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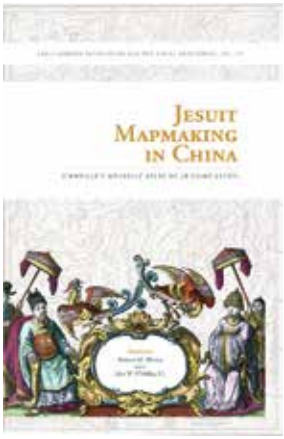

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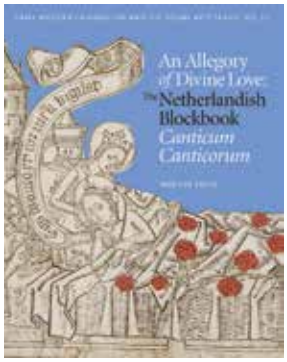

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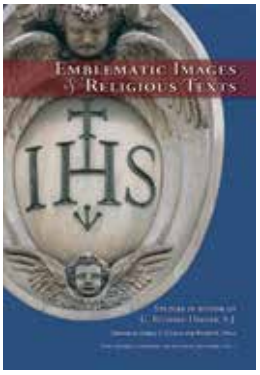

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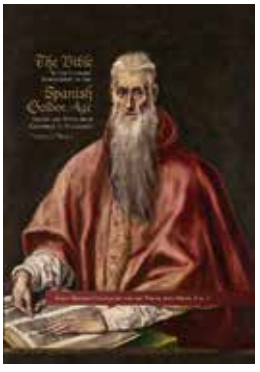

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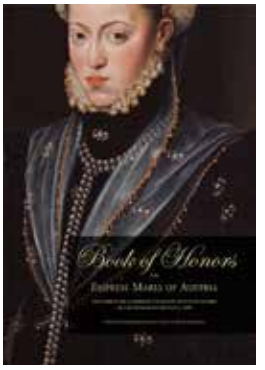

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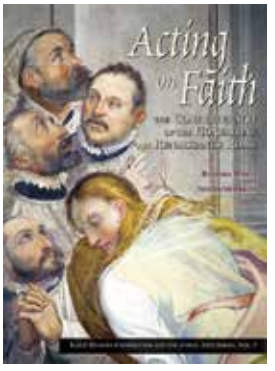

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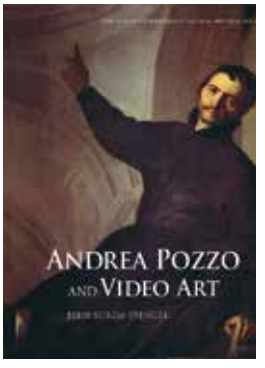

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subscriptions@commonwealmagazine.org

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

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LETTERS

A Stale Debate?

ABSTINENCE EDUCATION

I am puzzled by the reflections of Christopher Roberts and Marian Crowe ("Does Method Matter?" March 20), which suggest that the spiritual discipline of marital sex depends greatly on use of Natural Family Planning (NFP). To the extent that this spiritual discipline is practiced in abstinence, NFP is certainly not required. There is no shortage of opportunities for abstinence in a marriage: long work hours, illness, troubled children, financial worries, exhaustion. After thirty-eight years of marriage, I can report that finding opportunities for abstinence from sex was—and is—a nonissue.

But why limit the spiritual discipline of marital sex to abstinence? There is a more demanding side to this discipline in the positive practice of sex, in generosity, openness, willingness to be led or to lead, patience, setting aside the anxieties of the moment or mood, cheerful humility, forgiveness and mercy…the list could go on, since the demands of this spiritual discipline are in the details. My wife and I practiced NFP all through our fertile years—and with satisfaction, since it worked for us—but it was neither necessary for abstinence nor the source of our greatest spiritual growth in marriage.

Perhaps the shortcomings in the moral reasoning against contraception (well stated by Lisa Fullam in the same issue) have sent Catholic spokespeople searching for an alternative rationale toward the same end—and our long tradition of sexual renunciation is easy to locate. But this has never been our only tradition for the practice of sex, and the focus on abstinence misleads Catholics entering marriage regarding the spiritual demands that lie ahead. Indeed, it distracts and misleads us all, and it devalues the unitive practice and power of sexual love.

FRANK SCHWEIGERT
St. Paul, Minn.

COMMON SENSE

Over the course of seven years at the Catholic University of America, I studied logic, epistemology, natural law, Augustine, and religion. I have been married sixty-five years, with eight children—including a stillbirth and a couple of miscarriages. At eighty-seven, I have acquired a lifetime of experience as a trial lawyer and businessman. When it comes to contraception, we need not talk of hard cases but rather of the average American Catholic couple who both work and yet must be very careful with their money. With or without children most of them practice or have practiced birth control. Why? Because, as a Chinese priest opined to me more than fifty years ago, if something is contrary to human nature, common sense, and the common experience of humanity, whether it be Catholicism or Communism, it won't work.

Back to the average Catholic couple: After a long and arduous day, meal preparation and other domestic duties, tending to several children—as many of our new immigrant families do—getting out ovulation charts and taking mucous tests before making love borders on the ridiculous. As for natural law, the major premise of *Humanae vitae* is flawed. Even Augustine, who never got it quite right on love and sex, preached that married couples could have intercourse to control their irascible and concupiscent faculties—even though they were not engaged in sex to have children. Accordingly, if a couple can have loving sexual relations to be of one flesh or to sate their sexual needs, then the purported requirement that every sexual act be open to procreation is not the primary reason for the act. Consequently there can be a barrier to procreation.

By his own admission, Augustine had a strong sexual drive. His life before his conversion, living with a woman and having a child out of marriage likely conditioned his later theology of marriage. Concomitant with his own experience he concluded that the celibate monastic life was a higher calling than marriage. Vestiges of this point of view are discernible between the lines of well-intentioned articles by

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writers like Christopher C. Roberts and Marian Crowe. This will not lead to a better understanding of human sexual love. It is regrettable that the wonderful legacy Augustine has left us loses some of its burnish because of the inordinate effect his ideas about sex have had on the hierarchical church.

ERNEST C. RASKAUSKAS
Potomac, Md.

A FAILED METHOD

After struggling with the authors' efforts to breathe new life into a long-exhausted discussion ("Does Method Matter?"), ending with the good sense of Lisa Fullam calling for contraceptive morality that honors love, justice, and experience, I could only wonder at this largely stale repetition of a moral debate the *sensus fidelium* has long since resolved. *Humanae vitae* was negated by theological and philosophical challenge, resort to conscience, and the revelation that Paul VI was persuaded to abandon Vatican II collegiality largely out of fear that "magisterial authority would be undermined if there were a change in teaching"—as if such change had never occurred before.

Cracks in the teaching against contraception began well before *Humanae vitae* was issued. I recall when, around 1960, a college friend returned from the annual Catholic Philosophical Association meeting with the news that its members found the natural-law argument against contraception invalid. Apparently the Catholic Theological Society of America, meeting nearby the same weekend, would not debate the issue.

That same year my wife bore our sixth child in six and a half years, five accounted for by failures of Natural Family Planning, accompanied by numberless occasions of withheld affection. A seventh pregnancy brought a physician's warning. Meanwhile, each successive pregnancy had worsened my wife's varicose-vein difficulties, dooming her to sixty-odd years of suffering—so far. Of necessity, we joined the majority of First World Catholics who followed their consciences or abstained from Communion. *Humanae vitae*'s loophole—conscience—visible to the sophisticated reader if not to hundreds of millions of uneducated or less educated fellow Catholics, decided the issue for us.

After *Humanae vitae*, most First World Catholics simply followed their own consciences and confessors learned to respect their silence about their sexual experiences. And bishops learned to condemn contraception discretely so as to be ignored. Meanwhile, perhaps in response to criticism, Rome recognized mutual love and sanctification as also primary ends of marriage—at least until the single-purpose-of-marriage argument was again required to condemn same-sex marriages.

Better had the *Commonweal* panel discussed why John Paul II and Benedict XVI loyalists are now so exercised about maintaining a posture on contraception they have for so long faithfully ignored.

WILLIAM H. SLAVICK
Portland, Maine

WHAT DO I KNOW?

In "Does Method Matter?" Christopher Roberts dismisses "hard cases" as a way of "keeping the challenges of Natural Family Planning at arm's length." My wife is one of those "hard cases." When she was pregnant with our second child she started having severe lung trouble, and after our daughter was born she was repeatedly hospitalized for years with pulmonary fibrosis. The doctors said it was a miracle she and the baby survived the pregnancy. She was on high levels of oxygen for over four years until she got a lung transplant. During that period she was in and out of the hospital and nearly died several times. God performed a miracle for our family (although it was a fourteen-year-old who donated the lungs, making it a severely bittersweet experience).

Fairly soon after the baby was born, when my wife was first getting sick, I got a vasectomy. According to church teaching as I understand it, that decision was "intrinsically evil." I had to live without my wife for a year while she waited for a lung transplant five hundred miles away, as I worked full-time and took care of two young kids on my own.

I don't appreciate being lectured to by Roberts on the supposed virtues of abstinence and how it is so great for marriages and helps fulfill God's plan or whatever. I know plenty about abstinence, as we were involuntarily forced into it during most of my wife's illness and absence.

When my wife became ill, our choices were: abstain permanently; use NFP and risk an unwanted pregnancy that would have almost certainly killed my wife, threatening the life of any future child, turning me into a widower and my kids into orphans; or use artificial birth control. My doctor told me a vasectomy is the most effective form of birth control, period.

As I understand it, NFP is advocated because it allows us to accept that we don't have total control over our lives and that we have to submit to God's will. I don't need to use NFP to know that. My wife's illness and the suffering our family has gone through have made it perfectly clear that events are out of our control.

But what do I know? According to the church and Roberts, my acts were "intrinsically evil." He can try to sugarcoat it, but when I read articles like his, that is what comes through. I thought Jesus and his church preached compassion, but I guess I'm just being "too insistent on [my] personal autonomy and the urgency of [my] appetites."

I very much appreciated the more nuanced views expressed by Marian Crowe and Lisa Fullam.

NICK HERMSEN
Palm Desert, Calif.

Risks Worth Taking

After months of grueling negotiations, Iran and six world powers, led by the United States, have "agreed to come to an agreement" regarding Iran's nuclear program. Economic sanctions put in place by the UN, the EU, and the United States will be lifted once it is verified that Iran has dismantled those elements of its nuclear industry that can readily be turned to the production of a nuclear weapon. The final—and crucial—details of the agreement are supposed to be ironed out in further negotiations before the end of June.

Although the tentative accord has been widely praised by most disarmament experts, opposition among Republicans and some Democrats in Congress—urged on by Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and his American supporters—may yet derail the accord. Opinion is roughly divided between those who think the deal as outlined is the best that can be achieved, provided Iranian compliance can be carefully vetted, and those who think negotiating with Iran is a fool's errand. Those opposed are demanding tougher sanctions, the end of Iran's support for terrorism, and the complete dismantling of its nuclear facilities. Some even advocate bombing Iran if it does not capitulate.

President Barack Obama and Secretary of State John Kerry have not made grandiose claims about what an agreement can achieve. It is unlikely to alter the authoritarian nature of the Islamic regime, nor will it prevent Iran from threatening Israel or supporting its radical Shiite allies in the region. No one is suggesting that U.S. and Iranian interests can be easily reconciled or that the bitter history between the two nations can be forgotten. But if the deal does prevent Iran from acquiring a nuclear weapon, the result will be greater regional stability and a safer Israel. There are risks in negotiating with any hostile regime, but in this case they are worth taking if an agreement can prevent another war in the Middle East.

There are reasons to be guardedly optimistic. Iran has already demonstrated a willingness to abide by the stringent inspection regime agreed to with the international community in 2013. In other words, the economic sanctions orchestrated by the United States have worked. Iran has been isolated diplomatically and its economy devastated. That is why Iran is at the negotiating table. For the United States to walk away from negotiations at this point, or insist on even harsher sanctions before an accord is finalized, would fracture the international coalition. Instead of increasing pressure on Tehran, the sanctions regime would unravel. The most likely result would be an economically revitalized Iran free to push ahead with its nuclear program. That would bring the prospect of war closer, which seems to be the intent of some administration critics.

President Obama is now faced with at least three new and difficult challenges. First, inspections and time tables will have to be worked out in detail. Second, the United States must reassure Israel and Sunni nations, which are understandably worried about Iranian aggression. This explains the administration's renewal of military aid to Egypt and support for Saudi Arabia's questionable intervention in Yemen.

Finally, the president must find a way to involve Congress in acquiescing to, if not formally approving, the deal with Iran. The president is certainly within his constitutional powers to conduct these negotiations. He also has the authority to lift some sanctions. But lifting the sanctions imposed by Congress will require legislative action. True, involving a Republican-controlled Congress bent on sabotaging this president's every initiative looks like a fool's errand of its own. But there is some indication that a deal can be struck that might preserve both the executive branch's prerogatives in foreign policy and the oversight responsibilities of Congress. With the backing of some Democrats, Senate Foreign Relations Committee Chairman Bob Corker (R-Tenn.) has proposed a bill that would allow Congress to weigh in on any final Iran deal, but also make it difficult to revoke. Corker's bill, at least in its most palatable form, allows the accord to go into effect if, after thirty days, Congress either votes "yes" or does not vote at all on the issue.

On the face of it, this would seem to give the president and his allies enough time to make the strongest case possible for the accord, and Obama has agreed to sign the bill. Engaging a hostile Congress risks rejection and a possibly crippling blow to U.S. credibility and effectiveness abroad, but like the Iran deal itself it is a risk worth taking. ■

April 14, 2015

Cathleen Kaveny

Playing the Princess

THE LIMITS OF RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

To say that Indiana's new Religious Freedom Restoration Act (RFRA) set off a firestorm would be an understatement. When Governor Mike Pence signed it into law in March, he triggered a series of protests from an array of groups that included both the NCAA and Angie's List. Unable to withstand the pressure, Pence pressed for revision and clarification of the law.

The dominant frame for the debate about Indiana's RFRA was the tension between religious freedom and the need to combat discrimination against homosexuals. But understanding the controversy in those terms doesn't address the deeper problem. Instead, the controversies over the Indiana law are symptomatic of a more fundamental difficulty with RFRA jurisprudence generally. I call it the "Princess and the Pea" problem.

As the federal statute is written, the protections of RFRA are triggered by a "substantial" burden on a claimant's free exercise of religion. But here is the problem: the courts do not apply an objective test for substantiality; they simply take a (sincere) claimant's word that a burden on his free exercise is substantial. In a nutshell, the substantiality of a burden depends not on its own weight when viewed objectively, but rather on the sensitivity of the claimant. That means that a religiously sensitive claimant can effectively object to a pea-sized burden, and thereby set the cumbersome machinery of RFRA adjudication in motion. The government now has to prove that the law is advancing a compelling state interest and that it is narrowly tailored to advance that interest in the way that least burdens the claimant's free exercise.

The current approach to "substantial" burdens is no longer workable. In our increasingly pluralistic and interconnected society, we need to develop a consensus about what counts as a substantial burden on religiously motivated moral beliefs. That consensus need not draw on any particular theological vision; it only has to reflect what is reasonable to expect of people, given the degree to which they have agreed to participate in a pluralistic society.

Most people would agree that it is a substantial burden to be forced to be personally involved in an action they believe to be immoral. So no one should be forced to perform an abortion, or to directly administer contraception. Most people also recognize that forcing people to be considerably involved in actions that they think cause serious harm to vulnerable third parties is substantially burdensome. So, for example, forcing someone to prepare prisoners for execution—or patients for euthanasia—is not acceptable, even if such people are not made to administer the lethal dose.

At the same time, Americans need to acknowledge that many attenuated forms of connection to the wrongful acts of others should not rise to the level of a substantial burden for purposes of RFRA analysis. The terms of our social experiment mean that most of us will find ourselves a tangential part of an action or way of life that we don't endorse. This is the price we all must pay for being involved in the commerce of a pluralistic society. That insight would rule out the RFRA claims of a Catholic innkeeper who refuses to rent a room to an unmarried heterosexual couple, just as it would in the case of a Muslim cab driver who declines to transport a passenger carrying alcohol. The same would go for an Evangelical baker who won't make a cake for a same-sex wedding—the example most cited by supporters of the Indiana bill. In all three cases, the burdens on free exercise are not objectively substantial enough to trigger the cumbersome legal machinery of RFRA.

Such claimants might respond that their actions put them in a position of appearing to endorse fornication, alcohol consumption, or same-sex marriage, respectively. But that doesn't make sense, because no sensible person understands the transactions that merchants make in the public marketplace as signaling their endorsement of the activities of their customers. And one who makes rooms generally available for rent doesn't in any way sanction the specific activity that guests engage in behind closed doors.

Some Catholics might recognize in my argument echoes of Catholic teaching on "cooperation with evil," which analyzes an agent's complicity in the wrongful act of others in a framework that takes into account the seriousness of the wrong involved and the distance of the agent from that wrong. Making an attenuated contribution to someone else's morally objectionable action plan is often permissible, provided that it does not entail harm to innocent third parties. While the jargon around the analysis of "cooperation with evil" is technical, its insights aren't narrowly Catholic. They offer a helpful way for everyone to assess his or her moral connection to the wrongful acts of others.

The U.S. Catholic bishops could have used the framework of "cooperation with evil" to analyze the weight of the burdens the contraception mandate placed on their religious liberty. But they didn't. Instead, they claimed that even a requirement to notify insurance carriers of their objections to the contraception mandate counted as "substantial burden" under RFRA. As the brouhaha in Indiana shows, their "Princess and the Pea" strategy may well backfire politically. But more important, it has backfired pedagogically. ■

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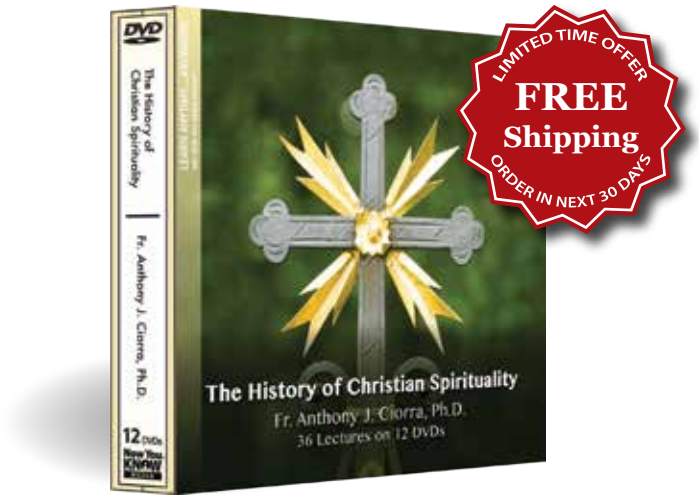

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A Theory of Everything

THE SMALLNESS OF 'BIG HISTORY'

Before the rise of professional historiography as we know it today, European scholars tended to start their accounts of the human story way, way back—as in, the Garden of Eden. In what was often called "universal history," humanity's story was depicted as progressing through certain predetermined, discernable "stages" or "ages," culminating in the Last Things. Such an approach persisted, in a more secularist register, into the Enlightenment: in the philosophe Condorcet's ten-stage account of the "inevitable perfection of the human race"; in Hegel's lumbering pontifications on *Weltgeschichte* (world history); or later in August Comte's vision of humankind's passage through three ages, from the theological through the metaphysical and, finally, to the mature "scientific" or "positivist" stage, which Comte confidently felt he was advancing in his own writings.

This effort to detach history from theological and philosophical concerns and remake it as a just-the-facts, scientific enterprise strongly shaped the discipline that emerged in the nineteenth-century academy. As physicists sought predictable laws in the natural world, so historians sought them in the human world. George Bancroft, a nineteenth-century U.S. historian, for example, traced the roots of American liberty to Teutonic forests and Luther's Reformation, addressing these words to the American Historical Association in 1886:

> The movements of humanity are governed by law.... The growth and decay of empire, the morning lustre of a dynasty and its fall from the sky before noonday; the first turning of a sod for the foundation of a city to the footsteps of a traveler searching for its place which time has hidden, all proceed as it is ordered. The character of science attaches to our pursuits.

This context will help us assess so-called Big History, an approach to teaching pioneered and promoted by David Christian, professor at Macquarie University in Australia. Christian's captivating instruction, showcased in a celebrated 2011 TED talk titled "The History of our World in 18 Minutes," has become hugely popular online—and has gotten a big boost from Bill Gates. After stumbling across it during a late-night workout, Gates arranged to meet the professor and soon decided to invest millions in an effort to get Christian's brainchild into American high schools.

Big History has some obvious charms. It aligns with the Common Core standards adopted in most states, and provides a wealth of well-organized material online—for free. It uses project-based learning in a comprehensive ninth-tenth grade sequence, and can also function as a "capstone" class or be incorporated into existing curricula. And it is exciting. Where high-school history teachers sometimes

David Christian

STEVE JURVETSON

struggle to make topics relevant—recently, our daughter's U.S. history class tried to use new NFL concussion rules as a way to get students interested in the Progressive Era—Big History ignites student interest with a drama of universal sweep and high stakes for our future. (The online curriculum proclaims that "decisions made by the generations of humans that are alive today" can either free the future from "conflict, disease, and degradation"—or undermine "the foundations of today's world.") And Big History, whose advocates fault conventional secondary-school curricula for randomness, promises students a way to draw connections among disparate disciplines. As project advisor Bob Bain puts it, "Most kids experience school as one damn course after another; there's nothing to build connections between the courses that they take."

In the largest sense, Big History goes the older "universal history" one better: it is not merely an effort to see how one country fits into the world or how one age follows another, but how our world fits into the deep time of the entire universe. Forget 1492 and 1776, forget decades and centuries; we're talking about eons. David Christian's narrative moves across eight "thresholds," from the Big Bang to the rise of agriculture, cities, states, industry, and technology; homo sapiens don't show up until threshold six. Christian drew his method from the *Annales* school, an early twentieth-century French school of history that prioritized quantifying the *longe durée*: broad, impersonal movements in geography, demographics, consumption, and the like.

But where *Annales* history was written in a dryly academic style, Big History is sexy. And it is catching on. As Andrew Ross Sorkin reported in a 2014 cover story for the *New York Times Magazine*, the California school system is paving the way for the state's thirteen hundred high schools to offer

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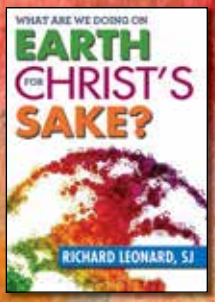

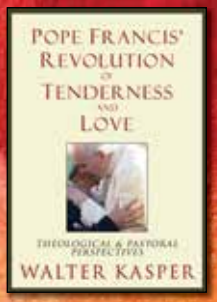

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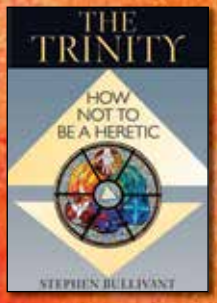

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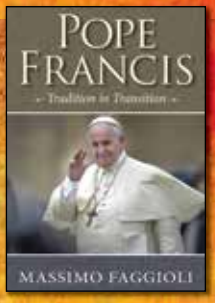

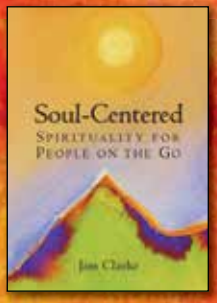

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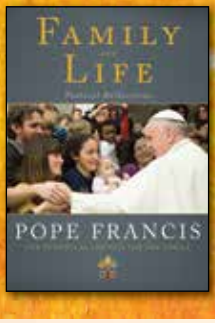

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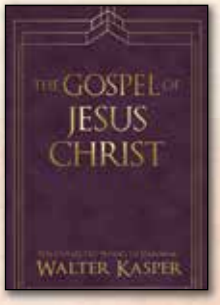

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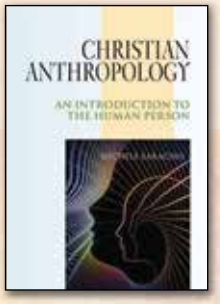

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Nellie Hill received an honorable mention in the 2013 Thomas Merton Poetry of the Sacred competition. Her fourth chapbook is Winter Horse *(Finishing Line Press).*

it, and the project's website lists several hundred schools in the United States, Canada, and Australia that already have embraced it. Sorkin reported widespread wariness toward the idea of a history program paid for by Bill Gates, quoting New York University's Diane Ravitch, a prominent critic of corporate school reform. "I wonder how Bill Gates would treat the robber barons," Ravitch mused aloud. "Bill Gates's history would be very different from somebody else's who wasn't worth $50–60 billion."

We are wary too, but not primarily because we fear Bill Gates is peddling rich-man history. The deeper problem, in our view, is that Big History is too big—too big, in fact, to be really history at all.

Historical inquiry can distort by over-specialization, looking at one place, person, or event too narrowly, without supplying the wider context. But going too wide also distorts understanding. Attempting to cover a vast stretch of space and time obscures understanding of contingent human actions. In raw scientistic fashion, Big History evicts subjective human experience from the curriculum, disabling the kind of teaching that (to quote Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn) seeks to convey "the whole weight of an unfamiliar, lifelong experience with all its burdens, its colors, its sap of life"—the kind of teaching that "recreates in the flesh an unknown experience and allows us to possess it as our own."

Furthermore, as social historians recognize, a key element of any big story is the range of small stories it contains. Particular things happen for particular reasons to particular people, requiring close scrutiny of circumstances, personalities, beliefs, social conditions, ideas, motivations, inventions, elections, and so on. This recognition is not only a feature of methodology but a key humanistic reason for studying history in the first place—and a prophylactic against the solipsism of mistaking your own milieu as the apex of human reason. Not only is this goal not present in Big History; indeed, the project appears designed to delete it. History teachers properly want students to consider particular persons and events, to kindle capacities for moral reasoning, and to engage times and places utterly foreign to their own. But insofar as Big History has a story line, it's the glacial, improbable ascent of homo faber, Silicon Valley style: from the Big Bang to Bill Gates.

Big History also exhibits a dubious faith in what David Christian calls the "underlying unity of modern knowledge." No fretting over a war between science and religion, or between the feuding "two cultures" of science and the humanities à la C. P. Snow, because historical knowledge exists within the house built by science. In the terms of the great German theorist Wilhelm Dilthey, Big History is all about *Erklären*, knowledge that admits sharp precision, not *Verstehen*, a more ruminative, reflective mode that encompasses nuanced empathetic understanding of people in remote times and places.

History teachers who are flattered to think that "history" can serve as the framework for organizing all knowledge would do better to worry that a Trojan horse is now inside their walls. Consider Christian's claim to deliver all 13.7 billion years in 18 minutes (or in a few online lessons). What takes us through most of those billions of years are astronomy, physics, geology, chemistry, and biology. These are vitally important fields, but they are not methodologically recognizable as history—and certainly not history as a humanistic, empathy-inducing enterprise designed to plumb the cracks and crevices, the fathomless contingencies, of human experience.

Science and history can and should intersect, of course. Environmental historians long have studied the reciprocal relationships of nature and human activity, and the history of science deserves a much more prominent place in high-school and college curricula than it commonly receives. One might further argue that the job of a holistic liberal-arts education is to provide appropriate links between various disciplines.

But in presenting as history a visually beguiling panorama that is mostly science, Big History minimizes the significance of human experience, reducing it to a "stage" or "threshold" in the unspeakable vastness of time, energy, and matter. So it is both poignant and comical that the online version of the course recommends the following questions for instructor use: "What does 13.7 billion years of history tell you about yourself? How does knowing so much about the past change the way you think about the future?"

Answers may vary. ■

Agnes R. Howard *teaches history and* **Thomas Albert Howard** *directs the Center for Faith and Inquiry at Gordon College in Wenham, Massachusetts.*

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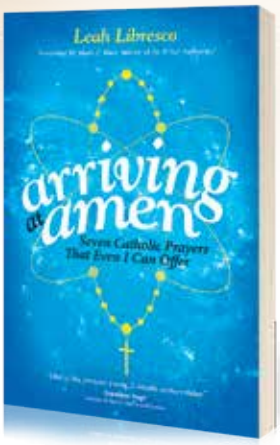

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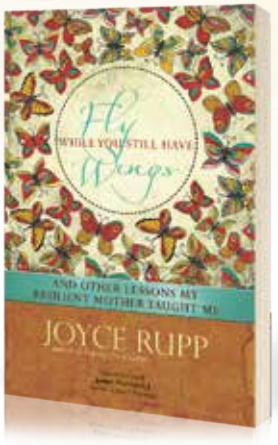

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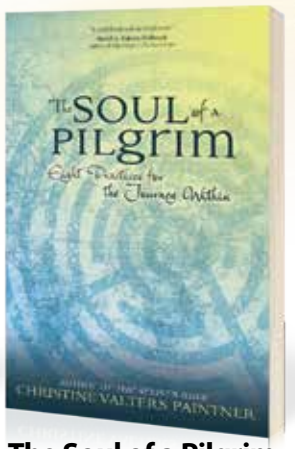

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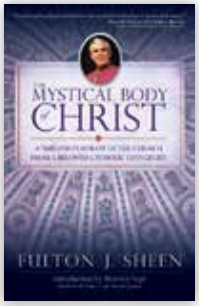

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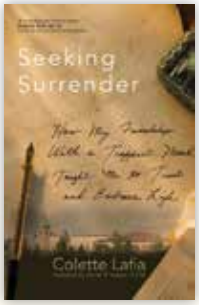

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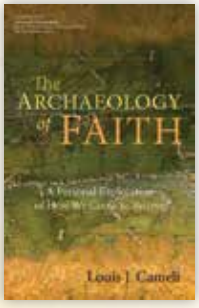

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A Place & Time Apart

The Liberal Arts vs. Neoliberalism

Jackson Lears

It is a platitude that we cannot defend the humanities without slipping into platitudes. Why is that? Part of the answer involves the corrosive impact of contemporary intellectual fashion. We are besieged by a resurgence of positivist scientism—the transformation of science from a method to a metaphysic, promising precise answers to age-old ultimate questions. Yet while pop-neuroscientists, evolutionary psychologists, and other defenders of quantifiable certainty have beaten back postmodern philosophical critiques, the postmodern style of ironic detachment has flourished. The recoil from modernist high seriousness, epitomized by the turn from Abstract Expressionist painting to Pop Art, has persisted long after Andy Warhol displaced Jackson Pollock as the celebrity artist du jour. As a signifier of the dominant cultural tone, the furrowed brow has been largely eclipsed by the knowing smirk. The commitment to searching out deep truths has yielded to the celebration of playing with surfaces (in the arts) or solving problems (in the sciences). The merger of postmodern irony and positivist scientism has been underwritten by neoliberal capitalism—whose only standard of value is market utility.

This convergence of postmodern style, positivist epistemology, and neoliberal political economy has turned a whole class of words into the stuff of platitude. Old words that used to mean something—ideals, meaning, character, self, soul—have come to seem mere floating signifiers, counters in a game played by commencement speakers and college catalogs. Vague and variable as their meanings may have been, there was a time when the big words of the humanities still carried weight. They sustained yearnings and aspirations; they sanctioned the notion that the four-year transition from adolescence to adulthood might be a time of exploration and experiment.

This idea has not disappeared entirely, but the last time it flourished en masse was forty years or so ago, in the atmosphere pervaded by the antiwar counterculture. Indeed one could argue that the counterculture of the 1960s and early '70s involved far more than the contemporary caricature of sex, drugs, and rock 'n' roll. It was in part a creation of young people who wanted to take college education seriously, to treat it as more than mere job training. Beneath the slogans and excess, the counterculture contained a probing critique of the instrumentalist mentality that managed the Vietnam War—the mad perversion of pragmatism embodied in the American major's words: "it became necessary to destroy the town in order to save it." Writers like Albert Camus, Martin Buber, and Dietrich Bonhoeffer may have been more often cited than read by young people in the 1960s and '70s, but those writers' presence in countercultural discourse suggested the urgent question at its core: How can we live an ethical life amid the demands of illegitimate power?

Excellent Sheep
The Miseducation of the American Elite and the Way to a Meaningful Life
William Deresiewicz
Free Press, $26, 245 pp.

One place to explore answers to that question was the liberal-arts curriculum. During the late 1960s, even at my conservative Southern university, humanities enrollments soared as students packed English, philosophy, and history courses—posing fundamental questions, resisting conventional answers. The old words still had meaning, and were being called to account. Literature provided a language for challenging "the insolence of office" that was epitomized in government lies—and for exposing the technocratic hubris embodied in Ahab's boast: "All my means are sane; my motive and my object mad." This is how we learned what we were up against: nothing better captured the madness of the managerial rationality behind the Vietnam War and the nuclear-arms race. Many students, myself included, acted on the unarticulated assumption that reading, reflection, and introspection might provide the foundation of an

Jackson Lears *was educated at the University of Virginia, the University of North Carolina, and at Yale University where he received a PhD in American Studies. He is now Board of Governors Distinguished Professor of History at Rutgers University, editor of* Raritan: A Quarterly Review, *and author, most recently, of* Rebirth of a Nation: The Making of Modern America, 1877–1920.

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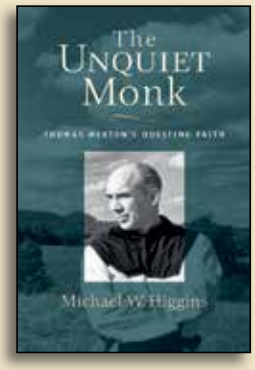

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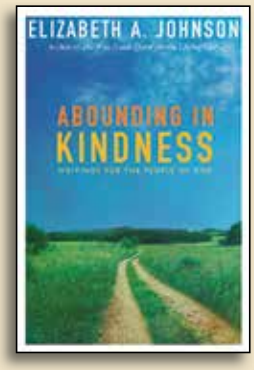

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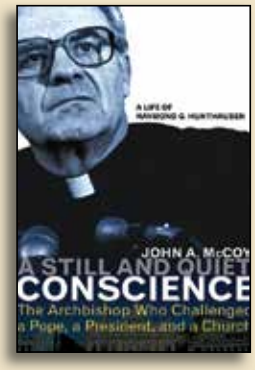

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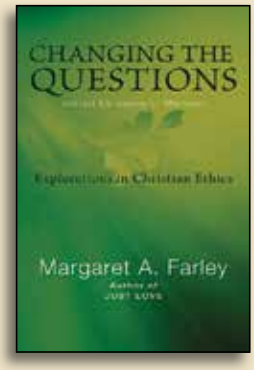

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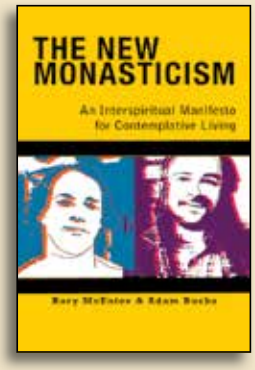

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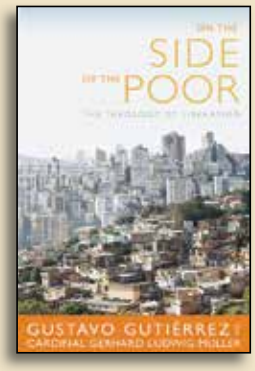

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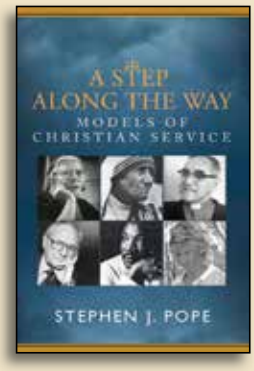

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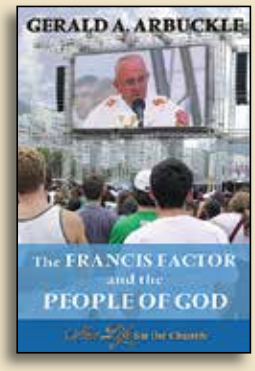

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independent self—skeptical of official pieties, capable of imagining more capacious ideas of patriotism and courage than the ones provided by the dominant culture—a self that could speak truth to power. That phrase was fresh to us then.

How times have changed. Nowadays "speak truth to power" has to be placed in inverted commas, to distance us from its earnestness. Among the educated professional classes, no one would be caught dead confusing intellectual inquiry with a quest for ultimate meaning, or with the effort to create an independent self. Indeed the very notion of authentic selfhood—a self determined to heed its own ethical and aesthetic imperatives, resistant to the claims of fashion, money, and popularity—has come to seem archaic. In an atmosphere dominated by postmodern irony, pop-neuroscience, and the technocratic ethos of neoliberalism, the self is little more than a series of manipulable appearances, fashioned and re-fashioned to meet the marketing needs of the moment. We have bid adieu to existential inwardness. The reduction of the mind to software and the brain to a computer, which originated among cognitive scientists and philosophers of mind, has been popularized by journalists into the stuff of dinner-party conversations. The computer analogy, if taken as seriously as its proponents wish, undermines the concept of subjectivity—the core of older versions of the self. So it should come as no surprise that, in many enlightened circles, the very notion of an inner life has come to seem passé.

The Old Campus at Yale University

One consequence of this seismic cultural shift is the train wreck of contemporary higher education. Nothing better exemplifies the catastrophe than President Barack Obama's plan to publish the average incomes earned by graduates from various colleges, so parents and students can know which diplomas are worth the most in the marketplace, and choose accordingly. In higher education as in health care, market utility has become the sole criterion of worth. The monetary standard of value has reinforced the American distrust of intellect unharnessed to practical purposes: the result is an atmosphere toxic to the humanities. We need a defense of the humanities that takes these cultural developments into account; that claims more for the liberal arts than the promotion of "critical thinking" and "people skills"; that insists, without slipping into platitude, on the importance of the humanities for their own sake.

William Deresiewicz, a former member of Yale's English Department, has written it. In *Excellent Sheep*, he presents a devastating critique of the idea that college education is simply about learning marketable skills; he also makes a compelling case for the humanities. He revives, in effect, the old words—the old quest for meaning, self, and soul. The problem is that he has attached his argument to a critique of elite higher education, even as he recognizes that the critique extends far beyond the Ivy League. He shrewdly dissects the cult of "meritocracy" on American campuses, diagnosing its elements of anti-intellectualism—the careerism, the conventionality, the managerial reduction of education to "problem-solving," the embrace of money as the measure of all things. He acknowledges that these maladies could be found as easily at the University of Virginia or the University of Mississippi Honors Program as at Yale or Princeton, but he does not seem to recognize fully that together they constitute a plague pervading the entire society. Amid the obsession with marketable skills encouraged by neoliberal capitalism, all colleges aim to turn out excellent sheep; some are better equipped than others to do so. Some sheep are more excellent—by all the conventional criteria—than others.

Whether the students are actually satisfied to be sheep is another matter. Deresiewicz writes movingly of their anguish. No reader of his book can doubt that elite colleges are full of fearful, driven kids whose miseries include "eating disorders, cutting, substance abuse, addiction, depression..." Here are some voices from the meritocracy in training: "I only get two hours sleep per night.... I really really fear failure.... I am just a machine with no life at this place.... I am a robot just going page by page, doing the work." It is like the mental Olympics, one student observes, but the contest never ends. Sometimes "the drug of praise" can temporarily numb the fear of failure. And sometimes it takes other drugs: "If I didn't take Zoloft," one former student told him, "I would hate myself." Parents who understandably worry about their children's mental health receive glib reassurances from administrators, who talk about how many students are depressed and how easy it is to phone the suicide hotline. The number of breakdowns is almost a point of pride, part of the price for high academic standards. A young woman

AD MESKENS

of my acquaintance recalled the Old Campus at Yale (the freshmen dorms) as a hive of conventional ambition; the buildings themselves seemed buzzing with ceaseless busyness. One thing is clear from Deresiewicz's interviews: the "meritocratic" atmosphere is death to intellectual seekers, who feel they've been sold a bill of goods and often keep searching after they get out. Somehow the job at Goldman Sachs just doesn't satisfy.

The problem, for Deresiewicz, is that when you focus on problems at Ivy League universities you invite the hostility of reviewers, many of whom are associated with Ivy League universities themselves. A few might even be called excellent sheep—products of the self-styled meritocracy of recent decades. Perhaps the most egregious example is Nathan Heller's review in the *New Yorker.* Heller asks "Are Elite Colleges Bad for the Soul?" and begins by describing the many forms of sleep deprivation endured by him and his classmates "early in this century" at an unspecified Ivy League university. All this makes clear that he will avoid the larger issues raised by the book and focus instead on an anecdotal defense of his own experience—a strategy followed by other reviewers as well. Deresiewicz has unintentionally invited this. So to do him justice it's important to emphasize that his argument stretches beyond the Ivy League, toward all of higher education in the contemporary United States—and beyond our borders to encompass the striving professional classes from Canada and the United Kingdom to China and India.

Still, there is a logic to focusing on the Ivy League; it is where the meritocratic myth flourishes in its purest form. The official atmosphere is pervaded by the unspoken rhetorical question: Aren't we great? The relentless striving for badges of achievement is more flagrantly and broadly present on elite campuses than anywhere else. The Ivy League is where the American ruling class (or at least a good chunk of it) learns that they have power and wealth because they deserve it. They are meritorious. Their credentials confirm it.

The catch is that the students have to keep acquiring more evidence of their excellence—beginning, after they graduate, with a job that pays at least $100,000 a year. You remain haunted, they say, by "the feeling of being a failure if you don't continue to amass the blue chip names" and prodded by "the need to keep on doing the most prestigious possible thing." Yet some still fear that they have missed something, some passionate pursuit of a success that can't be measured by conventional criteria.

High-achieving children are the products of "high-achievement parenting," another development of recent decades, performed by "parents who fill up their own brittle selves with their children's accomplishments," in the withering judgment of the psychotherapist Madeline Levine, whom Deresiewicz cites at length. His favorite example of an abusive parent is Amy Chua, whose *The Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother* celebrated her own authoritarian insistence on her children's feverish striving. Once again he picks the most virulent form of the sickness he wants to diagnose.

However strict or permissive their upbringing, children destined for elite schools display a "self that forms in response to parental expectations," an "affable, competent, adult-oriented personality." Not all parents embrace the meritocratic agenda, but even if they resist it, their children are swept along by the broad upper-middle-class culture of achievement. Its darker dimensions include "junior careerism, directionless ambition, risk-aversion, Hobbesian competitiveness," and "monumental cynicism." There's no there there. Education comes to be seen as "not far from game theory, an algorithm to be cracked in order to get to the next level."

The preoccupation with process over purpose, means over ends, has long been a feature of the technocratic mind, which despite occasional countercultural protests (as in the 1960s) has dominated American universities since the late nineteenth century and now seems poised to render other forms of thinking invisible. The focus on mastering technique rather than grappling with substance means that too often higher education "does nothing to challenge students' high school values, ideals, practices, and beliefs," as Deresiewicz observes. How can it, if it has no vision of what an educated human being should be, as Allen Bloom complained nearly thirty years ago in *The Closing of the American Mind*. It is interesting how often Deresiewicz cites Bloom, the bogeyman of the politically correct left in the 1980s, who was nothing if not a passionate defender of the humanities. Resistance to technocratic imperatives cuts across conventional political boundaries.

> In an atmosphere dominated by postmodern irony, pop-neuroscience, and the technocratic ethos of neoliberalism, the self is little more than a series of manipulable appearances, fashioned and re-fashioned to meet the marketing needs of the moment.

In recent decades, au courant educational ideologues have put technocratic imperatives in a determinist idiom—the train has left the station, etc.—and have added a dose of management jargon. The most egregious management-speak is the near universal use of a customer-service model for what universities do. As Deresiewicz observes, commercial values are the opposite of pedagogical ones. If you are interested in students' long-term welfare, don't give them what they want—don't be afraid, he tells professors, to stand on your own authority, to assume you know something your students don't, which they might profit by learning. The very fact that he has to make this obvious point suggests the parlous state we are in. The easy equation of students with consumers confirms Deresiewicz's conclusion that the

schools "finally don't care about learning at all"—or about teaching. "Teaching is not an engineering problem. It isn't a question of transferring a certain quantity of information from one brain to another," he writes, implicitly challenging the current fashion of online education. On the contrary: "'Educate' means 'lead forth.' A teacher's job is to lead forth the powers that lie asleep within her students. A teacher awakens; a teacher inspires." Not every teacher can measure up to this exalted standard, but its presence at least can make us try. By comparison, when it comes to motivating teachers, the commercial model offers nothing.

The emptiness of management jargon, applied to traditional moral concepts, is nowhere more apparent than in the ubiquity of the word "leadership." Once upon a time it was something that was considered a duty, an accompaniment of privilege. Now, Deresiewicz writes, it's little more than "an empty set of rituals known only to propitiate the gods." Like so many other ideals of the meritocracy ("innovation," "creativity," "disruption"), indeed like the meritocrats themselves, "leadership" lacks content. And where content is absent, power pours in. We are left with Mark Edmundson's witty summation, quoted by Deresiewicz: a leader is "someone who, in a very energetic, upbeat way, shares all the values of the people who are in charge."

The people in charge make sure that their charges inhabit "an atmosphere of constant affirmation" characterized by "the relentless inculcation of prosocial behavior." This is how elite colleges produce "team players"—but so do many other sorts of institutions, and so they have for many decades. The difference is that team players from Ivy Schools are more likely to end up team captain.

To the question "What's the point? What's this team for, anyway?" the answers are as vacant as they have always been in management literature; only now they reflect the diminished expectations of our neoliberal moment. As Deresiewicz says, the dominant ethos is: "Forget about ideals and ideologies and big ideas, those scourges of the twentieth century. Just pick a problem and go to work on it. The notion is technocratic, and bespeaks the kind of technocratic education students get today." Of course its inspiration is not the plodding gray technocracy of the mid-century corporation, but the hipness of the high-tech entrepreneur. Deresiewicz is rightly suspicious of the idea that this new social formation constitutes a "creative class." As he writes: "The suspicion arises that the small-scale/techie/entrepreneurial model represents the expression not of a social philosophy...but of the desire for a certain kind of lifestyle"—autonomous, hip, and rich.

Still not everyone, even among the elite, is seduced by this trendy vision. Deresiewicz has spoken to many young people who resist it. They are "ardent, curious, independent—looking to college for meaning, not skills; looking to the world for possibility, not security. What they told me, invariably, was that they felt abandoned by their institution." But it is not just the elite universities that have abandoned them; it is our entire leadership class, beginning with the president

QUICK

What never grew to light
past the established trees?
Each sapling in its supple bark
housed untold contingencies
of structure and song
and amassed tough lignin
against burnished blades,
fungi, beetles, teeth, and age;
but life is so quick to our eyes;
so I or my children might
this hour rejoin
the fallow joy
that fuels the earth.

—Sarah M. Brownsberger

Sarah M. Brownsberger has published her poems in Field, Salamander, Alaska Quarterly Review, *the* Hudson Review, *and* OnEarth. *She works as an Icelandic-English translator specializing in poetry, fiction, and art criticism.*

himself. During the 2008 campaign, Obama gave stirring speeches in Austin, Texas, and Madison, Wisconsin, where he insisted on the importance of music and the arts in any educational program. For a presidential candidate to be saying these things seemed too good to be true—as in fact it was. Once in office, Obama embraced the neoliberal education agenda of marketization and privatization, epitomized by his reliably anti-intellectual secretary of education, Arne Duncan. Where are intellectual seekers supposed to find legitimation for their search?

In Deresiewicz's book, for starters. He does not mince words: "An undergraduate experience devoted exclusively to career preparation is four years largely wasted. The purpose of college is to enable you to live more alertly, more responsibly, more freely: more fully." The key to this process is "developing the habit of skepticism and the capacity to put it into practice. It means learning not to take things for granted, so you can reach your own conclusions." So it comes down to an effort at self-culture, as Emerson would have said. And self-culture involves an inward turn: it is "through this act of introspection, of self-examination, of establishing communication between the mind and the heart, the mind and experience, that you become an individual, a unique being—a soul. And that is what it means to develop a self." Deresiewicz, the son of Orthodox Jewish parents, is not himself religious. But he finds religious language—beginning with the marriage of self and soul—inescapable in describing the intellectual quest fostered by the liberal arts. "People go to monasteries to find out why they have come, and college ought to be the same," he writes. It takes real courage to make such claims amid the market-driven discourse of contemporary higher education.

The consequence of this soul-making odyssey—or at least an early way station on a lifelong journey—is precisely the kind of self that resists the siren song of contemporary intellectual fashion, a self that is fortified against disappointments and failure. "A self is a separate space, a private space," Deresiewicz writes, "a space of strength, security, autonomy, creativity, play." This is a romantic modernist vision, thoroughly at odds with postmodern and neoliberal notions of selfhood. And like the romantic modernists of the 1960s, Deresiewicz sometimes slips into formulaic oppositions—such as the one he poses between the young and their parents, whom he falsely assumes to epitomize the constraints of conventional expectations. He is right, though, to recognize the difficulties involved in choosing an independent path—the puzzled looks, the people who wonder why you didn't fulfill your promise.

But if you've taken the humanities seriously you can withstand the puzzled looks. As Deresiewicz writes, the liberal arts curriculum remains "the best training you can give yourself in how to talk and think"—"to reflect...for the sake of citizenship, for the sake of living well with others, above all, for the sake of building a self that is strong and creative and free." You read literature, philosophy, and history because "you don't build a self out of thin air, by gazing at your navel. You build it, in part, by encountering the ways that others have done so themselves." And the wider and more varied the definition of the canon, the better—the more examples you have of alternative ways of thinking and being in the world. As Bloom wrote (and Deresiewicz quotes): "The most successful tyranny...is the one that removes the awareness of other possibilities." It was as if the conservative curmudgeon had foreseen the techno-determinists of our own time, for whom the train has always left the station and (in Maggie Thatcher's words) "there is no alternative" to the neoliberal system. The prerequisite for independence is the realization that there are indeed other possibilities than the ones handed down by conventional wisdom.

A sense of possibility, as Deresiewicz acknowledges, is a product of class privilege. And indeed the humanities have historically functioned as the playground of the rich, before they get down to the real work of running the world. (A friend of mine, a Yale professor, once said that part of ruling-class socialization was listening to a guy with a beard talk about Marx.) Yet the humanities need not be reduced to a mere luxury. Abundant testimony exists from teachers in night-school classes, even in prisons, that comparatively uneducated students can respond to great literature with passion and intelligence. That encounter can be life-changing. A student of mine at Rutgers, a Navy veteran, found that reading *Heart of Darkness* forced him to come to terms with

his own dark experiences in the first Gulf War. Conrad led him to Melville and W. E. B. DuBois, to exploring the mysteries of the divided self. It was a bumpy ride, but he came out of it more alert, more aware, and more fully engaged with the world.

So why shouldn't everyone have a shot at this experience? Deresiewicz thinks everyone should. And he knows it's more than a matter of affirmative action. In fact he recognizes what a hollow charade that policy has become—a legitimation of existing privilege. Quoting Walter Benn Michaels, he writes, "the (very few) poor people at Harvard... reassure the (very many) rich people at Harvard that you can't just buy your way into Harvard." Deresiewicz realizes that the only affirmative action worth the name is a policy that takes class as well as gender and ethnicity into account. But ultimately affirmative action can never be more than a Band-Aid on the carcinoma that afflicts higher education—the primacy of technocratic, monetary standards. We need to create a world, he writes, "where you don't have to go to the Ivy League, or any private college, to get a first-rate education." Of course it is already possible to do that at many fine state universities. But they are struggling to stay afloat amid the systematic impoverishment of the public sector that has lasted for decades and has only accelerated in the past few years. The most egregious among many recent examples is the assault on the University of Wisconsin by the Republican governor, Scott Walker. Since 1989, state spending on higher education in the United States has dropped by half—a fact few commentators mention as they bewail the rising cost of college. Of course tuition will rise under these circumstances: somebody has to pay. As Deresiewicz acknowledges, public higher education is suffering the same fate as K–12 education, not to mention public-health initiatives and other essential government services: they are all "starved of funds, then blamed for failing to deliver." So it is clear that the problems of higher education involve far more than misplaced meritocratic mythology at Ivy League schools; they are part of a general moral and political crisis.

The question remains: What is to be done? Despite his focus on the Ivy League, Deresiewicz supplies valuable ammunition for embattled defenders of the humanities, who too often have been reduced to mumbling about corporate recruiters' preference for English majors. It is time to go on the offensive, and he has done so in fine style. Arguing for the importance of the humanities is by no means a merely academic gesture. As the antiwar counterculture of the '60s learned, the liberal-arts tradition has a radical edge; it is a prod to the moral imagination, a seed-bed of political possibilities. The first step toward challenging illegitimate power is the recognition that you can indeed take that step—that there are alternatives available to the future on offer. As a peace-activist colleague of mine in Missouri said, when students wondered where to begin challenging the enormity of the nuclear-arms race: "Well, you start where you're at." ■

Believe It or Not

A Kinder, Gentler Atheism

Gary Gutting

Philosophy of religion is an awkward business. As philosophers, we ask for reasons (evidence, arguments), to which believers typically respond that it is rather a matter of faith. This needn't be a conversation stopper, since we can reply that faith can't be simply irrational assent, as if you just believed the assurances of a used-car salesman. But the discussion will be haunted by the possibility that philosophy and religion are passing in the night.

Atheism, however, is something else. Those who assert that there are no gods almost always present their position as a matter of reason dissolving the mists of faith. So from the start, philosophy and atheism are playing the same game—and, it appears, they are mostly on the same side since surveys indicate that about two-thirds of philosophers are atheists.

It would be natural to conclude that the philosophical literature contains powerful refutations of theism, which have embarrassed and frustrated those few philosophers who still believe. But in fact over the past few decades atheistic philosophers of religion have been playing defense, responding to the impressive work of theists such as Alvin Plantinga, William Alston, Robert Adams, and Peter van Inwagen.

Of course in popular discussions of religion, the "new atheists" (led by Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, and Christopher Hitchens) have made quite a splash with their aggressive attacks on religion. But Michael Ruse, a distinguished philosopher and a reflective atheist, is not impressed. "They are," he writes, "hectoring and arrogant; they are unfair to and belittling of others; they are ignorant of anything outside their disciplines to an extent remarkable even among modern academics." Ruse does, however, credit them with "an earnestness unknown outside the pages of the Old Testament," for which "they deserve a response more measured and thoughtful than they are able to give."

Atheism
What Everyone Needs to Know
Michael Ruse
Oxford University Press, $16.95, 304 pp.

Ruse's new book, *Atheism: What Everyone Needs to Know*, is in fact a refreshing contrast to much of the polemics of the New Atheists. Although he too writes for a popular audience with verve, wit, and passion, his discussion is far more informed and intellectually sophisticated. Compare, for example, Ruse and Dawkins on the cosmological argument. The argument posits God as the cause needed to explain the existence of the world. Dawkins claims the argument simply assumes that God, unlike the world, needs no cause. Dawkins takes the self-satisfied challenge "Then who made God?" as a decisive refutation. Ruse starts where Dawkins ends: "Prima facie you can drive a horse and carriage through the cosmological argument. If everything has a cause then what caused God?" But he goes on: "If you dig into Aquinas's writings, as well as others who have supported the argument, you soon see that they are ahead of you here." Ruse proceeds to explain that the cosmological argument concludes with God as a necessary being (requiring no cause) as the only alternative to an untenable infinite regress of causes. (In his acknowledgements, Ruse praises the English Dominican Brian Davies, "the best of teachers," for helping him understand Aquinas.)

Ruse eventually rejects the cosmological argument, but only after formulating David Hume's objection to the intelligibility of a necessary existent, considering two senses of necessary existence that might avoid the objection, and then concluding that neither sense plausibly supports the cosmological argument.

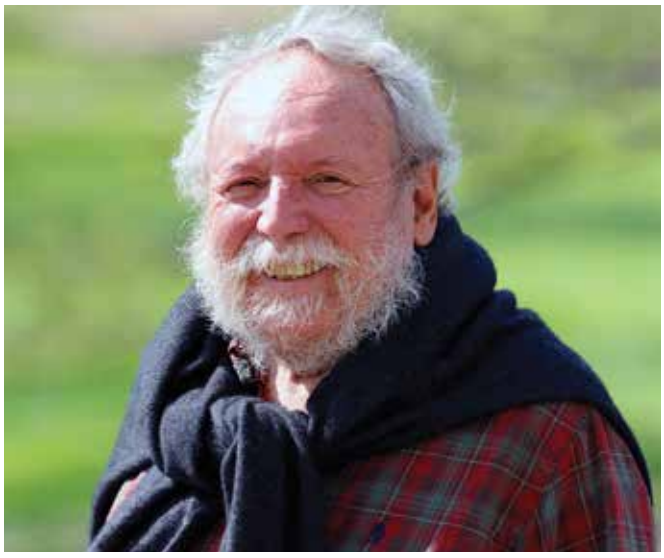
Overall, the book is a respectful but insistent reflection on whether the intellectual resources of theism are sufficient to withstand atheist critiques. Ruse begins with two historical chapters tracing the origins of atheism from defiance of God or belief in the wrong gods in Old Testament days, through ancient and medieval doubts and indifference, to scattered appearances of professed atheism (Diderot, d'Holbach), and of militantly anti-Christian deism (Thomas Paine) during the Enlightenment. On Ruse's account, the move

Gary Gutting *holds the John A. O'Brien Chair in Philosophy at Notre Dame. He writes regularly for "The Stone," the* New York Times *philosophy blog. His new book,* What Philosophy Can Do*, will be published by W. W. Norton this fall.*

to full atheism accelerated in the nineteenth century, but he suggests that uncompromising atheism became a major public voice only in the twentieth century.

Ruse's treatment of the sources of atheism is condensed, but careful and nuanced. He concludes that "overall it was science, and above all Darwinian evolution, that demolished traditional theism." But he notes important scientific factors besides evolution, such as geology, physiology, and thermodynamics, and also takes account of major non-intellectual factors such as the Industrial Revolution and political trends toward secularism.

Unlike the New Atheists, Ruse insists on a substantial discussion of the meaning and intellectual bases of theism before taking up the case against it. He begins with a quick survey of the considerably different religious portrayals of God in the Old and the New Testaments, and the even more considerable differences between them and the metaphysical "God of the philosophers." But he also makes the reader aware of Christian strategies for reconciling the accounts, including the rudiments of Aquinas's theory of analogy.



Michael Ruse

Ruse then turns to an overview of Christian thinking on faith and reason, including references to the Catholic view of Aquinas, the Calvinist view of Bavinck and Plantinga, the existentialism of Kierkegaard, and the empiricism of Locke. He next moves to capsule discussions of the main theistic arguments: the ontological, cosmological, and teleological arguments, as well as those from miracles and from morality. All of this is quite schematic, but beginners will find helpful pointers to a deeper understanding, while experts will find little to object to. They may raise an eyebrow here and there, but nothing in this book will make their jaws drop the way Dawkins's cavalier criticisms often do.

Ruse takes considerable care in setting up his treatment of the case atheists can make against theism. In accord with his historical survey and the thrust of the New Atheists, he focuses on the scientific critique. He agrees that science refutes the Biblical literalism of fundamentalists (creation in six days, less than ten thousand years ago, etc.). But, citing thinkers like Augustine and Calvin, he immediately notes that "literalism is neither traditional nor genuine Christianity." His own working formulation of Christian theism includes just four core claims: "a creator God exists"; "there is a purpose to it all"; "we humans are special"; and "we have obligations." His question is not whether these claims are true, but whether "science shows them untrue."

Ruse rejects the idea, endorsed most notably in our day by Stephen Jay Gould, that science and religion can't clash because science deals only with facts, whereas religion deals only with values (Gould's principle of "non-overlapping magisteria"). Ruse notes that at least the first three claims of his core Christian theism are factual. Still, he doesn't think it follows that the facts theism asserts lie within the domain of science, and indeed thinks that they don't. Modern science, he argues, has always worked in terms of a mechanistic model (or metaphor) that shows how, given some things, we get other things. But the question theists answer by appealing to God—why are there any things at all, why is there something rather than nothing?—can have no scientific answer, since science must always start from some basic set of things that it takes for granted. As for purpose, the explanations of modern science have long found no place for it. Finally, the "specialness" of humans, if any, lies in their consciousness, which science treats as just another mechanism (perhaps a computer) and special only in its degree of complexity.

Of course, the atheist can always respond that it's precisely because science finds no place for a creator or purpose or human specialness that the three theistic claims are false. This response, Ruse maintains, assumes that science is able to answer any question about what there is. This is unlikely because the machine model—like any metaphor—both raises and excludes questions; and, in any case, science itself can tell us nothing about the limits of its own knowledge. In particular, since it deals only with physical reality, it can't say whether there's any other sort of reality. "Science does not preclude religion," he says, at least when it's limited to the core theistic claims.

That, however, doesn't mean that there aren't other ways of challenging this core, as well as the many further (non-scientific) claims religions make. The last half of the book turns to these challenges.

The first challenge is whether the Christian theist's notion of God is even coherent. Ruse puts the issue in standard Athens-versus-Jerusalem terms: the metaphysically potent but paradox-prone ultimate entity of Greek philosophy in tension with the concrete, historically involved person who would be the endlessly fascinating protagonist in a

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Wendy Wright


His Eminence John Zizioulas

novelization of the Bible. (Less plausibly, Ruse also presents the conflict as between a Protestant personal God and a Catholic impersonal God.) In any case, his discussion is, as usual, engagingly chatty as well as admirably substantial and attentive to important subtleties.

The second challenge is for theists to show that there are good reasons to believe in God. Interestingly, Ruse seems to think that individual believers may have good reasons, particularly from their religious experiences. Of Alvin Plantinga, one of the "most distinguished philosophers of religion"—although one he sometimes strongly criticizes—Ruse writes: "If a man like that believes, then who am I to deny that [he and others like him] really do know." Ruse's concern seems not to be whether it may be reasonable for at least some theists to believe in God, but whether there are arguments that would make atheism irrational. By this high standard, it's not surprising that he finds all the major theistic arguments eminently resistible.

Ruse has surprisingly little to say about theists' efforts to respond to the atheistic argument from evil, mostly focusing on somewhat embarrassing efforts (by Plantinga and William Lane Craig) to provide positive explanations for horrendous evils. Such responses open themselves to Ruse's sardonic comment: "Try telling that to Anne Frank as she lay dying in Bergen-Belsen." But this emotional level of discussion ignores the intellectual difficulties that pose deeper problems for theists (of which more later).

Ruse concludes with judicious but inconclusive discussions of three further issues frequently raised by the New Atheists: Does religion have a thoroughly naturalistic (in particular, evolutionary) explanation that undermines its truth claims? Has religion led to far more evil than good? Does atheism offer a meaningful life? He does an especially good job on the first question, avoiding highly speculative "just-so-stories" but pointing toward more responsible accounts along lines suggested by Durkheim and E. O. Wilson. He also provides a sketch of life in fifteen-century England that tries to give a concrete sense of just what a Christian life-world could be like, and how we might explain such a world naturalistically. His conclusion is that, although religion might be a largely natural phenomenon that may be adaptive but not true, "there is nothing to stop the religious from arguing on other grounds that it is."

For Ruse, the decision for or against theism comes down to an individual's assessment of a complex of opposing evidence and arguments. He has no sympathy for the self-satisfied slam-dunks of the New Atheists. Still, his considered conclusion is that "the philosophical and theological issues seem to me to destroy the central claims of Christianity." He also, first and last, emphasizes that the judgment for or against theism is ultimately a moral one, in his case driven by a conviction that we should believe in an ultimate meaning only where there is strong rational support. To the consolations of religion, he prefers "the reward of putting aside childish things and seeing through the glass clearly."

Unlike the New Atheists, Ruse presents his atheism as his own considered conclusion, and does not insist that anyone who does not see the point is irrational. This seems right. It's hard to see how there could be a rationally compelling case for atheism. How could anyone be that certain God does not exist?

Agnosticism, on the other hand, would seem to have a lot going for it. My guess is that many truly religious people would admit, at least to themselves, that they don't actually know that God exists—which is precisely agnosticism. But Ruse, like Dawkins and company, has little to say about agnosticism, although his arguments could make a far better case for it.

Consider, for example, the atheistic argument from evil, widely regarded as the main threat to theism. On the emotional level (to which Ruse mostly restricts himself) the argument can seem devastating. On a purely logical level, however, it is more tractable. Those with lively intellectual imaginations can readily construct non-contradictory scenarios in which even an all-good and all-powerful God has reason to allow virtually any amount of evil. The trick is to cite sufficiently high levels of good that logically require great but lesser levels of evil (human wrongdoing, for example, as a condition for free will).

The standard scenarios showing the compatability of God and evil ultimately appeal to God's knowledge of relevant factors to which we have no access. Given what we know, it makes no sense, for example, that God would permit the horrors of warfare for the sake of respecting human freedom or of some other compensating goods. But what is paltry human knowledge in comparison with divine omniscience? This unbridgeable gap between God and humans is the ultimate trump card against the problem of evil.

But, as any chess player knows, a successful defense can lead to a more serious threat. There may be an all-good, all-powerful God; but the promise of Christianity is that, so long as we are worthy, God will ensure our salvation, however this is understood. But the solution to the problem of evil shows that God, for reasons unfathomable to us, may be prepared to accept enormous evils in some parts of creation for the sake of the final good of the whole. How, given the gap between our knowledge and God's, can we be assured that God might not need to allow our loss of ultimate happiness for the sake of some higher good (say the soul-making of a vastly superior alien race)?

There may be ways of responding to this higher-order problem of evil (and philosophers of religion are currently taking up relevant issues in a debate over "skeptical theism"). Without a satisfactory solution to this problem, we can't identify the all-good, all-powerful being we believe in with the Christian God who grounds our sure hope of salvation. The atheist's argument from evil could still be defeated, but we could no longer be sure that the God of our religion exists. The issue, of course, needs much more discussion. But agnosticism, not atheism, is the real challenge to theism. ■

CNS PHOTO / NATE CHUTE, REUTERS

Overheated

The Debate about Indiana's RFRA

Paul Horwitz

The controversy over the conflict between religious liberty and the antidiscrimination rights of the LGBT community has grown more heated in the past year. The recent debate over Indiana's new—and now newly revised—religious freedom law is just the most recent and prominent example. As the Supreme Court prepares to decide on the constitutionality of same-sex marriage, the questions have only gotten more numerous, and the battles more fierce. We do not yet know if they are reaching a crescendo, or if the next culture war is just ramping up.

Nor do we know yet what all this means for the law of religious liberty itself. Religious liberty claims, like all constitutional or statutory rights claims, must always be balanced against competing interests, including the powerful state interest in civil-rights enforcement. The current debate may conclude with the straightforward finding that equality rights do (or do not) trump claims for religious exemptions, in particular cases or as a general matter. It is possible, however, that something even bigger will happen. Much of the current debate concerns the idea of religious exemptions itself. It is possible that it will end with the public rejection of legal accommodations for religion altogether, in favor of the view that no generally applicable law should ever admit of judicial or legislative exemptions because of burdens on religious belief or practice.

That the debate is playing out so publicly and with such fervor is understandable, even commendable. It speaks to how far our society has come in a short time on the question of the equal dignity of gays and lesbians. For those who have long yearned for such recognition, questioning the quality of this debate may seem like mere carping—like caviling over the proper placement of commas in the Declaration of Independence.

But the quality of this discussion matters. Nothing, I think, will—or should—stop the basic recognition of gay

Paul Horwitz *teaches at the University of Alabama School of Law and is the author of* The Agnostic Age: Law, Religion, and the Constitution *(Oxford University Press).*

Two Poems by Barry Sternlieb

BEACH TOTEM

On borrowed time, it stands
for all you have left
behind, something nameless

in the name of the washed-up,
the lapsed and forgotten,
remnants joined to give loss,

no matter how tough
or random, another shot
at consequence, roughed out

of driftwood and plastic,
fabric and metal, detailed
with seaweed and egg sac,

feather and shell,
excess rescued from
the depths where passion

has always been raw
material for what doesn't last
but builds as if it will.

ANALEMMA

A figure-8 formed by recording the sun's position from the same place at the same time of day at regular intervals for a year.

As if its radiant sound
could make meaning slowly
dawn on me,
I drew the word out
loud through your still life room,
just for the rhythm
at first, but then for that
tone the unknown
sets when knowledge is yet
to come, in this case 9 down
on the crossword
puzzle left beside your bed,
merging a mother's horizon
with the journey of the sun.

Barry Sternlieb's work has appeared in publications including Poetry *and the* Sewanee Review. *His chapbook* Winter Crows *won the 2008 Codhill Press Poetry Prize.*

rights, and the heat of the current debate in part reflects this inevitability. But the details are still in flux, especially regarding same-sex marriage, and the current debate will surely affect some of the particular details of our new social settlement. Moreover, this debate raises questions about our very capacity to engage in the kind of thoughtful, careful public discussion that serious issues like this demand.

By that standard, there is good reason to be dispirited. The public furor over Indiana's religious freedom law, or "RFRA," was long on heat and short on light. There is a difference between attempting to persuade by careful reasoning and simply trying to play on emotions or rely on rhetorical tropes. Public arguments needn't observe the rules of the seminar room, of course. But it may be possible to offer a few tips to inoculate readers against some of the more questionable or manipulative arguments.

1) *Don't accept overheated descriptions of the substantive differences between the old federal RFRA and new RFRAs like Indiana's too readily.* The federal Religious Freedom Restoration Act of 1993, which provided for the possibility of religious exemptions from generally applicable laws, was passed by overwhelming majorities in Congress and signed by a liberal president. It was a response to a Supreme Court decision overturning a thirty-year legal regime of constitutionally mandated religious accommodation—a decision that a liberal commentator in the Harvard Law Review called "perhaps the most politically illiberal decision of the term."

Critics of the Indiana statute argued that any comparison between the two laws was off-base, for two reasons. Indiana's RFRA made clear that it applied to for-profit businesses, and it applied to private actions in which the government is not a party, such as the now-famous antidiscrimination suit against the New Mexico business that refused to photograph a same-sex commitment ceremony. Any suggestion that the controversy over Indiana's law was overblown was wrong, they said. (The revised law makes clear that the state RFRA is not a defense for service refusals involving sexual orientation and other categories.)

There are arguable distinctions between the two laws. But the distinction is not as great as one might assume. Last year's Hobby Lobby decision held—quite reasonably—that the federal RFRA did reach for-profit businesses. And four different federal appeals courts have held that the federal RFRA can be raised as a defense in suits brought by private parties. Indiana's law simply made explicit what many judges concluded was implicit in the federal RFRA. The initial Indiana RFRA was not radically different from the federal RFRA, and neither law is inherently outrageous.

2) Don't make assumptions about the results of individual disputes. Much of the anger last week had to do with frequent arguments in the press and elsewhere that Indiana's RFRA would lead to a "parade of horribles." Indiana's RFRA or other state RFRAs, the argument went, would permit widespread discrimination against the LGBT community—not just in narrow cases, such as a photographer

who serves gays and lesbians generally but is reluctant to lend her artistic talents to a same-sex marriage ceremony, but discrimination against gays and lesbians as a class. Hence the popular phrase, "a license to discriminate."

But RFRA laws do not grant an unrestrained license to exclude or discriminate. With the exception of some state bills, which were opposed even by champions of religious accommodation and failed, most RFRAs (including Indiana's) do not compel any result. What they do require is balancing. Judges must weigh sincere claims of a religious burden against the government's assertion of a compelling interest in enforcing a law. The court decisions on these issues have, so far, gone against the religious claimants. Courts generally conclude that government enforcement of antidiscrimination laws and policies is a compelling interest. The balancing test would require the government to show that these laws were appropriately applied and did not run roughshod over sincere religious interests. But it would not guarantee any result.

Gov. Mike Pence signs the Indiana Religious Freedom Restoration Act.

Calling these laws a "license to discriminate" is seriously misleading. The truth is that religious accommodation laws are no more a license to discriminate than a driver's license amounts to a right to commit vehicular manslaughter. People are entitled to different views about where and how to strike the balance. But it would be unfortunate if readers were so captivated, or shamed, by such phrases that they rejected the very idea of religious accommodation itself.

3) "Reactions" or "responses" to changing facts and laws aren't inherently suspect. Another popular move is to treat one's opponents' motives as so suspect that they require opposing anything one's opponents do. Same-sex marriage opponents' warnings that their adversaries are moving stealthily toward the end of religious freedom, or of religion altogether, rely on this sort of argument. On the other side, opponents of new state RFRAs depict them as the work of bigots seeking a "sword" against same-sex marriage, or as covertly using religion to advance libertarian opposition to all antidiscrimination laws. The notion that some new legal argument or movement is "strategic," or a "response" to facts on the ground, is treated as somehow disqualifying those arguments from being taken seriously at all.

This is an odd argument. If there is anything everyone can agree on, it's that the times *are* a-changin'. Public opinion on LGBT rights and same-sex marriage has changed dramatically in the past decade. The legal regime surrounding it, including its effect on religious freedom, is still evolving. That individuals and groups are "reacting" to these changes is neither surprising nor inherently suspect. *Both* sides' views are changing: sometimes softening, sometimes hardening, sometimes realizing that new facts present new threats to LGBT rights or to religious freedom and thus demand new legal claims and political arguments. That is normal.

Some politicians have indeed pushed for new RFRAs to play to their political base. Some of those politicians, and some of their followers, may well be bigoted—interested not in narrow conscientious exemptions but in striking any blow they can against same-sex marriage. Hot political issues always attract opportunists and strategists. But not every RFRA supporter is an opportunist, and not all strategy is wrong. (Those with longer memories might recall that the decision to put same-sex marriage at the head of the LGBT litigation agenda was itself a strategic choice. That did not make it insincere.)

But I would also like to make a case for another way of understanding the current push for state RFRAs and the religious exemptions they bring. Some sincere religious individuals and groups have no interest in refusing service to gays and lesbians as a class. But they do believe that certain activities would require their personal participation in the public celebration of marriages to which they conscientiously object. It is this, and only this, that concerns them. If they now want state laws that limit such requirements, that should not be viewed as some cynical reactionary "move." There would have been little point in pushing for such laws ten years ago, when the issue was barely on the radar screen. Moreover, they were assured that same-sex marriage would not alter others' religious practices and thus should be none of their business. Now they are discovering that this is literally untrue. The scope of law itself—the definition of "public accommodations," the reach of antidiscrimination law, the degree to which the government may conscript private employers into subsidizing contraceptive care rather than providing that care itself, as it should for any important public good like healthcare—has

grown and, they fear, threatens whatever space existed for their consciences outside the walls of a church itself. Just as some LGBT supporters fear that RFRA supporters are actually hostile to gays and lesbians altogether, these religious individuals fear that some supporters of LGBT rights are actually hostile to religion in general. We may decide that equality concerns must trump such objections, on a case-by-case (I hope) or categorical basis. But there is no reason to scoff at these individuals, to paint them as reactionary, or to assume they are concealing dark motives. Whatever the motives of those politicians who are trying to win votes, there are surely sincere and even decent objectors in the ranks. Our public discussion ought to take them seriously.

More could be said. I personally favor the legal recognition of same-sex marriages, the expansion of LGBT antidiscrimination laws—*and* the passage of state religious freedom laws that would allow courts to consider, on a case-by-case basis, sincere claims for religious exemptions. I am unsure how far those exemptions should reach, but I think they should extend beyond wholly private actions in the basement of one's own home or the nave of one's church. Public accommodations laws and the interests they represent are important, but their scope should not be absolute. The regime I favor is a zero-sum game. It will not satisfy every side every time. But that is the nature of every conflict between liberty and equality. Anyone who paints things as if there is no conflict at all—by putting scare-quotes around "religious liberty," for instance, as if to suggest that any claim that involves religious exemptions is not really a religious liberty claim—is not being honest.

Those who would draw the line differently aren't bad or unreasonable. These issues are and should be the subject of good-faith discussion and argument—of genuine negotiation, in our culture and our legislatures. RFRAs should be a part of that discussion, not ruled out altogether. The discussion must involve equal respect, a serious effort to understand the perspectives of the other side without assuming its bad faith, and the possibility of less than total victory.

It is difficult for any one legal system to recognize fully both LGBT rights, broadly understood, and religious freedom—also broadly understood. No; it is impossible. It is important nevertheless that we try—and that, when the contest produces winners and losers, we are candid about it, rather than try to pretend that there was no real conflict to begin with because one side was wholly unreasonable. We should have high expectations about what our public discourse looks like, do our best to hold ourselves to those expectations, and treat with caution anyone whose arguments fall short. Contrary to the old saying, not all is fair in love or war. This is a culture war about love: the right to love one's partner, and one's God. The stakes are high. But even this war has rules. ■

Rand Richards Cooper

Dark Thrills

'IT FOLLOWS' & "71'

Does any cinematic product deliver as much bang for the buck as the indie horror film? *The Blair Witch Project* (1999) was shot on a budget of $30,000, while last year's critically acclaimed *The Babadook* cost just $2 million. (In comparison, the current installment of the *Fast and Furious* series, *Furious 7*, rings in at $250 million.) Horror's go-to themes of enclosure and entrapment easily translate to small casts and simple sets; the shrewdest horror filmmakers, moreover, understand that our fear is all about anticipation—and keeping something off-screen, making something perpetually not yet happen, is about as thrifty a trick as you can pull. A curious cinematic pleasure resides in monitoring horror's brisk efficiency. How much can you get for so little?

It Follows, by writer-director David Robert Mitchell, begins with an ominous sequence in which a scantily clad teenage girl flees a suburban house in obvious psychological distress, quaking in fear at some unseen pursuer. Escaping in a family car, she drives off into the night, arriving eventually at a beach, where she makes an anguished cellphone call to her parents, apologizing for all her shortcomings. The next shot shows her horrifically broken body on the beach at dawn.

This nightmarish prologue cues up a strange story charting the spread of a deadly erotic contamination, or perhaps curse. Shortly after Mitchell's main character, a dreamy-looking teenaged girl named Jay (Maika Monroe), sleeps for the first time with her new boyfriend, he discloses that he has infected her with a fearful plague: from now on she will be stalked by zombie-like demons who will attempt to kill her in gruesome fashion. Invisible to others, to her they will appear to be normal humans; any passerby approaching with a blank expression is likely to be the one. Only by giving the curse to another sexual partner can Jay protect herself, since evidently the ghouls focus on the most recent recipient. Thus are we dropped into a film that is part *Halloween*, part *Looking for Mr. Goodbar*, and part *The Walking Dead*.

Maika Monroe in It Follows

RADIUS-TWC

Nominally, *It Follows* hews to the hoary trope of teen sexual promiscuity punished by violent terror, but the script's resonances are more varied and strange than that, touching on subtexts sexual, ethical, epidemiological, and sociological. The contagion theme links disease with demons and sex with death, resurrecting AIDS hysteria and reminding us that we are most mortal and vulnerable in our sexuality, our procreative power mirrored in its negation. The nightmare plays out in the suburbs of Detroit, and the attempt by Jay and her friends to turn tables on her predator and hunt it down takes them into that city's notorious zones of abandonment, whose ruined homes and encroaching weeds heighten the sense of decay. Mitchell's last film, *The Myth of the American Sleepover* (2010), was a tender coming-of-age story in the manner of the early Richard Linklater, plunking us down with four teenagers as they rollick across suburban Detroit on the last weekend of summer. *It Follows* turns that film inside out, plunging its sunshine into shadows and creating what critics have called a new subgenre: "slacker horror."

There is some slackness in the film itself: anachronisms in sets and settings (1970s, yet with cell phones and Kindles); a clumsy midstream change in the efficacy of the demons (suddenly they can harm everyone, not merely their targets); over-reliance on a pulsating electronic soundtrack; and a silly, over-the-top denouement. In the end it's not clear that Mitchell knows what he's doing with all of the ideas implicit in his film—or that it matters. *It Follows* is finally about what all good horror movies are about: namely, what they do to you, demolishing your sense of well-being and enwrapping you in a pervasive dread.

The setup of Yann Demange's new film couldn't be more traditional: a soldier lost behind enemy lines must make his way back to safety. The war depicted in *'71* is no traditional war, however, but Northern

Ireland at the height of The Troubles, and the battlefields British private Gary Hook must negotiate are the dark lanes and alleys of Belfast, teeming with violent hatred. Two years after the riots of August 1969 and the deployment of British troops, offensive actions by the IRA have turned the conflict into guerilla war and the city into a stark landscape of blasted rubble and burning cars.

Demange's theme is the horror of war and the radical unpreparedness of the young men thrown into it. The film's opening follows a company of young British army recruits through training routines in remote Scotland, jogging in formation up hillsides, crawling through streams; the scenes convey the rigor of military training, the vigor of the young men who undergo it, and the jaunty camaraderie it creates. It all makes enlisting seem like a pleasant country lark.

Until it isn't. To their dismay, the company learns it is being sent not to Germany, as hoped, but to Northern Ireland; and before they know it, they're standing on a street in Belfast, facing a hostile, screaming, rock-throwing mob. As the mob presses in and the soldiers' jaunty bearing gives way to panic, a boy steals a weapon and runs off. Pvt. Hook and another soldier give chase. A sudden, brutal act of violence ensues, in which the other soldier is killed and Hook savagely beaten and taken captive. Following the opening scenes in the bucolic countryside, these events rush forward with a suddenness expertly calibrated to shock. It feels like being cast from a serene afternoon into a maelstrom.

And the pressure never lets up; Demange keeps the pedal of his movie pressed to the floor. Wounded, Hook manages to escape his tormentors. But how to make it back to safety? He doesn't know the terrain of the city, nor is he aware that he is being pursued by a matrix of forces: his own company, desperate to find him; two factions of Irish Republicans—old IRA and Provos—who are themselves involved in lethal internecine struggles; the local Ulster police, battle-hardened and cynical; and a cadre of undercover counterinsurgency forces, some notably ruthless, who have their own shadowy agendas. That Hook is being hunted by men who themselves are hunting each other boosts the film's relentless tension. Lethality—and treachery—pour forth from every corner.

'71's obvious forebear is Carol Reed's 1947 classic, *Odd Man Out*, another tale of a wounded man eluding enemies in Belfast. But unlike James Mason's Johnny McQueen, Gary Hook is not a struggling moral agent; the film says nothing about his political allegiances (if any), moral intuitions, or inner battles. Hook's youthful ignorance and innocence make him a kind of moral *tabula rasa*, upon which the violent, the treacherous, and the corrupt will write in blood. "You're just a piece of meat to them," says a kindly civilian—himself a former army medic—who briefly takes Hook into his flat and tends to his wounds.

To bring home this appalling truth, Demange and his screnwriter, playwright Gregory Burke, have made Hook laconic in the extreme. Casting the classically handsome Jack O'Connell, they give him almost nothing to say; this must be the most severely underwritten lead role since Clint Eastwood's Man with No Name. We get no insight into Hook's background, aside from a brief early segment in which he visits his younger brother in the orphanage where he himself apparently grew up. This refusal to flesh out the character reinforces the point that it isn't Hook in his individuality that matters, but rather in his generic role and function as soldier—a callow and ill-trained one. Hook's reticence serves his predicament: for nearly all of the film's ninety-nine minutes, he is either hiding out in places where survival depends on silence, or too wounded to do more than groan.

Viewers of *'71* unfamiliar with the politics of Northern Ireland may find themselves lost among the intricacies of who is fighting whom, temporarily allying with whom, and betraying whom. Again, the omission of context reflects Demange's commitment to keep his story stripped to its harsh essentials. There is hardly a scene or action that doesn't relate directly to the matter directly at hand, the white-knuckled calculus of survival. Demange works with the efficiency of a horror-film director; and his nightmare of sectarian hatred and urban violence is all the more frightening—alas—for having actually happened. ■

Francis Oakley

A Woman Pope!

Medieval Christianity
A New History
Kevin Madigan
Yale University Press, $40, 512 pp.

Acknowledging (somewhat self-deprecatingly) that what he has produced is "a new textbook" and "a book for beginners," Kevin Madigan says that his intent was "to produce a volume that integrates the best of traditional scholarship with the rich and important developments that have occurred in the study of medieval Christianity over the past forty years or so." That he has succeeded in doing, and in admirable fashion. If this is, indeed, a "book for beginners" and the author is careful to avoid taking too much knowledge for granted in his putative readers, he does not condescend to them, and those of us in the business who know the story (or like to think, at least, that we know the story!) can still read his account not only with pleasure but also with profit.

Of the book's nearly 500 pages, 115 are devoted to the first thousand years of Christian history, almost 150 to the 1050–1300 period, and about 70 pages to the years from 1300 to 1500. While a late-medieval specialist may perhaps be forgiven for finding the account of those last two hundred years a trifle breathless, the chronological allocation of space and attention is still perfectly defensible. In a book that manages only the most fleeting of references to a theologian as important as William of Ockham, one might also quibble a bit, I suppose, about the allocation of precious space to such obscure thirteenth-century oddities as Guglielma of Milan (regarded as an incarnation of the Holy Spirit) or Manfreda da Pirovano (expected by her followers to become pope). But in general the allocation of space between more recent scholarly developments and what Madigan classifies as traditional approaches is also defensible. Before tilting as he does to the more novel stuff, he is careful to put in place the traditional narrative concerning the rise to prominence of the papacy, the challenge it handed down to the traditional ecclesiastical order dominated by emperors, kings, and nobles, and its development into a powerful, centralizing monarchy that got itself into trouble by stimulating opposition from the provincial churches and from the rising national monarchies of Europe.

But it is the more novel material, I suspect, that is likely to capture more readily the interest of readers. Thus, though we hear surprisingly little about the Eastern Orthodox Church, Madigan devotes a full chapter to Islam and its relationship with Latin Christianity, another two to heresy and its suppression, and two more to a carefully nuanced account of the status of Jews in Western Christendom and—clearly evident from the twelfth century onward—the steady deterioration in their relationship with the Christian majority. And what stands out especially for me is the account of detailed attention he devotes to the religious life of ordinary people, to the means whereby Europe was gradually Christianized, and to the powerful role played in that long, slow process, first, by the traditional monastic orders and, then, from the thirteenth century on, by the mendicant orders of itinerant friars, especially the Dominicans and Franciscans. Their commitment to lives of poverty, the level of higher education they (eventually) embraced, the quality of their preaching, and their devotion to the least advantaged or previously ignored segments of the population had a powerful impact, and especially so in the rapidly growing but previously unchurched urban centers. There, he concludes, "the story of the Dominican and Franciscan response...is largely a narrative of towering pastoral and intellectual achievement.... They Christianized the life of merchants and townfolk and created a new piety for those seeking holiness outside the precincts of the monastery."

Pope Innocent III Confirms the Rule of Francis, *by Giotto, 1295–1300*

PHGCOM

As he covers such developments he draws attention to some things that may well surprise the non-specialist reader. For example, in the early Middle Ages, there was the vogue of the "double monastery," usually communities of women to which communities of men were attached, but ruled not by a man but by an abbess, often noble by birth and wielding what were, in terms of later practice, some startling powers—e.g., that of hearing the confessions of her nuns and then absolving them. And, from the rich density of later-medieval piety, he evokes the marked specialization in the curative

powers of saints. (In this connection I recall the curious fact that England's Young Prince Hal of Shakespearean fame had a great devotion to St. Fiacre, who specialized in the relief of hemorrhoids). Similarly, the practice of ritual humiliation when some unfortunate saint had not responded in satisfactory fashion to the pleas of the pious petitioner. Or again, the manifestation in the prevailing piety of a marked materiality—the association of supernatural power with place, notably the shrines of saints or with relics—saintly body parts or "contact relics" like bits of clothing that had been in contact with the saintly body. And so on. All in all, this sort of thing makes for compelling reading, and Madigan's book can be said to convey a picture of medieval Christianity that is no less lively for being well-informed and carefully balanced. It can be recommended without reservation to any interested reader.

That duly acknowledged, and noting that the book's strengths lie rather in the narrative/descriptive than in the conceptual/interpretative, perhaps I could take the liberty, without seeming churlish, of signaling a couple of qualifications to what Madigan has to say. The first concerns the secular-mendicant controversy that first broke out in the mid-thirteenth century at the University of Paris. It pivoted on the resentment stimulated among the secular clergy by the privileges that the papacy had conferred on the members of the mendicant orders. Those privileges, among other things, ran counter to the jurisdictional authority wielded by bishops within their dioceses. Madigan does discuss this controversy but makes no mention of the profound consequences it eventually had for the very constitution of the universal church. For Franciscans advanced the argument that the papal grant of privileges to the friars was no more than a particular manifestation of the fact that the pope was the fount and source of all the jurisdictional power wielded, via a process of delegation, by all ecclesiastical agencies and officials, the bishops themselves not excluded. This "derivational" theory of ecclesiastical jurisdiction, which came to be championed by the leading high papalists and was destined to have a long history reaching down well into the twentieth century, undercut the ancient view that each bishop, by virtue of his episcopal consecration, had by divine right a measure of autonomous authority in the governance of the church. And it came to undergird the type of absolute papal monarchy that has endured into the modern era. From that constitutional perspective the bishops have come to be viewed, in effect, as nothing other than branch managers within the whole, highly centralized organism. It is true that that "derivational" understanding of ecclesiastical jurisdiction was finally to be precluded in theory by Vatican II's historic teaching on episcopal collegiality, but it has clearly not been dislodged from the established routines of curial practice or from the Roman Catholic imaginary at large.

The second qualification I should like to signal is a more basic one. Despite talk in recent years about the new historiography, this is, in its overall conception, a fundamentally traditional work, predicated on an acceptance of the traditional division of European history into ancient, medieval, and modern (a Renaissance humanist contrivance) and of the medieval phase into three sub-periods: early, high, and late. This may, I sense, have betrayed Madigan into underestimating the ideological continuities between what we know as the late antique world and the early-medieval. Thus he seems to view the claims of medieval kings to a sacral, quasi-priestly status as the outcome during the Dark Ages of a desperate and mistaken ecclesiastical concession, one that the Gregorian reformers later came to regret, proclaiming as they did that the age of "priest-kings and emperor-pontiffs" was over. But the notion that kings were sacred was an age-old global phenomenon with nothing less than a millennial history. It was close, indeed, to being the theopolitical common sense of humankind. Embedded in the Hellenistic philosophy of kingship that Rome had made its own, it had been accommodated to Christian belief by Eusebius of Caesarea, who in the fourth century had portrayed the emperor Constantine in quasi-messianic terms and contrived to situate the Christian Roman Empire within the order of redemption. The medieval anointing of kings did no more than add a biblical sheen to what was, in effect, an age-old pre-Christian complex of beliefs that endured into the Middle Ages and cast a long shadow, even, across the papacy's own ambitions for supremacy in Christian society. Without its persistence, indeed, it would be hard to explain how the popes of the High Middle Ages permitted themselves to emerge as fully fledged sacral monarchs in their own right, imperial in their regalia, costume, the ceremony surrounding them, and the reach of their claims—the very successors, indeed, of Constantine himself. We cannot know how accurate the chronicler's description of Boniface VIII's reception in 1298 of the ambassadors of the claimant to the imperial throne may have been but, whatever the case, contemporaries themselves would hardly have been surprised by his depiction of the scene:

> Sitting on a throne, wearing on his head the diadem of Constantine, his right hand on the hilt of the sword with which he was girt, he [the pope] cried out "Am I not the supreme pontiff? Is this throne not the pulpit of Peter? Is it not my duty to watch over the rights of the Empire? It is I who am Caesar, it is I who am emperor."

In his *Leviathan*, the seventeenth-century English philosopher Thomas Hobbes was moved to describe the papacy as "no other than the ghost of the deceased Roman empire sitting crowned on the grave thereof." I am not sure that we will fully understand medieval Christianity until we recognize that that observation was no less accurate in its fundamental perception for being derisive in its conscious intent. ■

Francis Oakley *has written extensively on medieval and early modern religious and intellectual life. He is president emeritus of Williams College.*

Maria Bowler

Capital-G Greatness

Moral Agents
Eight Twentieth-Century American Writers
Edward Mendelson
New York Review of Books, $21.95, 224 pp.

You can almost feel sorry for Norman Mailer as Germaine Greer takes the microphone in D. A. Pennebaker's *Town Bloody Hall*, the 1971 documentary on the electric public debate between Mailer and four feminists. Having just been introduced by Mailer as that "distinguished and um, young and formidable lady writer," Greer strides to the podium and suggests that "what we accept as a creative artist in our society is more a killer than a creator—aiming his ego ahead of lesser talents, drawing the focus of all eyes to his achievements, being read now by millions and paid in millions."

MARIO SCHIFANO

Frank O'Hara, 1965

The audience roars in recognition—while Mailer stands there, the Great Public Male, absorbing the blows.

Why Mailer would offer himself up as a target is made clear in critic and scholar Edward Mendelson's attentive new book, *Moral Agents: Eight Twentieth-Century American Writers*. Mailer habitually "required a large supporting cast of antagonists," Mendelson observes; and "the more that women felt provoked by him, the more he felt masculine to himself." Such insights into the writer's psyche abound in these essays. The loose group portrait begins with Lionel Trilling, establishing himself as a preeminent public intellectual; includes Dwight Macdonald, Alfred Kazin, William Maxwell, Saul Bellow, and W. H. Auden; and concludes with Frank O'Hara. The book's title captures the profile of men who, in Mendelson's phrase, "seized for themselves the authority and power to shape American literary culture" and confronted "moral tests and temptations" in their quest. Mailer is most clearly the kind of writer Mendelson is interested in: one who strove for capital-g Greatness. The inner conflict that accompanies the pursuit of such power forms a major theme of the book.

With each subject, *Moral Agents* focuses on the tension between the private writer and the public man who wrote to lead. Mendelson reads Lionel Trilling's diaries, full of conflicted ego, as if to say, "Aha! I knew it." The diary entries reveal that Trilling associated creative genius with amoral chaos, and so was irritated at having to present himself as a civilized gentleman; his moral struggle took the form of repression. With Bellow, Mailer, and Kazin, the conflict appears as a subverted masculinity that haunts their work and their lives. The moral concerns taken up in their art are set against the background of their actual

behavior, including how they treated their wives. Perhaps unsurprisingly, their abstract commitments didn't always translate into kindness or humility.

Mendelson uses the word "morality" as shorthand for "a matter of the inner logic of actions and consequences, not of precepts and rules." Morality, in other words, isn't an external imperative, and when it threatens to seem so, as with Auden's explicit concern for love of neighbor, Mendelson goes out of his way to insist otherwise—emphasizing, in this example, Auden's rejection of institutional Christianity. At times this attenuated and slightly idiosyncratic definition of morality leaves Mendelson describing little more than an emotional disposition. His treatment of William Maxwell lays bare the influential *New Yorker* editor's deep fatalism, and we see how Maxwell's spare, passive prose style was born out of his expectation that the world may contain story, but no plot, no clear cause. Moral agent? Actually, one could call Maxwell's gift artistic vision without moral imagination.

Norman Mailer, 1958

If Mendelson's treatment of morality doesn't always convince, it could be because his deeper concern is individual personhood. His gift for parsing personality—by which he means not inherited temperament, but a disposition that develops over a lifetime of choices—sets *Moral Agents* apart. Mendelson unabashedly psychoanalyzes his subjects, weaving his conclusions into his literary and biographical descriptions. "Whenever [Auden] wanted to rid himself of something in his psyche, he first gave it a voice in his poems." "Kazin accused himself of sins he didn't commit to avoid thinking of the mundane ones he did." "[Bellow] was always troubled by the gap between his peacock's display of words and the self that his words half-concealed." It makes for an entertaining mix of sharp insight and gossip.

The book's demographic is narrow—mid-twentieth-century, mostly New York City–based white men—but Mendelson preempts criticism by arguing that he has chosen writers who made pronouncements on the world at large, and as he points out, it was men who were allowed to make such claims within "the political and cultural marketplace" of the era. He adds that his last book, *The Things That Matter*, exclusively featured women writers whose work explored the interior life. This division, he insists, is not an argument that male and female writers have essentially different qualities, but simply "reflects nineteenth- and twentieth-century social realities that were the product of stereotyping and prejudice." Fair enough; Mendelson's subject is literary and moral authority within a specific cultural milieu. But if he had engaged writers who had to apply their considerable talents and influence obliquely, perhaps we could have learned even more about what power and moral authority could mean in that generation.

In today's generation, at any rate, the public intellectual's job—as far as we even acknowledge it—has become largely ceremonial, and the institutions that could give a single person the same wide cultural influence have weakened. In most cases, Mendelson's portrayals don't tempt us to mourn the loss. But then there is the rare case where moral and artistic vision were fully married, as in the work of W. H. Auden. Mendelson is Auden's literary executor, and he paints the poet as a genius who, in contrast to some of the others, over time became painfully aware of his capacity for sin, and correspondingly made himself appear "less than he was." When the poet gave readings late in his career, Mendelson recounts, "more than once, someone in the audience complained that he was no longer 'leading us' as he did in the 1930s—while Auden stared straight ahead, ashamed that he had once made it possible for those who wanted a leader to imagine he was one."

Auden's authority cost him, as it did most of these men, but his was greatness of a different sort than the one Germaine Greer dismissed; here the principle and the presentation are united. Bring on that kind of genius. ■

Maria Bowler *is* Commonweal*'s editorial assistant.*

CARL VAN VECHTEN

Dominic Preziosi

Serious Trouble

There's Something I Want You to Do

Charles Baxter
Pantheon, $24, 227 pp.

Among the factual details Charles Baxter manages to work into his latest collection of short stories is that Minneapolis, where many of these tales are set, is the nation's leader in prosthetic medicine and technology. Why? Because historically it has been a center of industrial manufacturing. Favorably located on the Falls of St. Anthony at the head of the Mississippi River, the city was home to numerous mills providing generations of residents both steady employment and the accompanying possibility of dismemberment.

A writer like Baxter doesn't introduce such an image without a reason, and indeed a number of the stories in *There's Something I Want You to Do* deal explicitly with the idea of "human wreckage." Comprising ten stories split equally among virtues ("Bravery," "Loyalty," and "Chastity") and vices ("Lust," "Sloth," "Avarice"), the collection gets its narrative thrust from the imperative of its title. That catalytic kick—reflective of Baxter's stated preference for what he calls "request moments"—inevitably sets people on a collision course. The resulting impacts leave some in worse shape than others.

Baxter, whose previous books include the novels *The Feast of Love* and *Saul & Patsy*, as well as the acclaimed story collection *Gryphon*, is often praised (and in some sense condemned) as a writer's writer. Readers familiar with prize-winning and anthologized stories like "Feinstadt's Mother" or "The Next Building I Plan to Bomb" or "The Winner" know the care he takes with character and composition, the scrupulousness with which he avoids epiphany. Man will become better when you show him what he is like, Chekhov said, and like Chekhov, Baxter doesn't force self-realizations upon his characters to get them out of their jams. "I read fiction because I want to see bad stuff happening," he has said. "I want to see people misbehaving and getting themselves into real trouble, serious trouble. That's what I go to fiction for. That...and the sense that I'm learning something about people."

Little surprise, then, that Baxter's protagonists so often mess up, even (or especially) when endeavoring to do well. And if they happen to learn from their mistakes, there's always another opportunity to get things wrong. In the course of these linked stories, a selection of recurring characters meet up at different places and times, their past experience not necessarily a guide to negotiating present difficulties. This arrangement might have felt overly schematic in other hands, but Baxter uses a light touch in establishing a unifying order, as sinful and saintly urges compete and sometimes complement one another within individual stories.

"Loyalty," perhaps the collection's best piece, may also be the most illustrative of Baxter's aims. "I don't say anything in the face of the incomparable wreckage," the narrator reports on re-encountering his ex-wife and mother of his child for the first time in years. "She's wreckage," he later says aloud, explaining both to himself and his current wife why he has no choice but to help her. "It's as simple as that. We have these obligations to our human ruins. What happened to her could have happened to me or anybody."

This impulse afflicts a number of characters, even as the damage (broken bones, smashed knees, debilitating drug habits, rare diseases) continues to take its toll on them. The aging narrator of "Avarice," who is also the mother of the protagonist in "Loyalty," covets vengeance against the drunk driver who killed her husband. "Looking at me you would not think me capable of murder," she says, "but I found that black coal in my soul, and it burned fiercely. I loved having it there." The idealistic pediatrician of the beautiful opening story, "Bravery," reappears years later in "Gluttony," now depressed, obese, and addicted to junk food. By the end of the story he has wrecked his car after a maddening argument over abortion with the parents of the young woman his teenage son has impregnated—his nuanced and compassionate concern about the couple's decision obliterated by fundamentalist moralizing.

These synopses make the stories sound like heavy going, but Baxter knows where to find hidden veins of humor. The newlywed wife in "Bravery" wakes on the first morning of her Prague honeymoon to see her husband standing "before the window naked, with a doctor's offhandedness about

Charles Baxter

the body, surveying the neighborhood. She thought he resembled the pope blessing the multitudes in Vatican Square, but no: on second thought he didn't resemble the pope at all, starting with the nakedness." Another recurring character can't help falling in love with women who make him laugh, no matter their other shortcomings, eventually marrying a comic who uses him as a punchline in her act and refuses to kiss him even after they've conceived a child ("Chastity"). She also challenges him on humanity's capacity for knowledge:

"Suppose we have limitations on our brains, like the limitation on a dog brain. And you know what we can't get, ever?"

"I don't know," Benny said....

"Exactly," Sarah said with triumph. "You don't know. And you never will. ... I believe that because of the way we're wired up we'll never know God, and that's just for starters. Something is out there but we'll never have any concept of what it is. All we have are these dumb fairy tales about crucified guys with beards and dead people coming alive again and the book sealed with seven seals. Also, by the way, we'll never know the actual structure of the universe."

This may be as close as Baxter comes to stating his aversion to epiphany: What can we ultimately understand, about the universe, one another, or our vulnerable selves? In the book's coda, Baxter writes: "Look: the pedestrians gaze over the bridge's side at the Falls of St. Anthony," then mentions the appeals to the saint that "even lapsed Catholics" utter when searching for lost things or seeking restoration of "peace and tranquility of mind." Hovering over these pages is the ghost of poet the John Berryman, who famously jumped from the city's Washington Avenue Bridge. One of Baxter's characters contemplates a leap from the same structure, but what goes over the side instead is her cellphone, with which she has just taken a photo of herself. Baxter's wrecks persist in holding despair at bay, expecting no easy fix yet never giving up on the possibility of being made whole again. ■

Dominic Preziosi *is* Commonweal*'s Digital Editor.*

John T. McGreevy

In God & Mammon We Trust

One Nation Under God

How Corporate America Invented Christian America

Kevin Kruse

Basic Books, $29.99, 337 pp.

Can you name the only president baptized while living in the White House?

If you answered Dwight D. Eisenhower, ignore *One Nation Under God*. If like me you had no idea—and, God help me, I earn a living by teaching this sort of thing—buy a copy.

An off-handed Eisenhower comment—the country needed a "deeply felt religious faith and I don't care what religion it is"—once symbolized for scholars the diminishment of serious theological reflection in the postwar era.

Kevin Kruse tells a different story. Eisenhower decided to be baptized in the National Presbyterian Church in a quiet ceremony on a February Sunday a few weeks after his inauguration. Eisenhower's grandfather had, in fact, been a Mennonite minister, and his mother a Jehovah's Witness. His parents had chosen the name Dwight in honor of the late nineteenth-century evangelical revivalist, Dwight Moody. He only joined a church after becoming president, reversing a pattern of irregular attendance at religious services during his long military career. But he became close to Billy Graham during the 1952 presidential campaign and began thinking of his presidency as propelling a national "spiritual renewal."

Much of what we now understand as an ambient American sympathy for religious expression, Kruse demonstrates, did not originate with the American founders. Neither did it grow organically during the nineteenth century. Instead, figures such as Eisenhower, working with like-minded allies in Congress, decided to make the Fourth of July a national "day of prayer" (1953), begin an ongoing tradition of National Prayer Breakfasts attended by the President (1953), add the phrase "under God" to the Pledge of Allegiance (1954), and place the phrase "In God We Trust" on stamps (1954) and currency (1955).

Why then? The most original (and convincing) claim in *One Nation Under God* is that the association of patriotism with Christianity stemmed from a libertarian impulse within American business, as leading businessmen (including tire magnate Harvey Firestone, oilmen Sid Richardson and J. Howard Pew and entertainment moguls Cecil B. DeMille and Walt Disney) strategized to counter the popularity of Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal. Their campaign for "spiritual mobilization" explicitly denounced "federal planners" and valorized the free market. Unions, especially, seemed to threaten the economic freedom and individualism at the core of the American experiment. Socialism seemed around the corner to these businessmen and the ministers (such as Graham) who joined their effort, as evidenced by "tyrannical" levels of taxation and such laws as Social Security, unemployment insur-

Billy Graham in 1954

ance, and even veteran's benefits. Only "spiritual mobilization" could resist the drift toward economic centralization.

Kruse might have dwelt on the significance of this libertarian impulse. Historians of the United States once told the story of the twentieth century as a periodic wave of reforms, beginning with the Progressive Era efforts of Theodore Roosevelt, Jane Addams, and Woodrow Wilson, peaking during the crisis of the Depression with the New Deal, and continuing with Lyndon Johnson, Medicare, and the Great Society. The arc away from a seemingly simple-minded focus on the individual toward a sophisticated recognition that markets needed restraints seemed clear, as did the recognition that the American social-welfare state, belated though it was when compared to that of other industrial nations, needed further elaboration.

Now this story is less compelling. The period from the New Deal to the early 1970s did produce the modern American social-welfare state, but the political consensus such a welfare state required now seems anomalous, undergirded by low rates of immigration, high rates of taxation, and the shared experience of depression and war. And even then, as Kruse demonstrates, libertarian impulses moved just beneath the surface of American political life. Perhaps the most important Protestant ministers of the mid-twentieth century, for example, were not the leaders of the National Council of Churches but evangelicals decidedly uninterested in the Social Gospel. One spokesman for the Spiritual Mobilization effort was a young actor named Ronald Reagan, disenchanted with unions from his experience in the Screen Actors Guild and in the process of detaching himself from allegiance to the Democratic Party.

Adding "under God" to the Pledge of Allegiance and "In God We Trust" to our currency was uncontroversial. And in fact these gestures received support across the political and religious spectrum. (The Knights of Columbus, for example, were the original sponsors of the addition to the pledge.) Even organizations such as the American Civil Liberties Union (preoccupied with Senator Joseph McCarthy) and groups dedicated to the separation of church and state (obsessed by their campaign against any federal aid to Catholic schools) offered little protest.

Where Eisenhower disappointed the proponents of "spiritual mobilization" was not on religious issues but on broader economic questions. The 1950s marked the consolidation and expansion of Social Security and many New Deal programs, not their roll-back. Eisenhower's own domestic agenda included the Interstate Highway Program, NASA, and other massive investments in infrastructure and research.

Disappointment with Eisenhower spurred conservatives to search for other political leaders, and they eventually found their way to Barry Goldwater—"a choice not an echo"—and then to a newly elected charismatic governor

of California, Ronald Reagan. At the same time, the consensus on religion and public life collapsed, and a Supreme Court more sympathetic to the plight of minority religions (or atheism) banned prayer in the public schools, alienating conservatives who understood this as a betrayal of the consensus articulated with so little controversy just a decade before.

Kruse identifies *One Nation Under God* as an origins story, tracking how "liberals and conservatives [became] locked in an intractable struggle over an ostensibly simple question: Is the United States a Christian nation?"

The question is simple. Is it important? Kruse's lucid narrative is a model of historical writing aimed at a general public. But the significance of disputes over prayer in the public schools, or even whether the United States is fundamentally a Christian nation, is not always clear. One-time ardent proponents of prayer in the public schools, after all, now can turn to the booming homeschooling market. And debates on the Christian origins of the United States inevitably have an abstract feel. To be fair, Rudy Giuliani recently accused President Obama of insufficient patriotism because Obama compared the atrocities committed by ISIS to the Crusades. (And the president did so, Kruse might immediately add, at the National Prayer Breakfast). And some Americans continue to believe that President Obama is a Muslim.

But this Fox News chatter, disturbing as it is, may distract us from analysis of more fundamental divisions. *One Nation Under God* details how an alliance of businessmen and ministers made the public trappings of religion more prominent in American civic life. What it does not do is explain how religious convictions—on issues ranging from abortion to immigration—shape our deepest cultural divides. ■

John T. McGreevy *is the I.A. O'Shaughnessy Dean of the College of Arts and Letters and professor of history at the University of Notre Dame. He is the author of* Catholicism and American Freedom.

Michael Walsh

Overdrawn

God's Bankers

A History of Money and Power at the Vatican

Gerald Posner

Simon and Schuster, $32, 728 pp.

There is nothing like a murder-mystery to grab a reader's attention. Gerald Posner begins his book with one of the best. On the morning of June 18, 1982, the body of Roberto Calvi was found hanging beneath London's Blackfriars Bridge, weighed down by stones stuffed into the pockets of his suit. He had come to London as a fugitive from Italian justice, jumping bail after conviction for fraud. He took a circuitous route, travelling within Europe on a false passport that was "good enough to fool customs agents," Posner claims. Obviously he does not realize that immigration officers in Europe were not then (and are not now) as punctilious as their counterparts at JFK. Back then it was easy to move across European borders provided one's documents had the right heraldic symbol stamped on the outside.

The question Posner cannot answer is did Calvi jump or was he pushed? The first coroner's inquest held in London ruled Calvi's death a suicide. An Italian court later disagreed, and a second English inquest arrived at an open verdict. But if it was murder rather than suicide, who was the assassin? And why did Calvi come to London in the first place? Posner does not answer either question, but, as far as I know, neither does anyone else (a few years after Calvi's death I made a tentative suggestion about the location of his demise in a book published in the mid-1980s).

Calvi was chairman and managing director of Milan's Banco Ambrosiano. He had close ties with the Istituto per le Opere di Religione (IOR) or the Institute for the Works of Religion—generally, if inaccurately, known as the Vatican Bank. He was also a close collaborator with Archbishop Paul Marcinckus, originally a priest of the Archdiocese of Chicago before becoming a Vatican functionary. Despite his complete ignorance of the world of finance, Marcinckus served as president of the IOR from 1971 to 1989.

Posner makes readers wade through a vast number of pages before returning to the story of Calvi. He fills the space in between with a disquisition on more general papal money matters. He sets out to intertwine Vatican finance with a history of the papacy. That was a mistake. More by accident than by design, I saw Posner on YouTube giving an interview about this book. He exuded self-confidence. I can only say it was misplaced.

Take, for example, that stream of papal revenue known to most Catholics as Peter's Pence. As Posner correctly says, this tax originated in Anglo-Saxon England, particularly with King Offa of Mercia (757–96), who built the "dyke" that still bears his name in order to keep the Welsh out of his kingdom in the English midlands. Though it was a tax that was sent to Rome, it may have been intended at first as financial support for the English hostel rather than for the papacy itself. Nevertheless, support for the papacy it became, and has remained so, though it fell into abeyance until the nineteenth century. Its geographical spread widened in the twelfth century, thanks in good part to the efforts of that quintessential bureaucrat Cardinal Nicholas Breakspeare, the future Hadrian IV—the only Englishman to become pope. But it was a specific payment, separate from, say, annates, the first year's revenue of benefices, or other taxes on clerical income imposed when the papacy had cash-flow problems or needed to finance a crusade. Posner uses Peter's Pence as a catch-all term,

even including stipends paid to clergy for services received. But he's gotten it wrong. His account gives a wholly mistaken impression.

This is not a small thing. Posner claims to have used Philippe Levillain's *The Papacy: An Encyclopedia*, which includes an excellent article on papal finances. He says John Pollard generously assisted his research and quotes Pollard's *Money and the Rise of the Modern Papacy*. Had Posner paid close attention to those works he would not have written so cavalierly about Peter's Pence.

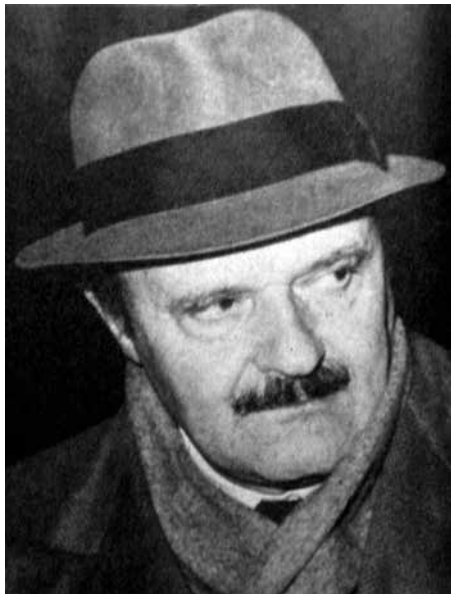
There is much more of the same. Early on Posner writes: "Pope-Kings unvaryingly were scions of powerful Italian families. When one of their sons became pope, the by-products of a papacy often included rampant corruption, pervasive nepotism, and unbridled debauchery. The cash from indulgences mostly became a bottomless pit." In historian's jargon, papal monarchy, the years in which one might (just about) talk of pope-kings, covers a fairly short period, which lies mostly outside the years indulgences flourished. That is, admittedly, a rather pedantic point. I was more intrigued by Posner's delineation of the papacy as one of "rampant corruption, pervasive nepotism, and unbridled debauchery." The endnote for that particular comment cites Joseph McCabe, a former Franciscan priest who turned against religion in general and Catholicism in particular: in less politically correct times he would have been called an apostate. Posner may not have known about McCabe's dubious history, but the title of the book he was citing, *A Rationalist Encyclopaedia*, should have given him a clue that McCabe's perspective was not exactly neutral. Nor, one begins to suspect, is Posner's.

Factual mistakes abound. He asserts that "it was a pope, Paul IV, who had… created ghettoes"; the establishment of the ghetto in Venice preceded the pontificate of Paul IV by two decades. He presents the dissolution of the Partito Popolare as a consequence of the Lateran Pacts; it was practically a precondition. He claims G. B. Montini's father was "a politically active lawyer";

he was a journalist. Hans Küng, despite the withdrawal of his *missio canonica*, has never been condemned as a heretic. Posner thinks that when Karol Wojtyła was elected pope he was one of the Catholic Church's "most prolific theological authors" and that Joseph Ratzinger was a "scholar" of canon law; both men would have been startled by such compliments. He says that in the 1950s, Montini, the future Paul VI, was a monsignor directing the Vatican's refugee programs; Posner is not specific about dates, but from November 1952 Montini was Pro-Secretary of State for Ordinary Ecclesiastical Affairs, hardly a modest monsignor. Posner apparently thinks Juan Perón was the Argentinian "strong man" during the Second World War; not true. There are a good many more similarly egregious errors, but the assertion that the knife attack on Tacchi Venturi was in 1956 (it was in 1928), made me despair not just of the competence of the author but equally of the professionalism of his editors.

Posner's problems are of his own making. He might have skipped the history, to which he is an unreliable witness, and kept more closely to the Vatican's distinctly shady financial affairs. When he does so he is rather better, but then he is following a good many who have gone before. He cites John Pollard's academic study mentioned above, James Gollin's *Worldly Goods*, Jason Berry's *Render Unto Rome* and Charles Raw's well-researched *The Moneychangers*. Had Posner taken those books as a given and moved on to the story of more recent financial shenanigans he might have avoided many pitfalls and written a more manageable tome.

Of course, writing about recent events has its own difficulties. As Posner repeatedly complains, he was refused access to Vatican papers he wished to consult. Even though he appears to take it as a personal slight rather than the application of a general rule, I have some sympathy. Every sovereign territory has its own regulations about access to official documents. The Vatican's are more arcane than most. Access moves by pontificate. John Paul II allowed access up to Benedict XV, Benedict to Pius XI. With the election of Pope Francis, scholars should now be able to consult the papers of Pius XII, but it still hasn't happened. The excuse given is that there are a great many documents waiting to be put in order. But they have already been examined for the publication in the 1960s and '70s of the eleven volumes of the *Actes et documents du Saint Siège relatifs à la Seconde Guerre Mondiale*. The failure to open the archives stokes suspicion. What use Posner might have made of the material had he seen it, however, is anyone's guess. Someone who translates *Sacra Congregazione dei Religiosi* as the Sacred Congregation for Religion, and goes on to describe it as "a little-known Curia division responsible for setting guidelines so bishops kept separate their religious and secular duties" is, I would imagine, going to have problems understanding what he finds.



Robert Calvi

Readers will be particularly attracted to the more exotic tales of the IOR's misdeeds—of which there are plenty. One of the most exotic is that of the gold stolen by Ustaša (Croatian fascist) fugitives at the end of the war, and allegedly deposited in the IOR. In 1946, Emerson Bigelow, a U.S. Treasury Department agent, sent the State Department a memo alleging that the value of that gold was enormous: $225 million in today's money. Pollard does not believe that story—certainly not the sums mentioned—and gives his reasons. Posner has read Pollard's book, and one might expect him to engage with Pollard's arguments. He does not. Instead, he takes Bigelow's memo at face value.

Likewise, though it is likely the Vatican helped fund Solidarity in Poland, the story Posner tells about how this was done arouses doubts similar to those aroused by his discussion of the Ustaša gold. He was told in an interview with the "Italian intelligence agent Francesco Pazienza" that $3.5 million of the Vatican's money had been converted into gold ingots that were smuggled into Poland hidden in a car driven by a priest from Gdansk. I experienced Polish "customs agents" while crossing the border during the Communist regime. Carrying $3.5 million in gold ingots across the frontier, no matter how expertly hidden, sounds implausible. Even if they arrived safely in Gdansk, it is difficult to imagine how they were converted into złoty without anyone noticing. The only evidence Posner cites is his conversation with Pazienza, elsewhere described as an adventurer. That Posner believes the story without further corroboration is almost more surprising than the story itself.

Quoting the *Guardian* of London, Posner wonders whether the Vatican needs a bank at all. Pope Francis had apparently been asking the same question, though he has decided to keep it. When the IOR was created (out of an existing institution), the Holy See needed a means of moving money across borders in a world divided by war. And the IOR was not a bank. How it came to act like one, and fell into disrepute, is a story that, despite Posner's five hundred pages of text (and two hundred of endnotes), still needs to be told. ■

Michael Walsh, *formerly librarian at Heythrop College, University of London, recently completed a revision of* The Oxford Dictionary of Popes.

Steven Knepper

Tyranny of Choice

The World Beyond Your Head

On Becoming an Individual in an Age of Distraction

Matthew B. Crawford

Farrar, Straus and Giroux, $26, 320 pp.

"In the darker precincts of capitalism," warns Matthew B. Crawford, "things are being designed to foster disengagement, to the point of inducing a kind of autism." Consider Las Vegas. The rows of video slot machines, with their blinking dollar signs and promises of mega-jackpots, seem to offer unlimited choice and chance, but they are actually insidious traps. These slots are less likely to give big payouts than the old mechanical machines, yet their screens project the illusion of near wins. The old levers have been replaced with push buttons, the mechanically spinning reels with video screens. The result is that the "rate of play" has increased to over a thousand games per hour, which "makes the experience more absorbing, and hence also tends to extend the duration of play," Crawford writes. Casino designers call this "player-centric" design, as if it somehow empowers gamblers, yet Crawford tells stories of how some become so absorbed that they urinate in their pants, while others impede EMTs rushing in to help heart-attack victims.

Vegas has figured out that the most valuable resource is its gamblers' attention, but video slot machines are only an egregious example of the growing "attentional economy." In *The World Beyond Your Head*, Crawford catalogues the omnipresence of flat screens in airports and restaurants, the advertisements that now pop up after you swipe your credit card in the grocery store, the Korean subways that release the scent of coffee right before the Dunkin Donuts stop. Crawford says that we often blame our diminishing attention spans on technologies like smart phones, and there is some truth in that, but it lets the main culprits off the hook. Focusing only on the technological device veils the agency of the companies that decide to inundate us with images, sounds, and smells. Blaming technology doesn't cut through the myth of "techno-inevitability," our pervasive "readiness to regard technology as a force with its own magical imperatives, rather than as an instrument of human intentions."

Crawford claims, therefore, that our problem is more political than technological. Unfortunately, we don't even have the political vocabulary to protest the invasion of our daily lives: "Our annoyance dissipates into vague impotence because we have no public language in which to articulate it." To fix this, Crawford suggests, we "need to sharpen the conceptually murky right to privacy by supplementing it with a right not to be addressed. This would apply not, of course, to those who address me face-to-face as individuals, but to those who never show their face, and treat my mind as a resource to be harvested by mechanized means." But the problem is not just our lack of an appropriate political vocabulary for our desire to be left alone. Crawford argues that our reigning political vocabulary actually facilitates the assault on our attention. Corporate bombardment is reinscribed in our public discourse as the expansion of "choice," which is by default a good thing. Arguing about good and bad ends is too "judgmental" for a liberal democracy, so our public morality makes choice an end in itself. But making freedom of choice an ultimate value is actually an abdication of value altogether, for a choice is always a means to an end. In the case of video slot machines and a never-ending cascade of intrusive advertisements, the end is decreased agency and greater alienation. "To capital," Crawford writes, "our moral squeamishness about being 'judgmental' smells like opportunity."

Matthew B. Crawford

Crawford is not afraid to be judgmental. He castigates casinos, video games, automatic braking systems, MOOCs, and the new Mickey Mouse Club. He is equally withering about the type of people they aim to form—unskilled, undisciplined, narcissistic, fragile, more comfortable in virtual reality than the real world. Nietzsche's last men are not mentioned by name, but Crawford's "pliable choosers" bear a family resemblance. Even so, Crawford is ultimately as constructive as he is critical. His 2010 bestseller *Shop Class as Soul Craft* offered a provocative defense of working with one's hands, and this new book elaborates a similar solution to our current woes—"skilled practices" that build up both our attention span and our physical and mental competence. Such practices draw us out of the digital ether and into contact with the tactile world and other human beings. Crawford balances his depictions of slot machines and intrusive advertising with vividly rendered case studies of skilled practices, such as racing motorcycles, playing ice hockey, playing guitar, blowing glass, and building organs.

MICHAELBCRAWFORD.COM

Crawford uses these case studies to articulate a revisionist model of human action. He argues that modern science unleashed the terror of determinism. Free will became an illusion, and there emerged a picture of humans batted around by forces outside their control. Kant countered this with his ideal of autonomy, of self-ruling rationality abstracted from external influences. Crawford argues that we still live in a world shaped by this Kantian ideal of autonomy. Kant's view is problematic, though, because it overcompensates: it makes external reality a categorical threat to agency. Freedom becomes a feature of our inner mental life, not something acted out in the world. Crawford rejects the false dichotomy of determinism and free will, drawing on dissident strands of philosophy, cognitive science, and psychology to argue for a model of embodied agency. According to this model, the outside world certainly limits and shapes us, but the development of skilled practices allows us to navigate it in ways that ultimately focus our attention and expand our competence and agency. And since we usually learn these practices alongside others, often under the guidance of experienced teachers, they draw us into relationships with people as well as things. To learn a skilled practice like carpentry you have to humble yourself. You must endure failure, frustration, heckling, and perhaps injury, but you end up with expertise, confidence, and objective standards for judging your work and the work of others—all of which entail a truer and more enduring individuality than today's hollow consumerist self-fashioning. This individuality also provides a surer foundation for democracy.

It is worth noting that Crawford seems to see a potential ally in religion. He mentions in passing that liturgy is another way of disciplining attention. Diminished attention spans present a problem to the church—especially if Simone Weil is right that the capacity for sustained attention is the prerequisite for prayer—but Christianity has significant resources, especially in its

contemplative traditions, to address this problem. Perhaps one way, then, that the church can act as a field hospital in the modern world is to marshal those traditions to help resist the hegemony of distraction.

The World Beyond Your Head covers a lot of territory in three hundred pages. And while it certainly holds together, that coherence has a hard-won feel in places, with some strands of the argument reading like loose ends or hastily tied knots. Likewise, while Crawford is a lucid writer, the speed with which he moves through his argument can be a bit disorienting. The terms and concepts—"ecologies of attention," "hyperpalatable stimuli," "jigs," "nudges," "cognitive extension," "affordances"—come fast and frequently. The book could perhaps stand either a little more philosophy (Kantians will undoubtedly have a bone to pick with Crawford, and a wider engagement with ancient and medieval philosophy and modern phenomenology would bolster the arguments for embodied agency) or a little less to make the book easier on the lay reader. Overall, this is not as accessible a book as *Shop Class as Soul Craft*.

But it is also a more ambitious book, and it deserves the same wide audience. *The World Beyond Your Head* confirms Crawford as an incisive and original cultural critic. He offers the kind of rare argument that cuts through stale political categories in order to address a pressing issue. Crawford's attack on the insidious workings of capitalist marketing would seem to align him with the left, but his discussions of character, judgment, and standards of excellence sound more like the concerns of a conservative. An intellectual maverick, he at times comes across like a sort of motorcycle-riding Christopher Lasch. Both take sardonic aim at the moral flabbiness and narcissism that are fostered to keep us in line. Both hark back to an old republican political tradition that sees virtue and toughness as the prerequisite for either real democracy or radical resistance. ■

Steven Knepper *is assistant professor of English at Virginia Military Institute.*

Crumbs of Grace

Clare Coffey

I walk into the vestibule of St. George's Antiochan Orthodox Church early Sunday morning with no connection to the parish but the fact that, once, someone I loved had brought me to worship here. Now, with no plans to convert, no loved one inviting me, no reason to be here but a nagging desire to return, I feel almost ashamed. For one thing, I'm alone; most other attendees are filing in with families. I've never liked going to church, but I'll spend two hours here—on top of an evening Catholic Mass. Stiff-legged, and, I'm sure, absurd with my straight-ahead, catch-no-eye stare, I take my place as close to the back as possible.

The Orthodox Patriarch of Antioch lights a candle upon arriving to patriarchate in Damascus.

The liturgy proceeds, the slow, sonorous voices of priest and choir chanting in Arabic, interspersed with some English and Greek. Sometimes the luxuriant melancholy of the chanting breaks into a harsh, almost defiant key. I want to sing along, but I don't know Arabic. The priest's voice rises above the others from the sanctuary a thousand miles away. When, at the responses, I lift up my hands to cross myself, they are clumsy and just a few moments behind. I've already flubbed kissing the icon of the Theotokos, as I'm sure all eyes have seen and noted. I let my hands and voice drop.

Now the liturgy is about a third of the way through, and the church really begins to fill—mostly families with younger children, ambling or scurrying in with haste but no anxiety. Little girls wear polyester skirts and awkward, rhinestone-studded "high heels"—strappy white sandals with half an inch's boost that I remember from my own childhood attempts to be fancy for church. I've lost track of the responses completely now. Everyone stands, except for the old, the infirm, and, apparently, the interlopers who didn't catch on and are too proud to be late in rising.

One of the sitters, directly in front of me, strains a hearing aid toward the altar. He is little, wrinkled, and dark, with white tufts of hair ringing his head and protruding from his ears and nostrils. A cell phone rings. The old man's daughter gesticulates at him frantically, her grey-streaked bob shaking with indignation. Misreading her signals, he shrugs, answers, and breaks into a full-volume stream of rapid Arabic. His daughter turns around, rolls her eyes, and catches mine. She shakes her head, as if to say "men." I shake mine back, "oh, men," and think that perhaps they can't tell I'm an outsider after all.

They do, of course. After the liturgy, at least five people will approach me at the coffee hour, say, "You are new, yes?" and pile my plate with pastries.

These are the people right-wing publications call "Christians" in scare quotes and condemn for daring to find fault with the state of Israel. According to the narrow sight line of American political discourse, these exiled representatives of the world's oldest Christian communities do not exist: you can be a freedom-loving Christian or a terrorist Arab, but you cannot be both.

Communion time. The children line up in front of the priest's wife, and it is comforting to see that Orthodox children are as fidgety as Catholic children. As people file haphazardly up to the Eucharist, babies and grownups alike, I sit down. I have not gone to Communion regularly in years, for many reasons. Every Sunday I dread the grim pre-Communion ritual—the kindly officious ushers signaling the people to rise and line up, pew by pew, the consciousness of holding up the line as I try to let others get by me. Here it is more or less a free-for-all, and I'm satisfied that I've passed more or less unnoticed.

But I haven't, or not quite, because four women offer me holy bread from their hands as they pass by. The bread, hunks of the communion loaf left unconsecrated, is free for anyone to take and distribute. I gobble it down eagerly. I must look like the fat robins in the park near my home, beady-eyed and impudent in their chirpy clamor for food, sucking up the breadcrumbs that toddlers throw them. My father says that forsythia is the first sign of thaw in Philadelphia, but robins mean that spring has taken hold and the frozen ground is beginning to break. The liturgy is finishing, and I'm still nibbling crumbs from my hands, a fat robin, happy in the house of the Lord. ■

Clare Coffey *studies classics at Dartmouth College.*

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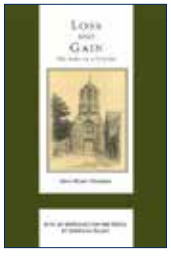

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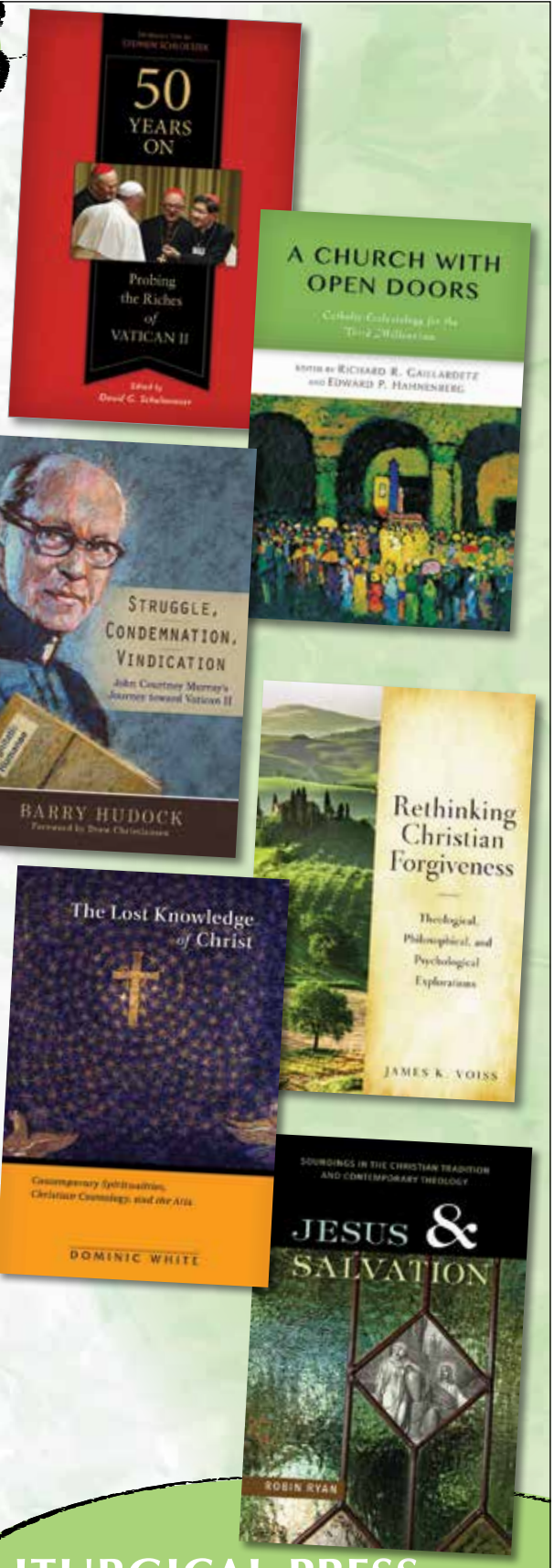

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