender, was abruptly removed from the faculty one year later and reassigned as chaplain to a residential school for boys. (Yes, I know—the chancery's thinking beggars belief.) Cornwell himself eventually left the seminary and subsequently the church, to which he later returned, albeit on his own terms. "To this day I remain circumspect," he tells us.

I lead with these biographical details for a reason: one can't make sense of this strange book without them. *The Dark Box* is so suffused with anger that its author, for all his intelligence, is seldom capable of balanced historical analysis—a capacity especially required when writing about so private and variously experienced an institution as confession. The reviewer thus finds herself in a bit of a pickle. Cornwell's anger is righteous and one wants to honor it, particularly in light of the sexual-abuse scandals that clearly helped to give rise to the book. But bad history is bad history, even when fueled by emotions with which one sympathizes.

Part 1 of *The Dark Box*, which runs to a startlingly brief seventy-five pages, traces the history of confession from the early church to the dawn of the twentieth century. Cornwell's footnotes indicate familiarity with the relevant scholarly literature and his overview is for the most part accurate, at least with regard to the basics. Originally a public and once-in-a-lifetime manifestation of sorrow for the gravest of sins—Christians prayed to be spared this experience—confession gradually evolved into a private ritual, one that was meant to be repeated many times over. This happened first in monastic settings and then, as monks traveled for missionary purposes, spread more widely. How frequently Christians confessed in the early Middle Ages is almost impossible to know; many may not have confessed at all or may have received what was now regarded as a sacrament only on their deathbeds. Such appears to have been the assumption

The Basilica of Mont Sainte-Odile in Alsace

RALPH HAMMANN

of Pope Innocent III, who prompted the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215 to require that every Christian confess and receive Communion at least once a year.

Given its ubiquity and private nature, it is hardly surprising that confession spawned a certain amount of abuse. With sexual sins prominent in confessors' manuals and invariably categorized as grave, many penitents approached the sacrament in a perceived state of mortal sin. Ill-educated or otherwise deficient clerics might do psychological damage to the fearful or debase the sacrament by selling absolution. Confessors sometimes solicited sex, as the records of ecclesiastical courts attest. Abuses like these, along with serious doubts about the scriptural warrant for the sacrament and the theology on which it rested, did much to fuel the Protestant Reformation. Luther famously likened confession to rape. At the same time, he tried—ultimately in vain—to retain confession in modified, nonsacramental form as a mode of spiritual discipline.

Confession was about more than abuse, as Luther's ill-fated effort obliquely attests. It could indeed be an aid to spiritual growth, especially for those in monastic settings. It could console and encourage penitents, just as it could inflict humiliation and terror. One cannot otherwise explain—not without defaming the laity—why reception of the sacrament became increasingly frequent in the post-Reformation centuries or why a confessor like the Curé d'Ars was popularly regarded as a saint by legions of the faithful. (In 1859, the last year of the Curé's life, some ninety thousand pilgrims visited his parish.) But Cornwell will have none of it. His historical chapters dwell almost obsessively on sexual abuse by confessors—the abuse of adults, as he makes a point of emphasizing—and all else is pushed to the margins. Even Charles Borromeo, that stalwart reformer, emerges as something of an enabler. He may have introduced the confessional box into his diocese in the sixteenth century to protect the privacy and bodily integrity of the penitent. But those dark boxes, Cornwell argues, did not preclude and may actually have promoted sexual lapses on the part of the clergy. "Many married women, suffering from domestic and marital frustrations, became addicted to the atmosphere of crepuscular intimacy. Confessors, for their own reasons and circumstances, were equally vulnerable." And so it goes. By the time he gets to the nineteenth century, Cornwell is invoking such anti-Catholic screeds as *The Awful Disclosures of Maria Monk*.

Part 2, which runs from 1903 until the Second Vatican Council, is the heart of Cornwell's book. Pope Pius X (1903–14) is the villain of the piece—the man allegedly responsible, both directly and indirectly, for the abuse of countless Catholic children. The argument is as complicated as it is eccentric. By instigating the antimodernist crusade, Cornwell claims, Pius reduced the Catholic clergy to a state of moral schizophrenia, bound by oath to give mental as-

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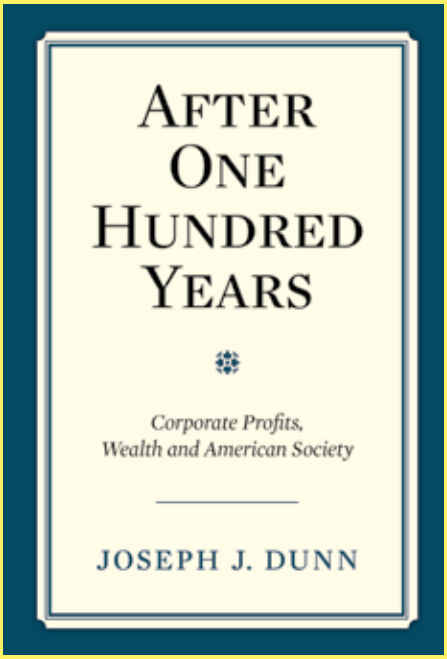

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sent to whatever Rome required while stifling the voice of conscience. "The moral schizophrenia involved helps to explain, in part at least, the states of mind discovered in priestly child sex offenders, who would attack children one day, and say Mass the next." By encouraging frequent Communion and lowering the age of first Communion to seven, moreover, Pius is said to have condemned young children to years of psychological trauma and made them more readily available to the predations of pedophile priests. "The two forms of confessional terrorism are inextricably related, and the boundaries between the two are often indistinct."

A truly audacious argument can have at least momentary power. Surely an author of Cornwell's stature would not make such extravagant claims without being able to back them up? But Cornwell offers precious little in the way of evidence. He relies most heavily on the roughly three hundred responses he received after publishing an article on confession in the *Tablet* in 2012. Not all of these letters, which came mainly from Catholics in Ireland and England, recounted negative experiences in "the dark box," as Cornwell concedes. He nonetheless deploys these letters as proof of his wildest assertions. (Some of the letters do indeed relate genuinely horrific experiences, but many more appear to have centered on the garden-variety agony of confessing adolescent sexual lapses, especially masturbation.) He pulls the most egregious examples of clerical sexual abuse from the John Jay report and its Irish counterpart, linking these to confession on the grounds that confessions were frequently heard, beginning in the late 1950s, outside "the box." Thus abuse in a rectory or at a priest's summer house might well have occurred in the context of confession. He refers periodically to "interviews"—otherwise unspecified—that support his darkest conclusions. Most disturbingly, he insinuates throughout that readers who doubt his argument are themselves part of the problem, unwitting enablers of the clerical predators still lurking among us.

I do not doubt that confession could be a traumatic experience for the young, though I suspect that adolescents rather than prepubescent children have had the worst of it. Nor do I deny that his role as confessor gave the priest great psychological power. Predatory priests could and did groom their victims in confession and sexual abuse did sometimes occur in that context. Cornwell's anger, in short, is more than justified. But his argument is deeply flawed. It assumes, for one thing, that clerical abuse of prepubescent children is largely a twentieth-century problem, which I seriously doubt. He offers no evidence in this regard, nor does he consider that the sexual abuse of adolescents might have been read in earlier centuries as the abuse of persons who were for all practical purposes adults. His argument also ignores some inconvenient truths. According to the John Jay report, the ordination classes of the 1970s had the largest percentages of credibly accused abusers, a finding echoed by similar reports elsewhere. Since these priests, unlike their twentieth-century predecessors, were ordained without taking the oath prescribed by Pius X, the high percentage of offenders among them would seem to contradict an important element in Cornwell's argument. We hear almost nothing in this book, moreover, from or about nonabusive clergy and their experience as confessors. If moral theology textbooks as late as the 1950s were rigidly legalistic, the preconciliar literature on confession was markedly pastoral. According to George Kelly's 1951 *The Good Confessor*, an extremely popular handbook, the priest should put the penitent at ease, question as unobtrusively as possible, offer words of encouragement, and always give the penitent the benefit of the doubt. Advice like this is also part of the sacrament's complex history.

Part 3 of Cornwell's book is a rather disjointed meditation on the status of confession since the council. He is gratified by the collapse of the sacrament, at least in its previous mode. Few Catholics in the industrialized countries still confess with old-style regularity and children's confessions these days are gentle, even jovial, affairs. Taking their cue from the adults around them, many children appear to assume that they will confess in the future rarely if at all. Cornwell correctly attributes these developments to the ever-widening gulf between lay Catholic views on sex and the teaching of the magisterium, along with a heightened awareness of the communal dimensions of sin. He applauds the laity's new-found autonomy. But moral autonomy is a lonely business and the laity, he maintains, are spiritually hungry. Why else were communal penance services so popular in the brief years of their flourishing, when general absolution was frequently given? To deny this form of the sacrament to the faithful, as John Paul II did in 1984, was thus in Cornwell's view an act of unwitting cruelty. "Sacramental confession has the potential capacity to administer knowledge of the whole of one's spiritual life, past, present, and future, in relation to one's faith community and in relation to God."

The eloquent closing pages of Cornwell's book, where he speaks of what might be, are a fitting conclusion to this Catholic jeremiad. The story has a moral, one premised on values many readers of *Commonweal* would endorse. Most of us sense that something is grievously wrong in our church. But given the knottiness of the human condition, fierce moralists are apt to be poor historians. A historian by profession, I would not want a book like Cornwell's to my credit. I envy him, though, for having managed to vent the anger many of us share. I am still choking on mine. ■

Leslie Woodcock Tentler, *author of* Catholics and Contraception *(Cornell), is professor of history at the Catholic University of America.*

SARAH BAUMANN

Andrew J. Bacevich

Out of One, Many?

The Twilight of the American Enlightenment

The 1950s and the Crisis of Liberal Belief

George M. Marsden

Basic Books, $26.99, 209 pp.

Nostalgia, faint but unmistakable, permeates the pages of this book like the aroma of cinnamon in Grandma's kitchen. Yet Catholic readers of a certain age may catch a whiff of something different and less welcoming.

George Marsden's chosen subject is the Protestant Establishment and what happened when it went away. For younger readers, regardless of their religious persuasion, the mere phrase "Protestant Establishment" possesses about as much salience as "dial telephone" or "slide rule." Persuading them that such things once really mattered poses a challenge. In *The Twilight of the American Enlightenment*, Marsden, a distinguished historian now retired from teaching at Notre Dame, takes up that challenge.

As Marsden reminds us, the Protestant Establishment dominated American politics and intellectual life from the founding of the Anglo-American colonies until midway through the twentieth century. Then, in the course of a decade or two, its authority collapsed, carrying with it the consensus once said to define the "American character." Matters haven't been the same since.

Through World War II, Marsden writes, "The United States had been shaped by an alliance between enlightenment rationality and Protestant religion." From the era of George Washington to the age of Franklin Roosevelt, that is, mainstream (predominantly northern and largely white) Protestant denominations—Episcopalian, Congregational, Presbyterian, and the like—had affirmed and sustained the propositions laid down in foundational documents such as the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution.

Throughout this era, the God in whom Americans trusted was the God of Jonathan Edwards and Cotton Mather, not the God of Sunday Mass or Friday evening Shabbat services. A Protestant outlook defined the way that Americans conceived of and exercised freedom, that outlook meshing nicely with the needs of a nation engaged in a massive project of frenetic and sometimes brutal expansion, both territorial and economic. Long before baseball became the de facto national pastime, Protestantism had become the de facto national religion. In primary school, children saluted the flag, recited the Lord's Prayer, read the Bible, and sang "The Battle Hymn of the Republic"—that's how they learned what it meant to be an American.

Soon after World War II, however, a rising generation of intellectuals, some Protestant, many Jewish, very few of them Catholic, set out to dispense with this arrangement. With a few notable exceptions, theirs was a predominantly secular perspective. They were modernists, decidedly ambivalent about the conformity and consumerism that they saw as defining characteristics of postwar America. "A society obsessed with consumption," Hannah Arendt remarked, "cannot at the same time be cultured or produce a culture." What America desperately needed, according to the postwar intelligentsia, was less conformity and a higher cultural standard.

Their antidote was to reframe freedom in terms of individual autonomy, thereby resisting the stultifying demands of masscult and midcult. "To be autonomous," they believed, "meant to be an authentic, self-determining, and self-fulfilled person who could

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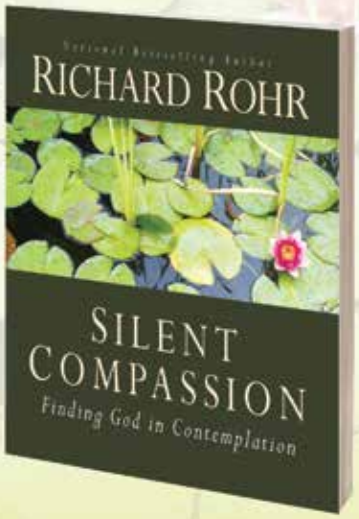
RICHARD ROHR



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President-elect Dwight D. Eisenhower and his wife Mamie leaving church on the morning of his inauguration

transcend the conventions of one's society." These "cutting-edge liberal intellectuals," Marsden writes, "viewed themselves as the true guardians of the Western heritage." Yet a necessary first step toward preserving that heritage, they insisted, was to discard religiously imposed constraint.

For their part, influential advocates of religion unwittingly aided this effort. During the 1950s, opponents of godless Communism such as the publisher Henry Luce were eager to add religious freedom to the arsenal of weapons available for waging the Cold War. Yet doing so meant downplaying sectarian differences, yielding a watered-down faith that rejected atheism without actually standing for much of anything. The price of admitting Jews and Catholics to this "generically Christian/American religion," according to Marsden, was to create a faux religious tradition "too problematic to long endure as a substantial part of American public life."

With the coming of the 1960s, a new definition of freedom took America by storm, with the remnants of the Protestant Establishment swept aside as collateral damage. The results, however, did not accord with either the expectations of cutting-edge intellectuals or the requirements of pious Cold Warriors.

Individual autonomy combined with an inflated confidence in the problem-solving capacity of science underwrote license and a "culture of narcissism." (Marsden cites Christopher Lasch approvingly). To be free was to "leave the petty constraints of one's community of origin and become a law unto oneself." For growing numbers of Americans, "individual development, individuality, and self-fulfillment" now emerged as "preeminent goals." Life became indistinguishable from lifestyle, its meaning revealed "not by looking to tradition or to community, either past or present, but by looking within."

Yet as Marsden notes, this do-your-own-thing definition of freedom proved considerably less liberating than advertised "because it also had to serve the needs of bureaucratic capitalism." In effect, autonomy gave birth to a new, more insistent conformity. ("Shoes Are Boring. Wear Sneakers," orders a recent ad campaign by Converse. Imagining that they are flouting convention, the young comply.) As for culture: In retrospect, the waning days of the Protestant ascendency, which included the odd Catholic among the Jews and blacks dominating the nation's literary and artistic scene, don't look so bad after all.

Meanwhile, religion, seen in smart circles as "wholly optional and dispensable," was becoming privatized. Except in a purely ceremonial sense ("God bless the troops and God bless the United States of America"), the "sacred canopy" that had long helped legitimize a way of life more profane than sacred became redundant. Its dismantlement went largely unnoticed and unlamented.

Granted, a country now sensitive to questions of pluralism that the old Protestant Establishment had disdained accommodated itself to an increasingly broad range of religious perspectives. Yet if "diverse religious voices were to be tolerated," Marsden observes, that did not imply any inclination to treat seriously what those voices had to say. God talk became a form of Muzak.

By the 1970s, these trends produced a backlash, expressing itself in the rise of a faith-based movement intent on reestablishing the political preeminence of that old-time religion. Marsden views this religious right with dismay, troubled by the Manichean view of its adherents who are persuaded that the choice facing America is "simply between a return to Christianity or a takeover by secular humanism and eventually authoritarianism." Either/or: no middle ground.

Marsden insists that there ought to *be* a middle ground—a way to affirm the pluralism permitted by the demise of the Protestant Establishment while also allowing religious perspectives to gain a hearing in the public sphere. Citing the works of Abraham Kuyper, an early-twentieth-century Dutch journalist-theologian-politician, Marsden advocates what he calls "confessional pluralism" or "principled pluralism." What these terms mean in practice is that debates over first-order questions should welcome views offered from all kinds of religious perspectives, with no one laughed at or shouted down. Laying down a dictum of sorts, Marsden decries any "assumption that outlooks reflecting trust in religious authority are second-class outlooks."

Perhaps that approach worked (for a while) in the Netherlands. Given the current state of American culture and politics, it's not at all clear that it will work in the United States. Indeed, one wonders whether Marsden himself takes seriously the likelihood of ideas associated with an obscure Dutchman, long deceased, restoring religion to a place of esteem in the American public square. Wouldn't Americans be more likely to respond to a religious figure—Martin Luther King Jr., for example—with whom they could more easily identify?

King would no doubt endorse pluralism, a fancy word for tolerance and respect. Yet one could imagine him going a step further to insist on a reexamination of freedom itself. While the Protestant Establishment reigned supreme, the operative definition of that term was insufficiently inclusive. In our own day, it has become inclusive but nihilistic. That's the piece that a people ostensibly devoted to freedom have yet to get right. ■

Andrew J. Bacevich *is a professor of history and international relations at Boston University.*

PHOTO: ABBIE ROWE, U.S. NATIONAL ARCHIVES AND RECORDS ADMINISTRATION

John F. Haught

Unwarranted Certainty

Our Mathematical Universe

My Quest for the Ultimate Nature of Reality

Max Tegmark

Alfred A. Knopf, $30, 432 pp.

The Accidental Universe

The World You Thought You Knew

Alan Lightman

Pantheon Books, $24, 157 pp.

An increasing number of cosmologists now believe in the existence of a multiverse. Multiverse theory holds that, in addition to our Big-Bang universe and its several hundred billion galaxies, there exist countless other universes, undetectable from within our own.

It's a thrilling prospect; but does a multiverse really exist? Though the theory is based on no actual evidence, Max Tegmark takes it to be a legitimate scientific idea. Indeed, this highly respected MIT particle physicist not only believes that a multiverse exists, but that it can tell us why the Big-Bang universe expands at the rate it does, why the force of gravity is what it is, and ultimately why life arose in our own universe. As if that were not enough, it turns out that multiverse theory—if properly elaborated—also answers the big philosophical questions thoughtful people have always asked: Is matter all there is? Are we free or determined? Do accidents really happen? Were we meant to be here? Was the universe created and does it have a purpose? What is the good life? Why get up in the morning?

To answer these questions and more, all we have to do is leap with Tegmark into the mathematical space opened up by a single grand idea, the multiverse. If we take that leap, we will find out that the physical universe is just the outward expression of an underlying, ultimately mathematical world. We will learn that life exists not through divine plan, but because the multiplicity of universes all but guarantees—statistically—that some will be well suited to life. How then, in light of such revelations, should you conduct your life day to day? In *Our Mathematical Universe*, Tegmark advises you to adopt a "scientific lifestyle." Rejoice that you live in a multiverse, where other versions of you exist in parallel worlds.

How can a theory for which there is no evidence—astrobiology is another—qualify as scientific? Multiverse theory qualifies, Tegmark argues, because it is associated with ideas that are testable. One of these is Alan Guth's widely accepted theory of cosmic inflation. Guth theorizes that our Big-Bang universe underwent an exceptionally rapid expansion during its first instant of existence. Though this expansion rate, a product of what cosmologists now call "dark energy," quickly decreased, the initial epoch of inflation—less than a trillionth of a second—accounts for some large-scale features of our observable cosmos. One of these is the physical homogeneity the universe exhibits at distances too far apart from one another to be explained by its present expansion rate. Another prediction, not yet confirmed, is that a multiverse exists.

During the inflationary period, dark energy theoretically could have had many different values, only one of which is the expansion rate essential for our Big-Bang universe. Hidden from us there may accordingly exist zillions of parallel universes, most of them lifeless and mindless, branching off prolifically and even eternally from a now-invisible "mother universe." Even though all these other universes lie beyond the horizon of detection in our cosmos, the mere fact that Guth's theory of cosmic inflation is open to empirical confirmation means for Tegmark that other predictions associated with inflation qualify as scientific, no matter how opaque to observation they may be at present. Anyway, mathematical reasoning and desktop computers can fill in whatever experimental gaps remain.

Our Mathematical Universe provides a readable and entertaining survey of the physics associated with speculation about the multiverse. If the author's criteria of scientific integrity seem loose, and his reduction of all reality to mathematical abstractions ethereal,

HUBBLESITE.ROG

Group of interacting galaxies known as Stephan's Quintet

one can nonetheless learn a lot about standard contemporary physics from this book—even when it sails beyond the clouds. Tegmark's diagrams and compact summaries are done with admirable originality, and one can well imagine that he is a resourceful teacher.

But is this book really about science? These days, popular books purporting to discuss science are as likely to be presentations of their authors' worldviews as they are summaries of scientific research. If one can separate the philosophy from the science, such works can be worthwhile for nonscientists, and in this respect Tegmark does not disappoint. *Our Mathematical Universe* is certainly scientifically educational. Yet a more enthusiastic fusion of physics with metaphysics would be hard to find, beginning with the book's tendentious subtitle, "My Quest for the Ultimate Nature of Reality."

Tegmark shows no awareness that his underlying philosophical perspective is a strange and even contradictory admixture of elements; his book blends ancient, medieval, and modern philosophical ideas into unpredictable hybrids on almost every page. Furthermore, although Tegmark has no use for a divine creator and seems most at home among scientific naturalists, there is something eerily supernaturalistic about his enshrinement of mathematical abstractions as ultimately and eternally real. The real world, he insists, is "out there," completely external to the knower, yet the reality that exists "out there" is purely numerical. While not ignoring altogether the importance of field work, Tegmark severs the mathematical from the experimental aspect of physics and launches his readers into a realm of pure numbers that he views as concrete and fundamental. As a result, he feels no need to draw a clear distinction between science and metaphysics.

He is not alone. Many scientists who make a name for themselves in one or another scientific specialty find it hard these days to resist the invitation to comment more generally on the philosophical, ethical, and theological implications of their disciplines' discoveries. They are doing so increasingly without observing the long-held distinction between science and philosophy. You may gather useful scientific information from such books, but chances are you will be treated to extravagant metaphysical excursions you didn't pay for. You can learn much about evolution from reading Richard Dawkins, for example—but as a bonus you will also learn that matter is all there is, that the universe is pointless, and that Darwin has delivered you from the compulsion to pray and worship.

Nowhere is the metaphysical adornment of scientific writing more extravagant than in works by celebrated physicists and cosmologists. Ever since Stephen Hawking suggested, in *A Brief History of Time*, that astrophysics makes a divine creator unnecessary, popular works on particle physics and cosmology have grown comfortable mingling science with talk about God—negative talk—and in the process turning their books into platforms for atheistic evangelizing. Cal Tech physicist Sean Carroll speaks for many when he declares that "if and when cosmologists develop a successful scientific understanding of the origin of the universe, we will be left with a picture in which there is no place for God to act..." Similarly, in *A Universe from Nothing*, physicist Lawrence Krauss interweaves important scientific information with his New Atheist message, while signing up Richard Dawkins to predict, in an afterword, that "If *On the Origin of Species* was biology's deadliest blow to supernaturalism, we may come to see [Krauss's book] as the equivalent from cosmology."

To be sure, this twisting of scientific writing into atheistic manifesto partly represents a reaction to creationist and intelligent-design tracts that collapse scientific ideas into religious apologetics. Still, there was a time when scientific skeptics would have been reluctant to use popular science books to persuade scientifically uninformed readers to give up their religious illusions. Albert Einstein, for instance, was no less atheistic than Dawkins on the question of a personal God, but in his popular writings he never cheapened relativity theory by making it a weapon to beat down the uninformed religious masses.

In *The Accidental Universe*, Alan Lightman, another physicist, helps account for the confident new conflation of physics with metaphysics. "Theoretical physics," he asserts, "is the deepest and purest branch of science. It is the outpost of science closest to philosophy, and religion." Lightman is also a novelist, author of the international best seller *Einstein's Dreams*, and a teacher of writing who holds a dual appointment in science and the humanities at MIT. *The Accidental Universe* is a compact and readable compilation of thoughtful essays on cosmic size, time, randomness, lawfulness, and hidden mathematical properties. Although the author describes himself as an atheist and shows little familiarity with theology, his comments on religion are closer in spirit to those of Einstein than to those of Krauss and Dawkins.

Though he doesn't describe his relationship with Tegmark at MIT, Lightman shares his colleague's interest in the possibility of a multiverse. He worries, though, that evidence of its actual existence could prove fatal to science as we know it. A multiverse would mean that our own universe just *happens* to have the physical properties essential for life, and that there would be no uniform laws underlying the totality of worlds. It would signify that ours is a completely "accidental universe" suspended over a lawless abyss. The remorseless regularity of nature that modern science has always taken for granted would dissolve in the chaos of unconnected cosmic experiments. Lightman, while not displeased to think that a multiverse would dismiss the need for a purposive deity to account for our own life-friendly universe, is concerned that a natural world without uniform laws would take the predictive starch out of science.

SARAH BAUMANN

What's really going on in all this talk about a multiverse? Is the theory a reasonable scientific prediction that might someday be confirmed experimentally, as in the case of black holes? Is it the last, desperate gasp of scientific naturalism as it seeks an alternative to the notion of a divinely created universe designed for life and for us? Or in fact does its unrestrained pursuit of otherworldly horizons express a deeply spiritual need for an infinity that far outstretches what astronomer Harlow Shapley once called the "anthropomorphic one-planet deity" of our familiar faith traditions?

And, finally, is the prospect of a multiverse a real threat to science as we know it? Guth and Lightman, along with the British astronomer Martin Rees, worry that if our improbable life-bearing universe turns out to be the only one around, the idea of divine design might still make sense. So they pin their hopes for atheistic naturalism on particle accelerators and computations that will prove that the universe (or multiverse) sprang "from nothing," as Lawrence Krauss puts it, rather than from a creator.

I believe that the anxiety associated with the possibility of a multiverse stems from an inordinately shrunken sense of both divine creativity and human intelligence. Atheistic multiversalists such as Tegmark typically assume—unnecessarily—that a divine creator could be neither good enough to delight in the spontaneity and diversity of nature, nor resourceful enough to summon forth an infinity of worlds. And why are Lightman and others so worried that the existence of a multiverse would signal the end of confidence in science and nature's intelligibility? The idea of a multiverse, after all, is itself a product of our human quest to make sense of things. And even if it turns out to be a bad idea, only a justifiable confidence in our intelligence and reason would permit us to deem it so. ■

John F. Haught *is professor of theology emeritus at Georgetown University and author of* Science and Faith: A New Introduction *(Paulist).*

Valerie Sayers

The Shape of Evil

A Land Without Sin

Paula Huston
Slant Books, $27, 303 pp.

Political and religious ideas can be difficult subjects for fiction, especially when they're combined: argument, after all, proceeds down a clearly marked highway while narrative takes the scenic route. But politics and religion meet in war zones on a daily basis, and artists have never shied away from representing the physical, if not the metaphysical, side of struggle. Certainly Mexico and Central America, sites of rich religious tradition and churning political conflict, have attracted Anglo realist writers—the best-known are probably Graham Greene and Robert Stone—equally drawn to the pleasures of the quest novel, with its atmosphere of suspense and exoticism, and the very different pleasures of the novel of ideas.

With her ambitious second novel, *A Land Without Sin*, Paula Huston jumps into this territory equipped with a wide-angle lens. She is determined to convey the riches of Mayan history, the dense beauties of Mexico's Chiapan jungle, the contemporary challenges of liberation struggles and liberation theology as seen from the privileged outsider's perspective. And always lurking behind the story of this world of Chiapas, so new to

Paula Huston

SLANT BOOKS

the novel's sharp-tongued protagonist, Eva Kovic, is a story of personal and cultural history that has intermittently driven both her and her brother to the clutches of despair.

Eva is a photojournalist who specializes in hot spots and war. She's traveled the world and has taken heartbreaking pictures: refugees in Darfur, a hut in Burundi "after a machete-wielding mob of neighbors swept through." Raised Catholic in a Croatian neighborhood in Chicago, she's long since lost her religion, and at thirty-four, she's lonely after a series of short-lived affairs. "There's a coldness inside that can scare people—men—while attracting them in ways that must feel vaguely uncomfortable to them," she says. "I'm not the kind of woman who's going to cling."

Eva is tough, but she retains a soft spot for Stefan, her older brother who left home early and has become a Catholic priest. Like Eva, he's chosen a life that sets him down in the middle of political turmoil, and in 1993, the time in which the novel is set, he's gone missing in Chiapas. Eva takes a freelance job working with a Dutch archaeologist who specializes in Mayan culture—she figures it will be a good cover—and sets off to find him.

Brisk with its action and richly detailed in its historical, geographical, political, and theological explorations, *A Land Without Sin* succeeds in considering the thorniest problems religious believers face—atrocity, despair, the nature of evil—without moralizing or over-simplifying. It's deeply engaging and impressive in its range, and for the most part it manages to keep its many narrative balls spinning gracefully. Perhaps most crucial to its success is a full and intelligent probing of an atheist's perspective—narrated by a complex, sharp, and dynamic female voice whose rue and wit inject healthy doses of irony and skepticism as needed.

Though Eva's main goal is to follow her brother into the jungle where he has disappeared, she also ends up pursuing an archaeological mystery concerning the messages of Mayan glyphs. The ruins she explores and the letters her brother has left behind lead her to ponder Stefan's lifelong pursuit of what he's called "the shape and personality of evil." Those letters in which Stefan describes his immersion in the writing of Miguel de Unamuno and René Girard are a handy way to lay out ideas but also a bald and somewhat clumsy narrative device. Nonetheless, at the heart of all the exposition, Girard's (and Huston's) ideas about scapegoating, sacrifice, and vengeance are intellectually satisfying. Furthermore, Huston raises the personal, philosophical, and theological stakes by situating the desire to avenge injustice not only in the ancient Mayan and contemporary Chiapan worlds, but also in the recent history of the Kovic family of Chicago.

That gives her another mystery to solve: Just what caused Stefan to leave home as a teenager, and what drives him now? He has disappeared into the jungle

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with the rebels, she discovers, because he is seeking to dissuade his onetime protégé Mat from taking revenge on a man named Aguilar for the murder of his father. Stefan must convince Mat that, as Eva puts it, "he has every right to seek justice for the murder of his father, was in fact morally required to do so, but that the moment he went after Aguilar for the satisfaction of hearing him scream he'd lose his soul." Stefan is the living embodiment of the faithful shepherd, trekking off into extreme geography and extreme danger after his lost charge.

The novel's notions of faithfulness are also embodied in the archaeologist's wife, Anne, a Quaker dying of multiple sclerosis. Anne is that most difficult of characters to pull off, the saintly sufferer, but Huston makes her believable in large part because she acts out her convictions rather than talking about them. It's Anne's husband who tells Eva what she thinks about faith: "That it was all there in front of us, open to everybody, and it was only a matter of learning how to see it.…[S]he believed we're born with the capacity to recognize some mysterious reality that's there, but that life hurts us and makes us wary, and eventually we screen ourselves off from things to the point where we lose the vision entirely."

With a potential reunion between Eva and Stefan in the balance, *A Land Without Sin* builds quickly to its suspenseful climax. It takes open delight in its own cinematic momentum, but it ultimately works as serious fiction because it's self-conscious—in the best sense—about the dangers of novels trafficking in political and religious certainties at the expense of complexity and mystery. Eva receives no come-to-Jesus epiphany but neither does she succumb to hopelessness about fallen humankind. She may not have regained the vision of faith Anne describes, but her field of vision has been enlarged. Just what we readers ask fiction to do for us. ■

Valerie Sayers, *chair of the English Department at Notre Dame, is the author of six novels including* The Powers.

LETTERS continued from page 4

WRITE ON

Kudos and thanks to Anthony Domestico for his articulate and insightful review of Renata Adler's novels *Speedboat* and *Pitch Dark* ("Fiction in Fragments," April 11). Reading it brought back the pleasure I felt when I discovered Adler and read her novels when they were first published a few decades ago. She is indeed a "writer's writer's writer," and Domestico is quite right that the novels "are almost impossible to describe in conventional novelistic terms." I hope that his review inspires those who have never read Adler to read the new editions of these novels and that those who have read her will be inspired to return to her once again. She is a unique literary voice. And that is a rare and precious thing.

TIINA ALEMAN
Jersey City, N.J.

ON BALANCE

Thanks for John Wilkins's informative and balanced reflection on the canonization of Popes John XXIII and John Paul II ("The Odd Couple," April 11). Wilkins is right to warn of the dangers of division, and to remind us of our own responsibility for the church and its service to the world. As I see it, even if your pope's a saint, that's still but one heart converted!

TIMOTHY P. SCHILLING
Utrecht, The Netherlands

THE PRICE OF CELIBACY

I had been planning to reply to Richard Gaillardetz's beautiful article "Married Priests" (December 6, 2013), and now—after reading Deacon Brian Carroll's letter to the editor in the February 7, 2014, issue—I must.

In discussions about married priests there's an elephant in the room: Who is going to *support* them and their families? American Catholics don't give nearly as much to their parishes as do members of other religious communities. Maybe large urban parishes could manage, but declining ones are already hard-pressed to meet payroll, housing, health insurance, and other expenses for their staff, even when clustered with other parishes.

I wonder how Fr. Nonomen's parishioners ("A Hole in the Basket," February 7) would react to having to raise extra funds to pay for married clergy and their families. In developing countries—where half the world's Catholics live—expecting a single man to accept poverty conditions is one thing; expecting his family to live in such conditions is quite another! Gospel exhortations (and those of Pope Francis) to "share" in people's poverty are beautiful ideals; but having to beg from them for the survival of one's wife and kids? How is that going to go over?

(REV.) JOHN KOELSCH
Jerome, Idaho

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Living Witness

Colleen Gibson

In the fall of 2009, less than six months after graduating from college, I found myself meeting with a vocation director about the possibility of a call to religious life. As I would soon learn, our conversation followed a fairly standard pattern. After small talk about my job and daily life, the director asked a series of questions: What was my relationship with God like? Why did I think I was called? What were my fears or hesitations about religious life?

That last question in particular stayed with me. How do you tell a vocation director you're scared that the life you feel called to may be dying? Or that you don't want to spend your life preoccupied by, or in direct care of, an aging population? But that's basically what I said. I feared being alone in religious life; I feared witnessing the failure of a group I'd given my life to; I was scared my life would be consumed by their death.

The vocation director acknowledged my concerns and assured me precautions had been taken to prevent such things from happening. Before I knew it, we were off to meet a few sisters and see important sites. First we visited sisters at the congregational retirement home. That was disconcerting. Still, I pressed on. Our next stop, though, unsettled me even more: the cemetery. As I gazed on the rows of headstones—all those buried sisters—it occurred to me that this wasn't the best place to take a potential candidate. It seemed to provide a good reason not to answer the call to religious life. Yet I did.

Now, four years later, I'm a novice with that congregation. Every morning I pray with my community. Our general intercessions include the names of our sisters who have died on that day over the years. With over 165 years in Philadelphia, there is no day of the year when we don't remember death. In many cases, the names are just words on a page, signifying that as long as this way of life goes on, so will we. Some days the sisters reminisce after prayer. This tradition serves as a beautiful reminder of our own mortality—and of our faith's promise of eternal life. The discomfort I felt during that first graveyard visit has dissipated. I find myself among women who invested their lives and followed the call of Christ. That sense of belonging helps me carry on. I know that I am in the company of sisters who are close to Christ, whether they are above or below ground.

Over the past year, however, the recitation of our necrology has taken on new meaning. The list is growing all the time. In 2012, we lost forty-two sisters. In the first four months of my novitiate, nineteen sisters died. Death hangs overhead, reminding me not only of our mortality, but also that we're running out of nuns. What religious life once was, it can no longer be. As our membership shrinks, our dedication must grow—dedication to being witnesses to the Gospel in the everyday, embracing what it means to be poor, chaste, and obedient every day of our lives.

Our witness must be visible in something more than our numbers. It has to be evident in our lives in and as the church. That is the future of religious life: the witness of an authentic choice to live lives intentionally and communally rooted in Christ. That means refusing to allow ourselves to be comfortable with the way things are—both in the wider world and in our own religious lives. It means listening—to one another, to those outside our community, and to the Holy Spirit.

The ideas of the past can't take us into the future. That way of living—of big institutions and pervasive Catholic culture—is dying, if not dead. We mourn the loss; we remember and we celebrate. Without forgetting, we move on. We become the witnesses Christ needs today. We seek new life and trust that this form of life will go on. We look to the future and hold firm to what has brought us this far: love of God and love of neighbor. For if those two things have taught us anything, it is that death is not the end. It is simply our chance to surrender to all God has planned for us. ■

Colleen Gibson, SSJ, *is a sister of St. Joseph of Philadelphia, completing her second year of novitiate.*

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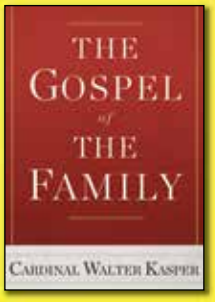

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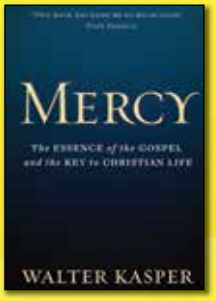

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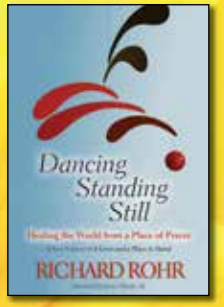

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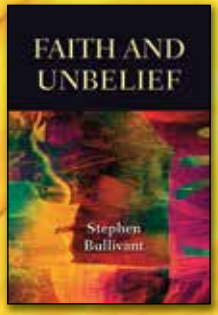

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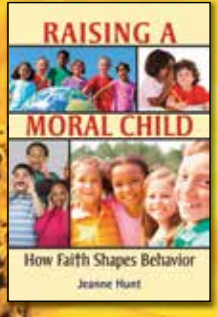

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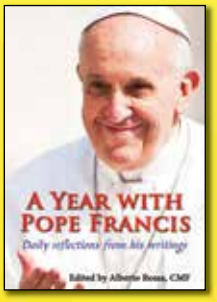

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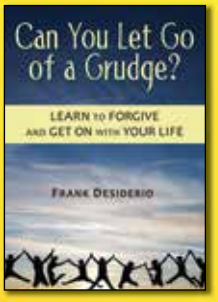

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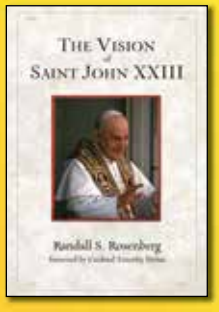

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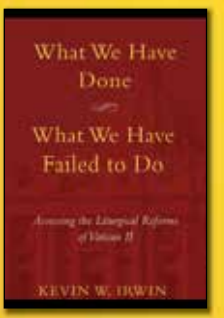

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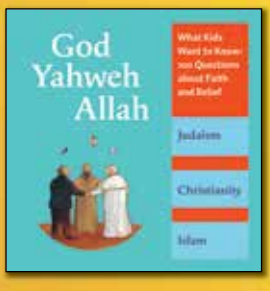

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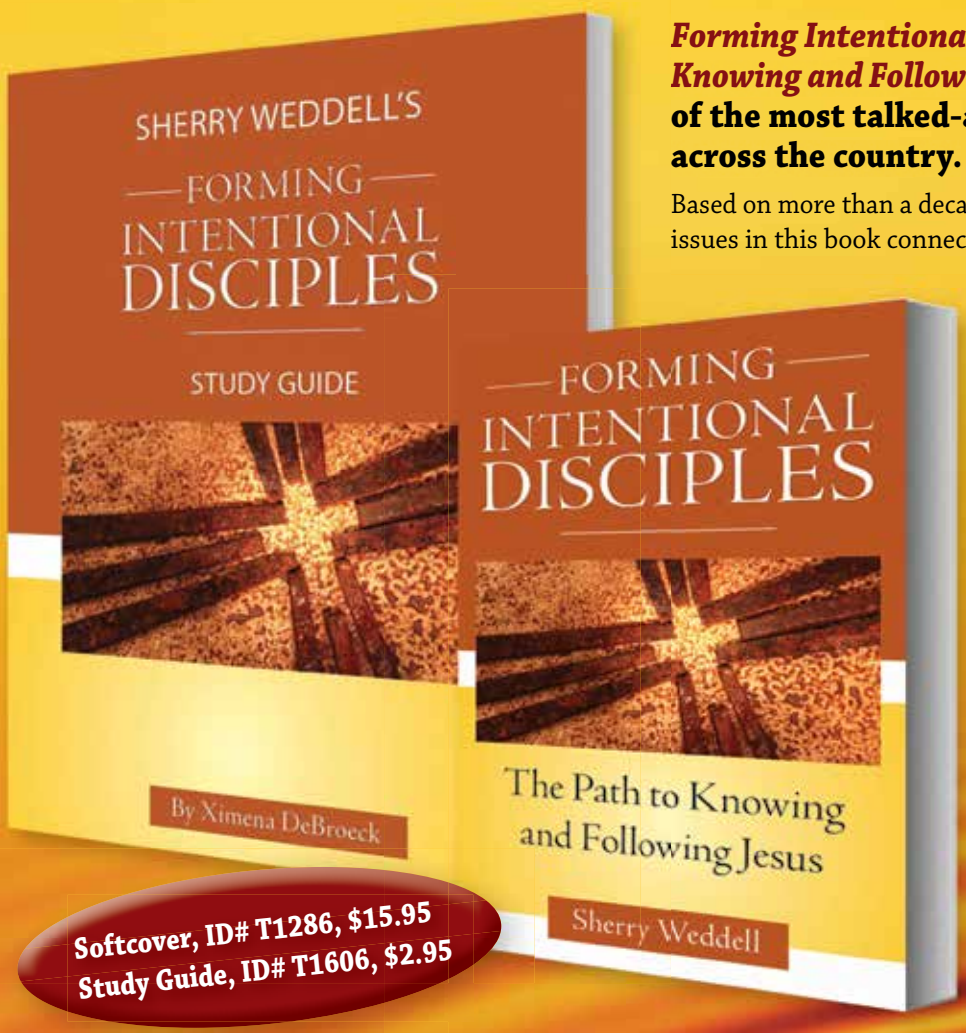

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