A Review of Religion, Politics & Culture

Commonweal

NOVEMBER 14, 2014

FALL BOOKS

ANTHONY DOMESTICO ON MARILYNNE ROBINSON

CASSANDRA NELSON ON MARY GORDON

JOHN WILSON ON KARL OVE KNAUSGAARD

WILLIAM STORRAR ON THE SCOTTISH REFERENDUM

MOLLY FARNETH ON KAREN ARMSTRONG

RICHARD ALLEVA REVIEWS 'GONE GIRL'

ALBERT WU: IS AMAZON BAD FOR BOOKS?

THE EDITORS ON THE SYNOD

$3.95 US/$4.50 CAN

www.commonwealmagazine.org

MASTER OF THEOLOGICAL STUDIES AT LOYOLA UNIVERSITY MARYLAND

Loyola's graduate program in Theological Studies nurtures a collegial atmosphere in which rigorous, lively debate and intellectual generosity flourish.

- **Faculty internationally recognized for scholarly excellence**
- **Study Scripture, Historical Theology, Systematic Theology/Doctrine, Comparative Theology, Ethics and Culture**
- **Two-year, Full-time Program**

If you are interested in the MTS program and have questions, please contact Dan McClain at dwmcclain@loyola.edu.

Virtual information sessions:
Dec. 17, 2014
Jan. 21, 2015

LEARN MORE:
loyola.edu/mts

LoyolaMTS

@LoyolaMTS

LOYOLA
UNIVERSITY MARYLAND
Loyola College of Arts and Sciences

Commonweal

NOVEMBER 14, 2014 • VOLUME 141 • NUMBER 18
commonwealmagazine.org

Founded in 1924
Commonweal

Editor
Paul Baumann

Associate Editors
Grant Gallicho, Matthew Boudway, Mollie Wilson O'Reilly

Production
Tiina Aleman

Digital Editor
Dominic Preziosi

Copy Editor
Susanne Washburn

Tablet Edition
KeriLee Horan

Editorial Assistant
Maria Bowler

Marketing Coordinator
Kaitlin Campbell

Business Manager
James Hannan

Development
Christa A. Kerber

Poetry
Rosemary Deen

Film
Richard Alleva, Rand Richards Cooper

Stage / Media / Television
Celia Wren

Columnists
E. J. Dionne Jr., Anthony Domestico, John Garvey, Cathleen Kaveny, Jo McGowan, Charles R. Morris, Mollie Wilson O'Reilly, William Pfaff, Margaret O'Brien Steinfels

Subscription Information
855-713-1792
subscriptions@commonwealmagazine.org

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

Publisher
Thomas Baker

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

Commonweal is indexed in Reader's Guide to Periodical Literature, Book Review Digest, and Book Review Index. *Commonweal* articles are available at many libraries and research facilities via ProQuest and OpinionArchives. Serials Data program No.: ISSN 0010-3330. Periodicals postage paid at New York, NY, and at additional offices. Single Copy, $3.95. Yearly print subscriptions, U.S., $65; Canada, $70; other parts of the world, $75. Special two-year rate: U.S. $98; Canada, $108; other parts of the world, $118. Add $45 for airmail. For digital and online subscription options visit www.commonwealmagazine.org/digital.

Cover design: Cecilia Guerrero Rezes

LETTERS

More on that '70s church

FORMATIVE YEARS

Thank you for the excellent article by Cathleen Kaveny ("That '70s Church," October 24), in which she rightfully challenges the claim that the decrease in Mass attendance, as well as Catholic attrition, is the result of poor catechesis following Vatican II. I began my thirty-year career in catechetical ministry teaching religion in a Catholic high school in 1966, and I served in both parish and diocesan settings as the director of religious education. I agree with Kaveny's analysis that catechesis was not at all poor. In accord with the documents of Vatican II, the General Catechetical Directory, and the National Catechetical Directory, many Catholic publishers (Sadlier, Benziger, Silver Burdett, Paulist, and others) worked with outstanding, dedicated Catholic authors to develop new catechetical series. These materials were solidly grounded in Scripture and the aforementioned documents, and were implemented in accord with authentic teaching and learning principles and processes.

Those materials emphasized a close relationship with Jesus and one another, and assisted students in understanding Jesus' command to "love one another as I love you" (John 13:34, 15:12). They also helped students understand Christ's mission to "bring glad tidings to the poor... liberty to captives...recovery of sight to the blind...[and] to let the oppressed go free" (Luke 4:18–19). This differed from the question-and-answer approach of the Baltimore Catechism, but it is not inferior. The Baltimore Catechism (I still have my copies of Baltimore I, II, and III) included very little about Scripture, and emphasized personal morality without much attention to social justice. The extent of lay involvement is given in question 269 of Baltimore Catechism III: "What is Catholic Action? Catholic Action is the activity of the laity under the direction of their bishops in promoting the growth and spiritual welfare of the church." No mention of the challenges presented in the gospel of Luke.

As Kaveny recognizes, catechesis was led by thousands of deeply committed and well-formed women and men who served as parish CCD teachers and catechists. They were prepared and supported by a new group of lay ministers who emerged after Vatican II—those who became parish and diocesan directors of religious education. This role was first held by religious sisters; they were quickly joined by lay women and men, many of whom earned graduate degrees in religious education through excellent programs developed by Boston College, Notre Dame, Fordham, Loyola University Chicago, and many others. I was privileged to serve as the first lay director of religious education for the Archdiocese of Baltimore.

This cadre of parish and school catechists and professional religious educators brought energy and competence to the demanding responsibility of sharing our Catholic faith. For children and youth, the effort was strong. But the effort to find a comprehensive approach to adult faith formation has not received the commitment of funding and personnel required to make it a significant reality in most parishes.

Many excellent programs, like the

continued on page 37

Pope Frank

"Speak frankly," Pope Francis said at the opening of last month's Extraordinary Synod on the Family. "Let no one say, 'I can't say this. They'll think such-and-such about me.'" That isn't how synods used to be. Under past popes, the Vatican tightly controlled the agenda. Bishops were warned not to bring up certain issues, such as married priests and contraception. But Francis wanted something different this time. He encouraged participants—mostly bishops, but also select priests and laypeople—not to fear openly disagreeing with one another, or with him. If nothing else new comes out of what will be a yearlong synodal process, that change alone constitutes a major accomplishment.

Encouraged to speak freely, the synod fathers did not hold back. Several bishops supported readmitting some divorced and remarried Catholics to Communion, something the pope reportedly favors; others opposed that idea, claiming it would entail a dangerous change in church teaching. Some participants spoke of valuable elements in "irregular" relationships, including those of gay couples, the divorced and remarried, and couples who cohabitate before marriage; other participants worried that could suggest support for what the church has traditionally condemned as serious sins. In other words, the pope got the frank discussion he asked for—and then some.

When the Vatican released a report, a text known as a *relatio*, summarizing what the bishops had been debating during the first week of the synod, it was big news. And that news was cause for serious alarm among some conservative Catholics. Cardinal Raymond Burke and others mounted a public campaign of resistance to the notion that the synod would liberalize church practice. They argued that even discussing subjects like Communion for the divorced and remarried would confuse the faithful and lead the church down a slippery slope to heresy. Burke reportedly told the synod there could be no change in doctrine, no change in canon law, and no change in pastoral practice. Instead, he urged the pope to issue a statement affirming Catholic doctrine on marriage. By failing to do so, he alleged, Francis had "done a lot of harm" to the church.

When the final version of the *relatio* was made public at the end of the synod, the welcoming language regarding homosexual people and the divorced and remarried was gone. In its place were two paragraphs blandly summarizing the disagreement of bishops on those issues, and one repeating Vatican statements on homosexual orientation. Yet even those did not receive the two-thirds majority vote required for approval. News reports announced that conservatives had succeeded in watering down the first draft of the *relatio* and altering the direction of the synod.

The reality is more complicated. First, the three paragraphs that failed to get approval were still supported by large majorities. Second, some synod fathers say that they didn't endorse the paragraph on gay people because it did not go far enough. Presumably, others feel that way about the sections on divorce as well. Third, Pope Francis decided to publish the entirety of the *relatio*—including the sections that did not receive two-thirds support. That version of the text has been returned to the world's bishops conferences for further study by clergy and laypeople alike. These contested issues are very much alive.

Some liberals have suggested that when the synod reconvenes next October, the pope ought to remove some of the more conservative participants and simply push through progressive reforms on his own. But that would not be in keeping with the pope's collegial vision for decision-making in the church. In moving the church forward, Francis's goal is to bring together as much as possible the various factions within the church. He welcomes a variety of views because he believes that no one person, no one ideology, has a monopoly on truth—not even the pope. Unlike some of his critics, he believes that candid disagreement, charitably expressed, can be fruitful. He knows real unity often requires persuasion; it cannot be forced or faked. He knows that open debate is not the same thing as confusion.

"We still have one year to mature," Francis said in his remarks closing the synod, "to find concrete solutions to so many difficulties and innumerable challenges that families must confront; to give answers to the many discouragements that surround and suffocate families." Finding those answers is not the job of the bishops alone, but of the whole people of God. There is much work to do, and the synod is just the beginning. ■

Cathleen Kaveny

Married to the Past

WHAT LAW CAN AND CANNOT DO

They were his.

PHOTOGRAPHER UNKNOWN, NORDISKA MUSEET

In "Commitment to Marriage," an open letter issued before last month's Extraordinary Synod on the Family, prominent social conservatives urged the bishops to take a variety of steps to strengthen traditional marriage.

The letter asked the synod to "support efforts to preserve what is right and just in existing marriage laws, to resist any changes to those laws that would further weaken the institution, and to restore legal provisions that protect marriage as a conjugal union of one man and one woman, entered into with an openness to the gift of children, and lived faithfully and permanently as the foundation of the natural family."

It's clear that the authors consider gay marriage and polygamy to be among the changes to be resisted. But what legal provisions, exactly, should be restored? As I pondered this question, I realized even more sharply the limits of lawmaking. It's not enough for a law to have a good purpose in order to be a good law. It also has to achieve that purpose by means that are fair, and that don't impose unacceptable ancillary burdens.

Two hundred years ago, Anglo-American law assiduously upheld the vision of marriage the letter advocates. But key legal buttresses were dismantled piece by piece, because they inflicted other moral costs—particularly on women and children—that were too high to pay. Here are five examples.

Married women's property laws. In the Christian view of marriage, a husband and wife lose their distinct identities and become one person. In the Anglo-American common-law tradition, that person was the husband. A married woman could not own property, enter into contracts, write a will, or earn a salary. In 1867, the Illinois Supreme Court baldly stated the pragmatic justification for this scheme: "It is simply impossible that a married woman should be able to control and enjoy her property as if she were sole, without practically leaving her at liberty to annul the marriage." Nonetheless, over several decades beginning in the mid-nineteenth century, American state legislatures began to take steps that allowed a married woman to retain some legal and financial independence.

Women's suffrage. Opponents argued that women's suffrage would disrupt the equilibrium between the sexes. A pamphlet produced by the National Association Opposed to Woman Suffrage in 1910 claimed that giving women the vote "means competition of women with men instead of cooperation." It alleged that "80 percent of the women eligible to vote are married and can only double or annul their husband's votes." When women gained the vote in 1920, they acquired basic political equality—and political independence from their husbands.

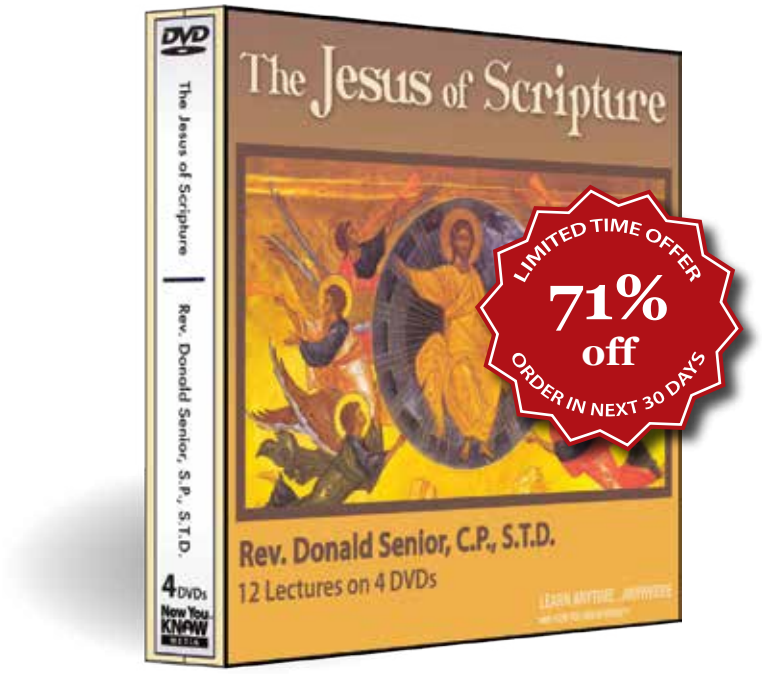
The Uniform Parentage Act. In the common-law tradition, illegitimate children had no right to support from their fathers, no right to use the paternal name, and no right of inheritance. Such laws reinforced the tight connection between marriage and childbearing. But they inflicted tremendous harm on children who were not responsible for the circumstances of their birth. In the late 1960s, the U.S. Supreme Court began striking down laws disadvantaging illegitimate children on the grounds that such provisions deprived them of the equal protection of law. Most states have now enacted some version of the Uniform Parentage Act, which gives children with unmarried parents the same rights as those whose mother and father are married.

Decriminalizing adultery and fornication. Until the mid-twentieth century, most states had laws against extramarital sex. They aimed to reinforce traditional sexual morality, to ensure that men were responsible for raising only their own children, and to deter the propagation of children out of wedlock. In the 1960s, many states began decriminalizing these acts, while others left the statutes on the books but did not enforce them. People not only wondered whether enforcing such laws was the best use of governmental resources, they also feared the enormous power they gave the government to intrude into the most intimate aspects of their lives.

No-fault divorce laws. In the late 1960s, most states moved from permitting divorce only on certain grounds (adultery or mental cruelty) to no-fault divorce. It is this shift that the authors of "Commitment to Marriage" would most like to reverse. But at what cost? States moved away from fault-based divorce in part because there was widespread perjury, including collusion between the parties, in determining "fault." Some recent research suggests that domestic violence and female suicide are lower in states with no-fault divorce. Moreover, fault-based divorce can't make married couples maintain a home together—it can only keep them from remarrying.

The law isn't magic. It can't undo major shifts in culture. Instead of figuring out how to pressure more young people to get married and stay married, it might be wise to spend some more time asking them why they think the institution of marriage no longer meets their needs. ■

Now You KNOW MEDIA



Discover the Jesus of Scripture Anew

Surely no one has made a greater impact on human history than Jesus of Nazareth. His life, example and teachings have had a profound influence on every generation since His death and resurrection. The quest for Jesus is unending, and many images of Jesus have been revered over the centuries.

Join one of the world's leading Catholic New Testament experts in this inspiring course. In these 12 special talks, you will explore the most powerful source for our understanding of Jesus: the New Testament. You will discover the nature of the four Gospels, their historical reliability and the distinctive dimensions of Jesus' mission portrayed by the Evangelists.

The portrait of Jesus found in the four Gospels and echoed in the rest of the New Testament writings remains powerful, beautiful and compelling. These texts are biographies meant to inspire and transform, and you will explore them as windows through which to view Jesus. This course is fascinating and brilliantly taught. Don't miss out on this special sale.

Must order within 30 days of issue date

1-800-955-3904

https://www.NowYouKnowMedia.com/Jesus

Now You Know Media, Inc.
12115 Parklawn Dr., Suite B • Rockville, MD 20852

The Jesus of Scripture

5-CD or 4-DVD Program

Presented by
Rev. Donald Senior, C.P., S.T.D.

President Emeritus,
Catholic Theological Union

Lecture Titles

1. Introduction
2. The Gospels as Portraits of Jesus
3. The Origin of Jesus and His Identity as Son of God
4. Jesus and His Disciples
5. Jesus the Healer
6. Jesus as Teacher
7. Jesus the Prophet
8. Jesus the Christ
9. The Passion and Death of Jesus
10. The Meaning of Jesus' Death
11. Jesus Risen
12. Beyond Jesus: The Risen Christ and the Early Church

The Jesus of Scripture
12 Lectures (25 minutes/lecture)
+ electronic study guide

SAVE $150

4-DVD Set ~~$209.95~~ **SALE $59.95**
5-CD Set ~~$119.95~~ **SALE $35.95**

+ $8.95 Shipping & Handling
100% Satisfaction Guarantee
Coupon Code: A1797

Now You Know Media's mission is to bring you the best Catholic professors and retreat leaders in America. Carefully selected for their scholarship, faithful insight and teaching excellence, our speakers will touch your heart and engage your intellect. Visit our website to browse our growing catalog of over 250 courses and retreats available in CD, DVD, and MP3 formats.

Albert Wu

Browsers Welcome

FRANCE VS. AMAZON

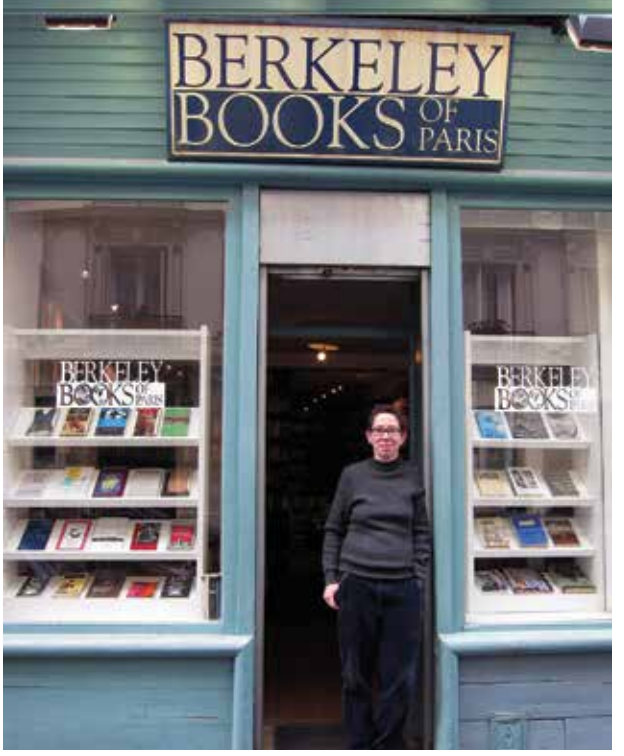
As an exchange student in Paris in 1999, Phyllis Cohen was drawn to the city's used bookstores. She went to work in one, and ultimately she decided to open one herself: Berkeley Books of Paris, which she founded in 2005 with two friends, in a location near the Luxembourg Gardens.

Cohen first fell in love with bookstores at Cody's Books and Moe's Books in Berkeley, California; her shop's name is partly an homage to them. Moving to New York City at nineteen, she worked at Posman Books and at St. Mark's, a longstanding staple of the East Village. Cohen recalls a job application that spanned three pages and asked her to list her "Ten Desert Island Books." For her it was an ideal community, a place where people lived and breathed books.

Today such communities are endangered. Both Posman and St. Mark's weathered the storm of the 1990s and early 2000s, when indies were pushed out of business by goliaths like Borders and Barnes & Noble—chain stores that, in turn, are now being squeezed out by Amazon. St. Mark's is still hanging on, but not without a scare. In July, unable to pay increased rent, the store had to vacate. Loyal customers and other booklovers donated money to help fund a move to a new location on Third Avenue.

It's not just U.S. bookstores that are feeling the threat. In July of this year, French legislators passed a new law, popularly called the "Anti-Amazon Law," barring large online companies from offering free shipping on their books—an inducement long used by Amazon and FNAC, the largest retail store in France, to lure customers away from other outlets. Whether the law is enough to save independent bookstores is unclear. (Amazon responded by pricing shipping at one cent.) But what is clear is the French government's willingness to protect independent bookstores. Discussing the Amazon law, French Minister of Culture Aurélie Filippetti pledged "to defend the network of independent bookstores, because they are essential not only for access to culture, but also for the cultural life of our land [*terroir*]."

Filippetti's use of the word *terroir* evokes a winemaker intimately tied to the land and to the riches of an artisanal tradition. The analogy casts the independent bookstore as a repository of French cultural memory and practices, connecting the reader to a literary sphere, just as the vintner connects the wine-drinker to the soil. For its part, Amazon argues that such cultural mediation is unnecessary, a relic of the past. We no longer need middlemen; the important relationship is the one between the author and the reader. In this view, not only do independent bookstores offer no added value; they actually get in the way, preventing the reader from being connected to an unlimited pool of books. They are symptoms of market inefficiency.



Phyllis Cohen at Berkeley Books of Paris

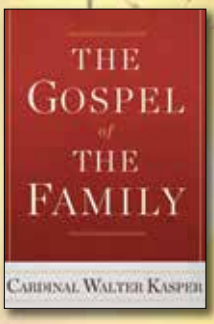
PHOTO: ROBERT MACK

From its inception Amazon has sought to disrupt the traditional bookselling market. The tactic is simple: undercut the competition, selling books at a loss if necessary, while building up a huge customer base and using it to mine salable consumer data, cross-market other products, and leverage industry prices. The plan has succeeded brilliantly; current estimates are that Amazon sells about half of all books sold in the United States. In turn, it has used its dominant market position to pressure publishers. *Forbes* reports that Random House, the largest book publisher in America, gives Amazon a 53 percent discount on its books. Amazon's attempts to bully publishers have triggered a bitter dispute with the publisher Hachette over such issues as who gets to control the price of e-books. In response to what it views as Hachette's recalcitrance, Amazon has delayed the shipping of a number of the publisher's titles. For instance, books by Hachette author Malcolm Gladwell, previously available in two days, now ship in one to three weeks.

The central assumption under which Amazon operates is that books are no different from any other commodity. "Books don't just compete against books," Amazon vice-president Russell Grandinetti recently told the *New York Times*. "Books compete against Candy Crush, Twitter, Facebook, streaming movies, newspapers you can read for free. It's a new world." Indeed, one might ask, why should I pay $26.10 for Malcolm Gladwell's newest hardcover, when the same amount of money gets me unlimited movies and TV shows for three months through Netflix—or when I can download the complete works of Jane Austen for free at Gutenberg.org?

The French are not seduced by this logic. Official French state policy recognizes that books are different and require protection. In 1981, the "Lang Law," named after then-minister of culture Jack Lang, fixed prices on French-

PAULIST PRESS FALL TITLES



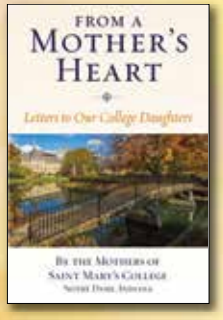
Important reading for the Extraordinary Synod on the Family, Oct. 5-19, 2014

The Gospel of the Family

Cardinal Walter Kasper

Cardinal Kasper advocates a stronger appreciation of marriage and the family—even on sensitive issues such as divorce and remarriage.

978-0-8091-4908-7 $9.95 Paperback



From a Mother's Heart

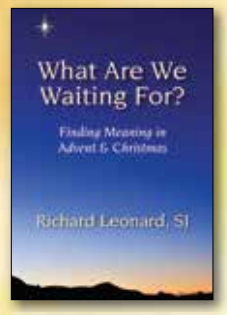
Letters to Our College Daughters

By the Mothers of Saint Mary's College, Notre Dame, Indiana

Introduced by Elizabeth Groppe

Letters written by mothers of incoming freshmen sharing with their daughters words of wisdom and reflections on life and faith. Here is a precious and moving gift for daughters whose universal appeal and insight is timeless.

978-0-8091-0612-7 $19.95 Hardcover



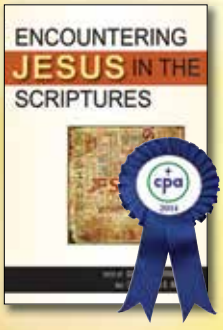
What Are We Waiting For?

Finding Meaning in Advent & Christmas

Richard Leonard

A bestselling author presents challenging and thoughtful seasonal reflections.

978-0-8091-4906-3 $9.95



Encountering Jesus in the Scriptures

edited by Daniel J. Harrington, SJ, and Christopher R. Matthews

Essays that explain not only who Jesus was in the first century but also what he might mean in the twenty-first century.

2014 CPA Award Winner-Scripture, Popular Studies.

978-0-8091-4812-7 $14.95 Paperback

The Psalms

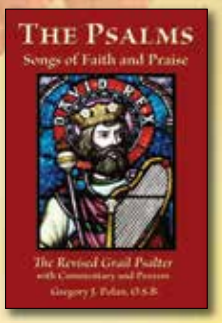
Songs of Faith and Praise; The Revised Grail Psalter with Commentary and Prayers

Gregory J. Polan, OSB

"Combines biblical scholarship, monastic tradition, and personal piety to produce a readable, insightful, and moving introduction to the Book of Psalms as prayer. This book will deepen any reader's love of the psalms."

—Leslie J. Hoppe, OFM, professor of Old Testament studies, Catholic Theological Union

978-0-8091-4882-0 $24.95 Paperback



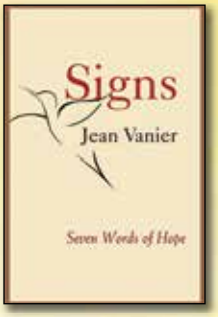
Signs

Seven Words of Hope

Jean Vanier

One of the world's great humanitarians helps readers come to an understanding of themselves and the world they live in through meditations on seven powerful words.

978-0-8091-4872-1 $14.95 Paperback



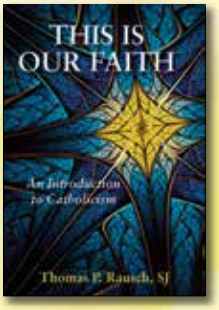
This Is Our Faith

An Introduction to Catholicism

Thomas P. Rausch, SJ

A concise introductory outline of the Catholic faith based on the Apostles' Creed and including more recent developments since the Second Vatican Council and the challenges of a global church.

978-0-8091-4893-6 $16.95 Paperback



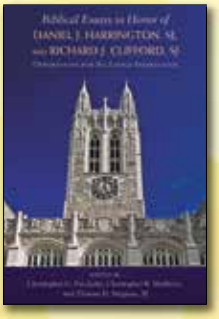
Biblical Essays in Honor of Daniel J. Harrington, SJ, and Richard J. Clifford, SJ

Opportunity for No Little Instruction

Edited by Christopher G. Frechette, Christopher R. Matthews, and Thomas D. Stegman, SJ

A collection of essays on the use and reuse of biblical texts and traditions as found in Scripture, intertestamental writings, and early Christian writings.

978-0-8091-4898-1 $29.95 Paperback



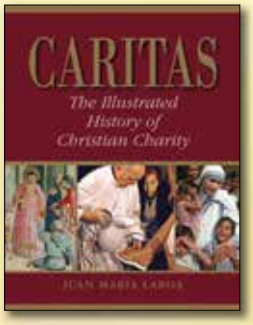
Caritas

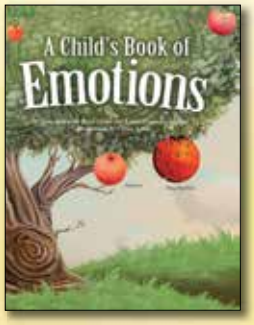
The Illustrated History of Christian Charity

Juan María Laboa

Charity is not unique to Christianity, but the history of the followers of Jesus can be told in their practice of love for their neighbors. The author presents a panorama of this history, told through representative works of art through the centuries. Beautifully illustrated.

978-0-8091-0610-3 $79.95 Hardcover





A Child's Book of Emotions

Esteve Pujol i Pons and Rafel Bisquerra Alzina

A collection of classic tales from around the world, each one exploring a different emotion. Entertaining, beautifully illustrated, and filled with life lessons, this book will help children benefit from wisdom that has come down through the ages.

978-0-8091-6772-2 $19.95 Hardcover

Available from bookstores or from Paulist Press

1-800-218-1903 • Fax: 1-800-836-3161 • www.paulistpress.com

language books, insulating independent sellers from market pressures by forbidding retailers from discounting more than 5 percent from the publisher's list price. More recently, the government extended such price-fixing to e-books as well. The state also offers subsidies and tax breaks to independent bookstores. For the most part, these protectionist policies have worked. Currently only about 10 percent of new books sold in France are sold by Amazon.

At its heart, the battle between the indie bookstore and Amazon is a contest over consumer culture—what it is, and who will define it. Amazon offers the consumer unlimited options, and makes them available almost instantly. You don't even have to leave your house. The Amazon vision of utopia places convenience and choice—and cost—front and center. The independent bookstore, on the other hand, invokes a different utopia: one where the cultivation of a taste for books is done communally, through the slow process of browsing the store's collection, with an informed bookseller as guide.

The two models entail different habits and behaviors. Phyllis Cohen notes that more people these days enter her store on a specific errand. It almost seems they have forgotten the semi-aimless curiosity that is the essence of browsing. Instead, they come for a particular book, and they want it now. In this sense, Amazon seems to be winning the battle over the formation of global consumer habits, replacing browsing with searching. This shift entails a loss both for the individual and for the general culture. As the critic Leon Wieseltier wrote two years ago in a perceptive essay in the *New Republic*, "browsing is a method of humanistic education.... When you search, you find what you were looking for; when you browse, you find what you were not looking for."

But searching is what Amazon is all about; and many people find it difficult to resist the company's promise of access to a near-infinite trove of books—or the devices that give you access. I, for one, was an early adopter of the Kindle. Having had the nightmarish experience of packing suitcases filled with books for a research trip to Europe, I rejoiced at the prospect of being able to store my entire library on a small device. But after an initial period, the excitement faded. The e-books I downloaded often had poorly formatted text, sometimes with no paragraph indentations. The typeface was drearily uniform. The option to keep switching from one book to another proved distracting, making it hard to concentrate on long novels. Over time I found myself reading less and less on my Kindle. *War and Peace* remains loaded on it, still untouched.

Of course, e-book design will continue to improve, and it's true that e-books have the potential to offer readers aesthetic experiences that physical books cannot. Yet a basic fallacy underlies the e-book: the assumption that books consist purely of "content," words that can be swapped in and out of any device, whether tablet, phone, or laptop. As book lovers know, a book consists of more than just text. Every part of a book—its binding, its typography, its cover—reflects choices made by editors, designers, and typesetters. The reader's relationship to the text is mediated by these choices and the physical realities they create; in a fundamental way they affect his or her aesthetic experience of the book. The e-book undoes this mediation—and in the process threatens an entire ecosystem of bookbinders and typographers.

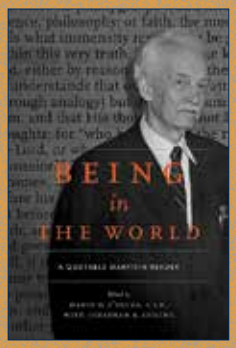
At stake is not just the survival of jobs, but also the thread that connects us with centuries of cultural and historical practice. In the Amazon digital utopia, computer algorithms automatically make many of the aesthetic choices in book production. The physical book, in contrast, links us to a collective human past. And here, perhaps, is a crucial difference. In five hundred years, will there be traces of the individual hands that entered the code or helped digitize the text? One of the more haunting sites on the internet is Krissy Wilson's "The Art of Google Books," where we can see images of the hands of employees who flip book pages as the scanner takes the picture. Google never intended for these images to be shown, but Wilson's website has captured them for posterity. The images serve to remind us that humans toiled to convert our physical artifacts into digital ones. Some of the hands have wedding bands. Others have nail polish. One pair is captured while digitizing a 1730 edition of Milton's *Paradise Lost*.

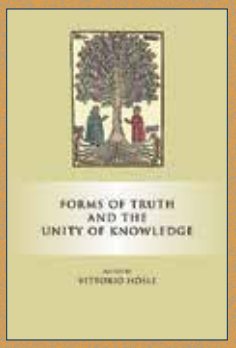
Despite much gloom and doom, all is not lost for the paradise that is the independent bookstore. As Andrew Leonard reported recently at *Salon*, there are signs of a revival. Since the low point in 2009, indie bookstores have rebounded in the United States, their ranks growing by 19.3 percent. The reasons are several. The fall of Borders created a vacuum that indie bookstores helped fill. The "shop local" movement mobilized consumer sentiment on behalf of a neighborhood, brick-and-mortar experience. And then there is that *terroir* factor. At Berkeley Books of Paris, Phyllis Cohen encounters American tourists who view going to the bookstore as appealingly nostalgic—a "bespoke, exotic experience," she says. They lament that their corner bookstore back home has closed down, and hope that someone will open a new one.

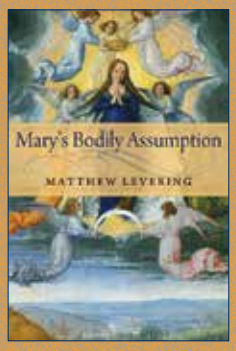
The physical book, Phyllis Cohen insists, has a "soul," and as a bookstore owner she feels not only a responsibility to her customers, but to the book itself. "It actually goes in both directions," she says, describing her daily mission to help the books in her shop "find good homes." The bookstore as she conceives of it is far more than a mere marketplace where goods are exchanged for money. "It's why I don't sell my books online," she explains. "If I don't see the people, I can't match them up with their books. I can't just sell them like they're shoes."

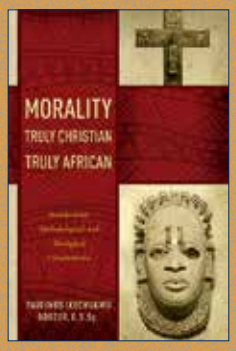
Selling books, Cohen continues, is "a personal thing," which is why she believes that her store and others like it will survive and flourish. "Amazon can't compete with me," she says. "They sell books, it's true, but I really don't think we're in the same business." ■

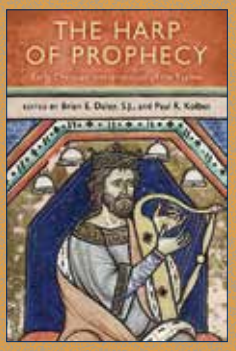
Albert Wu *teaches history at the American University of Paris.*

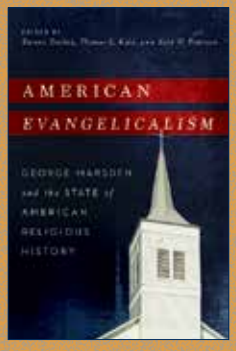


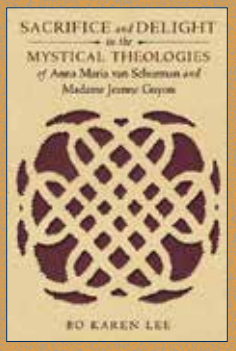


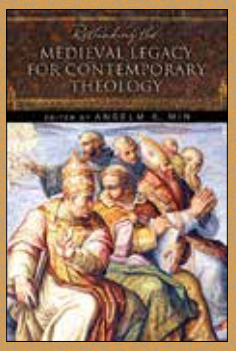












Notre Dame Press — *Fall Books*

Being in the World
A Quotable Maritain Reader
Edited by Mario O. D'Souza, C.S.B., with Jonathan R. Seiling
328 pp • $35.00 pa • *e-Book available*

Forms of Truth and the Unity of Knowledge
Edited by Vittorio Hösle
368 pp • $39.00 pa • *e-Book available* • Illustrated

Mary's Bodily Assumption
Matthew Levering
280 pp • $28.00 pa • *e-Book available*

The Moscow Council (1917–1918)
The Creation of the Conciliar Institutions of the Russian Orthodox Church
Hyacinthe Destivelle, O.P.
Edited by Michael Plekon and Vitaly Permiakov
Translated by Jerry Ryan
488 pp • $36.00 pa • *e-Book available*

Morality Truly Christian, Truly African
Foundational, Methodological, and Theological Considerations
Paulinus Ikechukwu Odozor, C.S.Sp.
384 pp • $40.00 pa • *e-Book available*

The Harp of Prophecy
Early Christian Interpretation of the Psalms
Edited by Brian E. Daley, S.J., and Paul R. Kolbet
344 pp • $39.00 pa • *e-Book available*

American Evangelicalism
George Marsden and the State of American Religious History
Edited by Darren Dochuk, Thomas S. Kidd, and Kurt W. Peterson
536 pp • $66.00 pa • *e-Book available*

Sacrifice and Delight in the Mystical
Theologies of Anna Maria van Schurman and Madame Jeanne Guyon
Bo Karen Lee
264 pp • $29.00 pa • *e-Book available*
Studies in Spirituality and Theology

Dark Light of Love
John S. Dunne
112 pp • $20.00 pa • *e-Book available*

Rethinking the Medieval Legacy for Contemporary Theology
Edited by Anselm K. Min
224 pp • $35.00 pa • *e-Book available*

UNIVERSITY OF NOTRE DAME PRESS ♦ Tel: 800/621-2736
e-Books available online at undpress.nd.edu

Blessings in Disguise

The Unfashionable Genius of Marilynne Robinson

Anthony Domestico

In her essay "When I Was a Child I Read Books," the novelist Marilynne Robinson describes how, growing up in northern Idaho in the 1950s, she "preferred books that were old and thick and hard." Reading was, for Robinson, a portal to a time and place before and beyond her own. Books introduced her to ancient splendors: "I knew a good deal about Constantinople and the Cromwell revolution and chivalry." The old-fashioned nature of her reading, its discontinuity with her own experience, was part of the enchantment. As she writes, "Relevance was precisely not an issue for me. I looked to Galilee for meaning and to Spokane for orthodonture."

This sense of willed anachronism should be familiar to readers of Robinson's work. She has pointed to nineteenth-century American writers like Dickinson and Melville as her most cherished influences ("her old aunts and uncles," she has called them), and Robinson's writing can seem as if it emerged, Rip Van Winkle–like, from an earlier time.

Robinson told me in an e-mail exchange that "the modern period has succeeded much too well in putting aside metaphysics." Her own work tries to correct this. Her novels—*Housekeeping, Gilead, Home*, and now *Lila*—are slow, meditative, and religious, more Ralph Waldo Emerson than Zadie Smith. The last three all take place in Eisenhower-era America, long before the Great Recession or subprime mortgages. In her writing as in her reading, relevance—that is, making her novels of their specific moment—is not a priority for Robinson.

To her fans—and there are many, from the *New Yorker*'s book critic James Wood to Barack Obama—Robinson shows that old-fashioned virtues like seriousness and simplicity are still, in fact, virtues. To her detractors—and there are some—Robinson's work is stylistically accomplished but frustratingly backward-looking, ignoring much of what has happened, both fictionally and socially, over the past three decades. In a recent essay, the writer Jess Row described Robinson's characters as "quirky, salt-of-the-earth, hard-working folks, nearly all of whom happen to be white." They are, in short, characters from an earlier America, if not an imaginary one. On this view, Robinson is an accomplished novelist of nostalgia.

Such criticism makes sense only if you think that fiction lives or dies by its explicit engagement with contemporary life. Relevance isn't the only aesthetic criterion, and social realism isn't the only defensible literary style. As Henry James writes, "The house of fiction has…not one window, but a million." Not every writer has to be Jonathan Franzen.

Robinson doesn't write social realism, but that doesn't mean she ignores social existence. Her new novel, *Lila*, is a sustained examination of what it means to live within and without community. Neglected as a child and raised by a wanderer, the main character, Lila, lives an itinerant life on the margins of mid-century America. Such freedom can be exhilarating. It can also be painful. Lila knows homelessness and despair, and this knowledge shapes how she reacts to future gentleness. When she marries a kind preacher and moves into the small community of Gilead, Iowa, she can't help but pull back: "That was loneliness. When you're scalded, touch hurts, it makes no difference if it's kindly meant." Few novelists write better about the attractions of solitude, but Robinson acknowledges that it comes at a cost.

What most distinguishes Robinson from her peers, however, isn't her lack of interest in writing an "issues" novel. It's her deeply felt, deeply reasoned, deeply committed Calvinism. In essays, lectures, interviews, and novels, Robinson has returned again and again to the beauty of Calvin's thought. For her, Calvin's much-maligned doctrine of total depravity actually shows how loving God is: Despite our weakness and sinfulness, God loves and sustains us at every moment. Total depravity, Robinson argues in an introduction to Calvin's writings, is really about God's unfathomable condescension: "It is as if we were to find a tender solicitude toward us in the fact that the great energy that rips galaxies apart also animates our slightest thoughts. It is as if we were to propose that that great energy only exists to make possible our miraculously delicate participation in it."

This "tender solicitude," Robinson writes, is "continuous, unmediated," and directed at "individual consciousness." Robinson is firmly Protestant in taste: she told me she prefers Milton to Dante, Augustine to Aquinas. I suspect that this is because of Protestantism's focus on the

Anthony Domestico *is an assistant professor of literature at Purchase College, SUNY.*

Marilynne Robinson

individual believer and his or her direct access to divine grace. God, Robinson writes, is "at the very center of individual experience and presence." Robinson finds herself most moved by those thinkers who take individual experience most seriously.

Faith, Robinson argues, is a "great, continuous instruction in perception itself," and to perceive correctly is to see "that the beauty that floods our senses has the meaning of vision and revelation." Robinson is a realist, but she's a visionary realist: a writer who senses that the real—the world we experience in our bodies and in our consciousness—is awash with divine meaning and intention.

Robinson was born in 1943 in Sandpoint, Idaho, a world of mountains and lakes that continually reminded her of her own smallness: in such a landscape, she writes in "Psalm Eight," she seemed "a mote of exception, improbable as a flaw in the sun." In the early 1960s, she attended Pembroke College, then the women's college at Brown, where she worked with John Hawkes—a writer whose postmodern fiction could hardly be more different from the novels Robinson would go on to write. She then studied for a PhD in English at the University of Washington. Unsurprisingly, she chose to write on an unfashionable text: Shakespeare's *Henry VI, Part II*.

While researching and writing, Robinson started jotting down metaphors on scraps of paper. "After I had finished my dissertation," she told the *Paris Review*, "I read through the stack of metaphors and they cohered in a way that I hadn't expected. I could see that I had created something that implied much more." That much more was *Housekeeping*. Robinson began working in earnest on the novel and, in 1981, it was published by Farrar, Straus and Giroux. It is one of the most astonishing debuts in recent literary history.

Housekeeping tells the story of Ruth, a fierce, lonesome girl raised by a series of female relatives in the town of Fingerbone, Idaho. From its first words—"My name is Ruth"—Robinson declared her epic ambitions: to write a female *Moby-Dick* of the American West, exploring the bonds of community and the lure of isolation, the visionary nature of perception and memory.

At first glance, *Housekeeping* doesn't look much like a traditional religious novel. The work seems unconcerned with theology, and Ruthie doesn't go to church. So it isn't surprising that critics paid more attention to the work's wild metaphoricity than to its metaphysical roots. *Housekeeping* is Christian like much of nineteenth-century American writing was Christian: in its Calvinist oscillation between despair and ecstasy, in its regular recourse to images of death and resurrection, in its sense that what we see is, in Ruth's words, "a sheet dropped over the world's true workings."

Robinson's second novel, *Gilead*, did not come out until 2004, twenty-three years after *Housekeeping*. Despite the gap, Robinson was hardly idle during this time. In 1991 she joined the faculty of the Iowa Writers' Workshop, where she still teaches today. It's a rich irony that Robinson, who has said she doesn't read much contemporary fiction besides the work of her students, has helped shape so many promising young writers, including Paul Harding (author of *Tinkers*), Chris Adrian (*The Children's Hospital*), and Leslie Jamison (*The Empathy Exams*). Robinson told me that teaching has given her a renewed appreciation for writing's many difficulties: "I have learned as much respect for the writers who, to all appearances, fail to master the art as

for the ones who excel in it. It is simply so difficult to do, and they are all so exposed in making the attempt." In between her first two novels, Robinson also wrote two exemplary works of nonfiction: a collection of essays, *The Death of Adam*, and a polemic against Britain's disposal of nuclear waste, *Mother Country*. But she didn't publish any fiction, and so *Gilead* was received with intense expectation.

Gilead puts the lie to those critics who say that contemporary fiction doesn't engage seriously with religion. It shows how Christianity is both a lived practice and a system of belief, a deposit of artistic riches and an endless source of intellectual exploration. The novel's language is soaked in voices from Christianity's past: Augustine and Donne, Herbert and Hopkins, Bonhoeffer and Barth. Here is its opening sentence:

> I told you last night that I might be gone sometime, and you said, Where, and I said, To be with the Good Lord, and you said, Why, and I said, Because I'm old, and you said, I don't think you're old.

We soon learn that the time is 1956, that the speaker is an elderly Congregationalist minister named John Ames, and that Ames is speaking to his seven-year-old son. More precisely, he's writing to his son: Ames, seventy-six years old, knows that he will not see his son grow up and so decides to put his thoughts down on paper. The novel is, in the old sense of the word, a reckoning: an account of Ames's life as a preacher in Gilead, Iowa, of his Christian faith, of his early widowhood and late rediscovery of love, and of the ways history has touched him and his family. (Ames's grandfather was a radical abolitionist in the Civil War, his father a pacifist during World War I.)

Gilead is a startlingly beautiful novel. On almost every page, you find yourself marveling at how inevitable and right each sentence sounds, at Robinson's exquisite control of cadence and imagery. Beyond its stylistic brilliance, *Gilead* makes a fundamentally good man seem interesting, and part of what makes Ames so interesting is his willingness to talk intelligently about matters of faith—in particular, his willingness to talk about the sacraments.

When I asked Robinson about the sacraments, she said that they were "a little hard to write about." Despite this difficulty, Ames does it well. Here he remembers an incident from his childhood, when he and some friends baptized a litter of kittens:

> I still remember how those warm little brows felt under the palm of my hand. Everyone has petted a cat, but to touch one like that, with the pure intention of blessing it, is a very different thing. It stays in the mind. For years we would wonder what, from a cosmic viewpoint, we had done to them. It still seems to me to be a real question. There is a reality in blessing, which I take baptism to be, primarily. It doesn't enhance sacredness, but it acknowledges it, and there is a power in that. I have felt it pass through me, so to speak. The sensation is of really knowing a creature, I mean really feeling its mysterious life and your own mysterious life at the same time.

In this passage, we have both a description of sacramentality and an enactment of it. If, for Ames, to bless is to acknowledge creation's mysterious life, then Robinson here blesses her readers: we are left with a sense of wonder before the world's splendor. Robinson wrote to me that the sacraments "are an utterance above language, the kindest deed ever done, the purest gesture of love ever made." Robinson, through Ames, gets close to capturing in language the mystery and majesty of baptism.

Gilead embodies Robinson's aesthetic of wonder—her sense that humility before the vastness of the world and our experience of it is the proper attitude for the artist to take. Robinson's moral and imaginative vision could serve as a gloss on the opening of Psalm 19: "The heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament sheweth his handywork."

For Robinson, if creation is wondrous, it is no less wondrous that we are able to appreciate it. I asked her about the relationship between beauty and pain in the Christian vision, and she responded:

> The life and death of Christ are addressed precisely to the fact that beloved humankind are, in greater and lesser degrees, sad and erring creatures, often enough bitter and mean-spirited creatures. Yet here is brilliant Creation shining all around us, and here are our own brilliant gifts of thought and perception to let us enjoy it and celebrate it.

Thought and perception are gifts because they allow us to appreciate the giftedness of all creation.

For Ames, there is a connection between the work of the mind and the work of the soul. "For me writing has always felt like praying." Memory becomes a religious faculty, too: "Sometimes the visionary aspect of any particular day comes to you in the memory of it, or it opens to you over time." Nowadays we are often reminded that memory is a flawed instrument, prone to errors of omission and distortion. *Gilead* makes a subtler argument: yes, memory is imperfect, but it's nevertheless the best instrument we have for exploring the richness of our experience. The mind is continually re-examining the past, looking for new aspects of old events, finding significance in neglected details. Robinson told me that "among the twentieth-century poets Wallace Stevens is the one I return to" most often. *Gilead* shows that, as Stevens puts it, "It can never be satisfied, the mind, never," and this endless curiosity is, to use one of Ames's favorite words, remarkable.

If writing/remembering is a kind of intellectual prayer, then gracefully moving through the world is a kind of bodily prayer. We see this everywhere in *Gilead*, from Robinson's loving descriptions of a young boy's game of catch to Ames's delight in preparing grilled-cheese sandwiches. Because of his own weakening body, Ames is better able to appreciate the pleasures of effortless physical exertion, and better able to recognize in physical grace a suggestion of divine grace.

This analogy between physical and divine grace is even more important in *Home*, Robinson's 2008 follow-up to *Gilead*. *Home* centers on the same town at the same time, but it takes as its main character Glory Boughton, the daughter of Ames's best friend and fellow preacher, the Rev. Robert Boughton. Glory makes a brief, inconspicuous appearance in *Gilead*; in *Home* Robinson shifts her to the center, and this decision makes an aesthetic and theological point. Every character, Robinson suggests, is both a potential fictional protagonist and a being that has been created in the image of God. (This argument receives further support in *Lila*, which once again approaches the same story from a different angle—this time from the perspective of Ames's young wife.)

Home is a sadder, more restrained book than *Gilead*. It's less brilliant, but it's after something other than brilliance. Glory hasn't led a particularly happy life. After a failed relationship, she's thirty-eight and living again in her childhood home. Though intelligent, she is not as brilliant or well read as Ames. Besides, she has other concerns: throughout the novel, she's dealing both with her father's failing health and with the many frustrations associated with her mischievous, occasionally mean brother Jack, who has just come back to Gilead after years spent elsewhere. The central question of *Gilead* is: How can we make our love felt when we are no longer around to express it? The central question of *Home* is: How can we make our love felt when we *are* there to express it, but those we love do their best to escape or frustrate us?

For Glory, the way to grace is through hospitality, through caring even for those who resist her care. Especially for those. Glory tends to her father's dying body and to her brother's broken spirit. The most seemingly banal activities—cooking dinner, bathing her father—become ways of acknowledging the sacredness of this world and of her difficult family.

In *Gilead*, the physical world is shown to be a sign of God's grace in scenes that could come from a Terrence Malick movie: light shines through a window onto an old church floor; water falls from a tree after a brief rain shower. But in *Home*, Robinson sees the domestic sphere, the world of cooking and cleaning and eating and mending, as a way into the imaginative and religious sublime. In one remarkable scene, Glory cuts her father's hair:

> So she clipped and trimmed, making more work of it than it was in order to satisfy him that some change had been accomplished, combing it down a little with water so he would feel sleek and trim. The nape of his neck, the backs of his ears. The visible strain of holding the great human head upright for decades and decades…. At the end of so much effort, the neck seemed frail, but the head was still lifted up, and the ears stood there, still shaped for attention, soft as they were. She'd have left all the lovely hair, which looked like gentle bewilderment, just as the lifted head and the ears looked like waiting grown old, like trust grown old.

In *Gilead*, Ames writes that grace is "a sort of ecstatic fire that takes things down to essentials." *Home* shows that grace works not just in the ecstatic but in the ordinary—in the daily tasks of living for and loving one another. Or, as Robinson wrote to me, "If hospitality is an essential Christian value, then the smaller hospitalities we give to our families are only more essential. I do think that the means we are given to please and nourish and comfort bear a more than accidental resemblance to the means of grace."

Robinson's novels seldom end where we think they will, or even where we hope they might. In *Housekeeping*, Ruth burns down her house and her old life with it, leaving whatever minimal comforts of domestic life she may have experienced and joining her aunt Sylvie in a tramp's life. On the final, stunning page of *Gilead*, Ames writes, "I'll pray, and then I'll sleep," followed by silence. We don't know if he has died or just become too weak to write, and we don't know what will happen to his young wife and son. In *Home*, Jack leaves Gilead, just missing his father's death and a longed-for reunion with his beloved, and Glory is left alone.

Robinson told me that "it seems excessively fictional to really 'end' a story," adding that she feels that her "novels end themselves—that after a certain point they begin to close themselves against me, so that any invention that might prolong them would be an imposition." And yet the story Robinson first told in *Gilead* has reopened itself twice, first in *Home* and now in *Lila*. The new novel is, once again, piercing and beautiful, but in a very different way. Lila's life before Ames was rough from the very beginning, as we learn in the book's first sentences: "The child was just there on the stoop in the dark, hugging herself against the cold, all cried out and nearly sleeping. She couldn't holler anymore and they didn't hear her anyway, or they might and that would make things worse." Soon Lila will be rescued—kidnapped, technically—by a loving drifter named Doll.

Over the years, Doll and Lila move throughout the country, hunting after day labor and moving on when money and work dry up. They find solace in physical work and in the makeshift community that arises among the downtrodden: "She liked to hear people tell stories. The saddest ones were best." It's almost as if Robinson has shown us what the future of Ruth and Sylvie from *Housekeeping* might actually look like.

Lila's settings are harsh (a St. Louis brothel, an abandoned house on the outside of town), as are the narrated events (abandonment, murder). The novel is written in the third person, but it's an extremely close third person, with Lila's mode of speaking and thinking continually inflecting the narrative voice. Unlike Glory and certainly unlike Ames, Lila is uneducated, and she alternatively laments and celebrates the fact that she doesn't have the words to describe the world as it appears to her. Here is an example of the kind of simple language that *Lila* presents:

It was still early enough that Lila had to pound on the shop door. She was so desperate to get out of the dress she was wearing, it didn't matter what she found there if she just had the money to pay for it. And then the woman said to her, when she had taken a look at her, tried to get a look at her face, So what happened? You had a baby? Lila said, No, I didn't, and the woman studied her sidelong, the blood on her skirt where it showed below the hem of her coat, on her shoes, thinking she knew better, and said, Never mind. None of my business.

Gone are Ruthie's ecstatic visions, Ames's gentle melodies, Glory's biblical cadences. Instead, we have Lila's wounded and enduring voice.

If *Gilead* was about sacrament and *Home* about hospitality, then *Lila* is about the meaning of affliction. It harrows rather than enraptures, and because of this *Lila* makes for less pleasurable reading than either *Gilead* or *Home*. Reading Lila's account of her courtship with Ames—how she deliberately met his kindness with Jacklike meanness, how she considered running away even when pregnant—makes you realize how much Ames edited out of his own account. This forced recalibration can be disturbing, like the moment when you realize that your parents are imperfect, that they have baggage and weaknesses all their own.

Yet even amid the pain, *Lila* provides scenes in which grace shines through. The final pages, where Lila gives birth during an Iowa snowstorm, are as strange and powerful as anything Robinson has ever written. That scene and the novel as a whole recall a passage from *Gilead*:

> Augustine says the Lord loves each of us as an only child, and that has to be true: "He will wipe the tears from all faces." It takes nothing from the loveliness of the verse to say that is exactly what will be required.

The Lord's comfort, Ames suggests, doesn't erase the sorrow we've felt. Rather, it acknowledges it and makes it bearable. At some mysterious level, it even makes it beautiful. *Lila* dramatizes this truth.

For some time now, Robinson has been our most singular writer, defying contemporary trends and carving out her own distinctive place within American literature. Reading *Lila* alongside *Housekeeping* shows just how varied Robinson's achievement has been: she's written about the plainness of Iowa and the wildness of Idaho, created one voice that echoes Herbert in its plain grandeur and another that rivals Dickinson in its imaginative extravagance. But there is a unity to all of Robinson's work, and this is part of what makes her so great. Her writing expresses a consistent and compelling vision of the world—a vision that sees the real as revelatory, the everyday as wondrous, Spokane as leading to Galilee. ■

The High Road

Scotland Debates the Commonweal

William Storrar

On the day Scotland was voting in a constitutional referendum on independence, I drove through the western part of the country to visit my sister in the hospital. Multiple sclerosis has deprived her of all mobility apart from a slight movement in her right hand. Yet she had insisted on putting the cross on the postal ballot paper herself. I wept with pride. I then drove on to Glasgow to see a friend, now in her eighties and still active in hosting seekers of asylum in her home and standing by them in court. She too had voted, walking down a steep hill to the polling station but needing a friendly agent to drive her home. On my way back to Edinburgh, a car drew alongside me, UK flags flying from its windows in support of a "No" vote. The smartly dressed young man in the rear passenger seat made an obscene gesture on seeing my "Yes" bumper sticker, which was my only way of declaring my support for independence that day, as a non-resident Scot without a vote. I cannot say it had the desired effect.

Scotland voted "No" to independence by 55 to 45 percent. But my referendum-day journey provides a clue to what was happening in Scotland in the summer of 2014. My sister in the hospital was not alone in her determination to vote: turnout was 85 percent. My friend of the friendless was not alone in her reasons for voting "Yes" to independence; for many "Yes" voters, the question was not one of nationalism or separation from the rest of the United Kingdom. It was about the kind of society Scotland wants to be in the twenty-first century, not least for the ill, the immigrant, and the poor. Independence was seen as a means to a greater end, a fairer society. And the obscene gesture from the young man on the highway? It was a rare episode of bad behavior in a campaign widely acknowledged as civil, peaceful, and celebratory, and remarkable for involving many thousands of people who had never before participated in public life or even registered to vote.

I witnessed this renaissance of democracy firsthand. In late May of this year I organized a civic-arts tour with some of the country's leading artists, writers, and singers. Our "Bus Party" traveled around the smaller towns in poorer, more remote parts of Scotland in the run-up to the referendum, asking the question, "What kind of Scotland do you want?" Most of those on the bus supported independence, while others opposed it, but all strictly observed the Bus Party's official position of neutrality, for the larger purpose of fostering dialogue with local communities through readings, music, and songs. Instead of expressing our own views on Scotland, we listened intently to the hopes and concerns of local people. Our hosts welcomed us into their community centers, arts centers, bookstores, parish churches, public libraries, even a public high school and an interfaith institute run by the Xaverian Missionaries, confident that we were there to perform and listen, not to campaign.

In that convivial atmosphere of cultural celebration and civil conversation, we invited people to record their thoughts on the future of Scotland on a long scroll of paper we carried from place to place. Our "Scroll of Thoughts" eventually stretched more than two hundred feet and recorded some four hundred contributions, each no more than a phrase but all pregnant with meaning. The scroll will be donated to the Scottish Political Archive as a historic document, capturing a country thinking aloud about a momentous decision at one moment in time.

What is striking about those comments is their consistency. They are all about public flourishing, not personal gain or loss. While the official "Yes" and "No" campaigns made much of whether people would be financially better or worse off with independence, the citizens we met across Scotland were concerned about something else: the common good—or, as we call it in the Scots language, the commonweal. Here is how the people we listened to described the sort of commonweal they want, compressed from their many thoughts into this one "Thought for Scotland":

> We want a confident, compassionate, caring, tolerant, diverse, rooted, outward, peaceful, energized, educated, enlightened, equal, sustainable Scotland without poverty, where hopes and dreams are realized, children fed and cherished, government is decent and dignified, all voices heard, all faiths welcomed, all parts belong, decision-making is local, people's lives mirror the beauty of our landscape and no one is left behind.

Of course such statements can be dismissed as the Scottish equivalent of mom and apple pie—who wouldn't want

William Storrar *is director of the Center of Theological Inquiry in Princeton, New Jersey, and co-editor of* Public Theology for the Twenty-First Century *(T & T Clark Continuum).*

The Union Jack and St. Andrew's Cross

CNS PHOTO / FACUNDO ARRIZABALAGA, EPA

such a society? But that is to miss the point. These are the considered thoughts of a small nation in the face of the new politics of austerity in the larger United Kingdom. Rather than succumb to the UK government's policies of welfare cuts for the poor and tax cuts for the rich, many Scots saw their independence vote as an opportunity to create a more equal economy and society through greater political autonomy.

Though Scotland did not vote for independence, the question has not been settled. Scotland and England entered into a parliamentary union in 1707. Scotland retained a large measure of civic autonomy through its own legal system and national church while taking full advantage of the British Empire. It was not until the British state began to play a more intrusive role in Scottish society in the modern era that support for self-government within the United Kingdom grew. The end of empire and collapse of Scottish heavy industry accelerated this trend, culminating in a Scottish Parliament for domestic affairs in 1999. At that time the case for independence won only minority support. What then led to the 2014 referendum vote?

In 2007, the Scottish National Party (SNP), a self-styled "social democratic party committed to independence," became the largest group in the Scottish Parliament. It proved so competent in government that it was re-elected with an absolute majority in 2011 on a manifesto that promised a referendum. To its great credit, the British government agreed to hold one. To their great disappointment, most Scots did not get their preferred option of more devolved powers for the Scottish Parliament on the ballot—the UK political parties could not agree on which powers to devolve. But, confronted by late polling showing a lead for "Yes," UK party leaders hastily published a joint vow to implement a fast-track timetable for increased powers for the Scottish Parliament. Did the vow stop the summer surge for "Yes"? Perhaps, but initial analysis of these trends suggests "Yes" might have come much closer to winning had the vote been held just days later.

All along, the Unionist parties assumed they would win. Given the Tories' deep unpopularity in Scotland, it fell to the Labour Party to defend the Union. It had a pragmatic reason for doing so: its Scottish members of Parliament swell the party's ranks at Westminster. But Labour also argued on principle: The UK gave Scotland the best of both worlds, allowing it to share in the resources and enjoy the security of a larger state while running its own affairs. The most eloquent Labour voice was former prime minister Gordon Brown. Significantly, he made much of his Presbyterian roots and values as the moral source of his Scottish identity. Brown even quoted me in support of those principles, but not for long: John Calvin soon gave way to Calvin Klein as global celebrities were enlisted to plead with Scotland to stay in the UK.

However, the "No" campaign, rather than make a positive case for staying in the UK, stoked fear by emphasizing the economic risks of separation. The "No" party leaders adamantly rejected the Scottish National Party's proposal of a currency union, in which the pound and a central bank would be shared with the rest of the UK, claiming it was unworkable. In turn, the Scottish government leader Alex Salmond stuck by his view that the "No" campaign was bluffing. A currency union would be conceded in negotiations after a "Yes" vote. One anonymous UK government

RILKEAN DREAM

I dreamed of myself as a light following
A greater series of lights, in a particular
Pattern of circles—

A veritable sense of a spiritual
Architecture, as in the shell of a conch,
Or what is sonic in the soaring arcs

Of language—
What Rilke's monk exhibits
In his painting—

Brushing the luminous colors
Of the ineffable in words.
Transcendence isn't tangible, or tacit,

But a glimmering,
As a ray of light, or the single wave
In one ripple of water after another.

—Wally Swist

Wally Swist's books include Huang Po and the Dimensions of Love *(Southern Illinois University Press, 2012) and* The Daodejing of Laozi, *with David Breeden and Steven Schroeder (Lamar University Press, 2015).*

minister admitted as much to the press. Yet almost all the Scottish media and senior business leaders used dire threats of currency chaos, rising costs, lost pensions, and relocated companies to oppose independence. A former Scottish head of NATO even warned a Washington think tank that the breakup of Britain would tip the world into the abyss. "No" campaign insiders called their strategy "Project Fear." It is extraordinary that, despite all the fear-mongering, 1.6 million Scots nevertheless voted for independence. Why? The answer lies almost fifty years earlier.

In November 1967, I made my first political journey to the west of Scotland. As a teenager, I stayed up into the early hours to watch the result of a parliamentary by-election on television. In the rock-solid Labour seat of Hamilton, a young woman lawyer won a sensational victory for the Scottish National Party. Winnie Ewing's campaign slogan for independence was "Stop the World, We Want to Get On." She captured the zeitgeist of my generation; it was all of a piece with the images that tumbled onto my television screen a few months later in the fateful year of 1968: the assassinations of Martin Luther King and Bobby Kennedy, the Prague Spring that was followed by the Soviet invasion. A single idea linked these seemingly disconnected events: Ordinary citizens could change the world. Civil-rights campaigners, dissidents, women, and youth were all stopping the world to get on.

That world has now changed beyond recognition. The political order that prevailed from 1945 to the 1960s, with its mixed economy, welfare state, middle-class prosperity, and Cold War spheres of influence, has been replaced by globalization. Even for left-wing parties like Labour, the prevailing view is that the social liberalism of the '60s must now be combined with the economic liberalism of the '80s—free love meets the free market. This has resulted in some strange bedfellows. During his tenure as chancellor in charge of the British economy, Gordon Brown, a disciple of Christian socialism, brought Alan Greenspan, a disciple of Ayn Rand, to pay homage to Adam Smith in Smith's native Kirkcaldy. Then, as prime minister, Brown promoted an American style of patriotism, but the reticent British body politic rejected his fly-the-flag approach. All the while, those civic activists of the 1960s kept on marching, through the movements against apartheid and for human rights, and eventually became today's social entrepreneurs and green networkers. This time technology is on their side. Social media has allowed the millennial generation of younger citizens to create, communicate, and connect cheaply, swiftly, and widely. All of this came together in Scotland in the summer of 2014, turning the country into a festival of democracy.

My referendum journey from May to September impressed on me three new features of this changed Scottish political landscape. First, thousands of young people, women, and residents of poorer communities have discovered their own public voice and political agency, largely through the "Yes" campaign and its self-organizing networks. These were not core nationalist supporters of the SNP. Independence for them was about solidarity at the grassroots, not seats at the United Nations. The Glasgow I drove through on Referendum Day, for example, was festooned with "Yes" posters. This postindustrial city has the highest levels of poverty in Scotland. It is also one of only four local government areas that voted "Yes." They all have a similar economic and social profile. The poor voted for change, while the prosperous voted for the status quo. This Scottish summer of active citizenship will continue. The networks of women and artists for independence have not closed down with the "No" vote, but see the result as a fresh opportunity for creative forms of political engagement. The pro-independence parties have all seen vast increases in membership since the referendum. The UK parties are under pressure to deliver on their vow to give Scotland more autonomy. As one local community activist said to us on our bus tour: "The genie's out the bottle and it's not going back!"

A voter leaves a polling station in Portree, Scotland.

CNS PHOTOC / CA THAL MCNAUGHTON, REUTERS

Second, the language of the common good and the commonweal is now part of the everyday vocabulary of politics and public discourse in Scotland. The Scottish Catholic archbishops called on the faithful to vote as conscience guided but always for the sake of the common good. The popular currency of this key term in Catholic social teaching was boosted by a secular initiative during the referendum. The Common Weal think tank generated policy papers and discussion forums that looked to the Scandinavian model of social democracy as the way to a more equal and prosperous Scotland. It was seen as a working alternative to the failed neoliberal model adopted by successive New Labour and Conservative governments. The question of whether Scotland is actually more egalitarian than the rest of the UK was hotly debated. Some commentators argued that it is a myth fostered to maintain the position of a Scottish establishment that hides its own interests behind that virtuous façade. With the continuing resurgence of grassroots politics, there is now a chance that our debates on the common good will involve ordinary citizens and not just the usual suspects, the institutional leaders and lobbying groups of Scottish civil society.

Finally, the referendum has seen the political coming of age of the Catholic community in Scotland. Given the central role of the medieval church in creating an independent Scottish nation, this may seem a strange statement to make. However, the largely immigrant church of the modern era had reason to feel ambivalent about a Protestant Scotland that discriminated against Catholics as recently as the 1970s. My drive-by antagonist is its lingering shadow. Full equality of opportunity in a more secular Scotland has removed that ambivalence to the point where Scottish Catholics now support independence by a greater percentage than members of Protestant denominations. This historic shift found public expression in two iconic ways during the referendum. A full-page advertisement was taken out in a national newspaper by "a cross-section of the Scottish Catholic community," declaring: "We believe a 'Yes' vote in this week's referendum makes possible a more socially just Scotland." This statement by prominent lay Catholics, parish clergy, and religious reinforced comments made by Scotland's premier historian and leading Catholic public intellectual, Sir Tom Devine. He broke his scholarly silence on such questions—"The future is not my period"—and declared himself a "Yes" voter in the final weeks of the campaign. A lifelong supporter of the Labour Party, like many Scots from an Irish Catholic immigrant background, Devine rocked the country with his announcement. As he said in my hearing, it may have cost him his friendship with Gordon Brown. Such personal loss must be set against the public gain of a pluralist nation.

Drama was an important part of our Bus Party tour, with the playwright David Greig on board, reading from his internationally renowned work. He stands in the tradition of Scottish drama that goes back to his namesake, Sir David Lindsay. This late medieval courtier and lay Catholic reformer wrote a morality play that wittily exposed corruption in church and state, *Ane Satyre of the Thrie Estaitis*. The main character is an everyman who steps onstage to condemn the oppression of the poor by the rich and powerful. His name is none other than John the Commonweal. In the summer of 2014, his successor stepped onto the public stage in Scotland. She shows no sign of leaving. She is my sister. She is my friend. She is Jean the Commonweal. The future is now in her hands. ■

PHOTO: MERRICK MORTON. © TWENTIETH CENTURY FOX AND REGENCY ENTERPRISES

Richard Alleva

Exile on Main Street

'GONE GIRL'

Like the best-selling novel it's based on, *Gone Girl* proceeds on three levels. First, it is a mystery story replete with clues, stratagems, lies, alibis true and false, detective work, innocent and guilty suspects, canny lawyering, and everything else you would see in an episode of *Law and Order*. Second, it is the portrait of a marriage so riddled with hypocrisy and bile that it would send Ingmar Bergman screaming out of the theater and into the nearest bar to share a drink with August Strindberg. Finally, it is a satire about the way today's all-enveloping media mock justice.

Every mystery story leaves loose ends; the test of its success is whether you shrug them off or roll your eyes in disbelief. For me at least, *Gone Girl* is sheer eye-roller. To summarize the plot is to tiptoe through a minefield of spoilers. Nick and Amy Dunn (Ben Affleck and Rosamund Pike)—a golden couple whose careers as trendy magazine writers in New York have been squashed by the 2008 recession—retreat to Nick's native Missouri, where he opens a very untrendy bar and she, a cool semi-bohemian, begins to feel humiliated by their exile to the flyover ordinariness of the Midwest. One day, Nick comes home to find the front door open and signs of violence in the living room. When the cops show up, however, they find evidence suggesting the scene was fabricated by Nick. Almost immediately, they suspect he's trying to disguise a murder as a kidnapping.

But if the girl really is gone, not dead, then where is she and what is the ultimate aim of her kidnappers? My problem with both the novel and the movie (scripted by the book's author, Gillian Flynn) is that when the real scheme is finally revealed halfway into the story, it seems so arduous and complicated that I had trouble believing that either of the two soft, comfort-loving yuppie protagonists would have had the nerve or resourcefulness to pull it off. Also, the later stages of the plot involve a murder that would require the skill and coolness of a Hannibal Lecter; a first-time killer probably wouldn't be up to it. Reading the novel, I was too constantly aware of the author straining for cleverness when I should have been enjoying the cleverness of the fictional mastermind. In this regard, the movie is a little better, since director David Fincher paces the action so well that we don't have time to count loose ends or entertain doubts until after the final credits roll.

On the film's second level—its portrait of a bad marriage—*Gone Girl* is definitely compelling but not quite satisfying. Here we have the union of two attractive phonies who have mistaken each other for the real thing. Nick, despite his lowbrow cultural tastes, has developed enough glibness to reinforce his good looks and convince Amy that her husband is the ultimate in cool masculinity. But she, too, is a self-invention, modeled on "Amazing Amy," the heroine of a series of kids' books written by her own parents (played to smarmy perfection by Lisa Banes and David Clennon). Each spouse has embraced a mirage and, finding it unreal, has reacted bitterly. With his aging frat-boy looks, unreadable eyes, somewhat slack jaw, and listless manner of speaking, Ben Affleck is perfectly cast as Nick. He keeps our opinion of the character in a state of suspension. Are we looking at a bewildered small-town boy who's in over his head or at a psychopath? Rosamund Pike is a revelation as Amy. A British actress who has previously appeared either in supporting roles in mainstream movies (*Pride and Prejudice, Die Another Day*) or in leading roles in little-seen independent features, she now gains stardom in a part that brings out the flavor of her personality. Like Katharine Hepburn, Pike has the high cheekbones and striding confidence of the patrician WASP, a confidence essential to Amazing Amy. Even in the film's best moments, however, Amy and Nick remain showy roles for skilled actors, not truly interesting characters with convincing inner lives.

But on the third level—as satire of a country hypnotized by the media's presentation of true crimes as serialized melodramas—*Gone Girl* is superb. Whether Nick is innocent or guilty, it soon becomes clear that he's undergoing a pre-trial trial in the electronic courtroom of the Internet and television, and that his brand of charm, however effective with women at café tables and in bedrooms, isn't cutting it with bloggers and Nancy Grace–type commentators. One scene in particular perfectly conveys the bumpiness of his ride through the popular consciousness. Nick is addressing a crowd gathered to express support for his missing wife. At first he speaks with confidence, winning his fellow townspeople over by denouncing the media's city-slicker contempt for unsophisticated Missouri ways. Then, just as the applause is dying down, a pregnant woman with a baby in her arms demands that he reveal what he really did to his wife. Nick, flustered, breaks down and retreats to his car, chased by reporters and photographers. And so a million screens will show images that present him as a murderous rat scuttling into the shadows.

Many movies (*Network, Notting Hill, Chicago*) have depicted the fickleness of media celebrity and notoriety, but few have done so as effectively as *Gone Girl*. The satire is merely one thread in the film's fabric, but it's the best thread. As suspense and marital drama, the film doesn't always convince, but it remains worth seeing as a black comedy of big American expectations and bigger American disappointment. ■

Cassandra Nelson

Flawed Vessels

The Liar's Wife
Four Novellas
Mary Gordon
Pantheon Books, $25.95, 304 pp.

Can good ever come from evil, or truth from a lie? St. Augustine answered the first question in the affirmative nearly sixteen centuries ago, when he observed that although the fall of man had brought sin and death into the world, it also paved the way for Christ's incarnation and redemption. From him we have the idea of the *felix culpa*, or "fortunate fall," for "God judged it better to bring good out of evil than not to permit any evil to exist." As for the second question, poets and fiction writers have long demonstrated how certain lies, by a kind of alchemy, can teach us the truth.

Mary Gordon comes to these questions rather late in her career—*The Liar's Wife* is her fourth collection of short fiction; other books include six novels and three memoirs—but in doing so, she has produced some of her finest work yet. The first novella in particular, from which the collection takes its name, is a small masterpiece of the form, not least because it asks questions as difficult and enduring as the two above, and it doesn't settle for pat or easy answers.

In order to understand exactly why "The Liar's Wife" is such a triumph, it's helpful to know that for decades the classic Mary Gordon protagonist has been a woman distinguished by her exceptional brilliance, beauty, and candor. Having never experienced ill health or any sort of major failure herself, this protagonist feels a mix of bewilderment and annoyance when others let such things stand in their way. Her unsparing honesty can make her insensitive at times, but she never regrets speaking her mind; it's her prerogative, as an inherently superior person, to tell others the truth, no matter how painful. When Gordon takes this kind of protagonist at her own estimation, the result is a passage like this one, from *The Company of Women* (1980), presented without any discernible shame or irony on the part of character or author: "'*Domine, non sum dignus*.' She said the prayer but did not mean it. She believed she was worthy." In all fairness, the standard Mary Gordon protagonist is also charming, funny, and in many ways much better company than I am making her out to be here. (Conveniently, she makes an appearance in this collection's final novella, so readers may judge for themselves.) But this protagonist has traditionally not been a champion of the underdog, to say the least, nor has she ever felt much need for grace.

And so it is that "The Liar's Wife" comes as a revelation. At first, we seem to be in familiar territory. Jocelyn Bern-

Mary Gordon

PHOTO: DAVID SHANKBONE

stein, seventy-two years old and retired, is relaxing at sunset in the house that she was raised in, in a wealthy Connecticut town. Her children are grown and successful; her husband, a lawyer, is intelligent and loving, although he happens to be at the couple's *other* inherited summer home, on Nantucket, at this particular moment; an Upper East Side condo awaits their return. Signs of comfort and good taste abound, from an antique Sheraton dresser in the bedroom to the glass of pinot grigio that Jocelyn holds up to the dying light. Like previous Gordon protagonists, she recognizes in herself a strong "desire to hide from the signs of misery: from the Down syndrome cousin, fully adult and yet a child. A story in *Life* magazine about a girl in an iron lung. The sound of the word 'refugee' and images of piled bodies in concentration camps." But unlike previous Gordon protagonists, Jocelyn, when forced to confront misery, is led to something approaching compassion and wisdom.

Misery comes in the form of her ex-husband, Johnny Shaughnessy, and his new girlfriend, Linnet. Their clothes are shabby, and their smiles reveal matching sets of bad dentures. Johnny and Linnet own zero houses to Jocelyn's three, and have shown up on her doorstep in the hope of spending a night in a real bed, rather than in the Frito-Lay truck they drive for extra income. Their poverty embarrasses Jocelyn. Outwardly, she is an awkward host, fearful that her every well-intentioned action is an implicit rebuke of Linnet's "Born to Be Wild" T-shirt, her "scorched" blond hair, and her occasional malapropisms. Inwardly, Jocelyn journeys a half-century back in time, to her whirlwind courtship with Johnny, the year they spent in his native Ireland, and the day she gave up on him and their marriage and left Dublin with no warning, only a note.

Ireland continues to haunt Jocelyn's thoughts as they head to a nearby Italian restaurant, where Johnny and Linnet have arranged to sing for their supper—literally—as a traveling duo called Dixie and Dub. "On account of he's from Dublin and I'm from Tennessee,"

Linnet explains. "Oh, yes I see," Jocelyn replies, suppressing an urge to tell Johnny, "You were better than that when I knew you." When Johnny's tendency to play fast and loose with the truth resurfaces—in the form of a tall tale about Jocelyn's having left him for Mick Jagger in their youth, which prompts an amusingly awkward rendition of "Ruby Tuesday" by the owner and waitstaff in her honor—she is plunged into an old confusion. As an American in Ireland, Jocelyn had felt utterly lost in "a paradise of talk, a wilderness of talk," where much was disguised in conversation and even more left unsaid, in order to meet standards of privacy and propriety that she couldn't fathom and no one would explain. Her reminisces of this time abroad are lyrical and poignant, and among the very best passages in the book.

As Dixie and Dub take the stage at the end of the meal, a curious thing happens. Transfiguration is not too strong a word to describe the effect of their performance on everyone in the room, musicians and listeners alike. Jocelyn is shocked to see two flawed vessels—him with his easy lies, her with "that ruined hair, those disproportionate breasts"—become "clear and pure, light on water." Eyes misting,

> she felt suddenly smaller than the two of them with her safe life, her safe home, her safe marriage…. They had made something happen in this ugly room, with its turquoise faux leather benches and its plastic gondolas. They had given people something; whatever else was false, the tears were real, real tears. What was it they had given? Hope? Belief? A sense that we are not alone, that we will not be left, finally, unaccompanied.

For a moment, everyone is lifted up, including the reader, and a sense of transcendence lingers long after the last song.

As Gordon weaves skillfully through this double drama—internal and external, past and present—we share in Jocelyn's growing amazement at the twists and turns and rich paradoxes of life: that beauty can sometimes take the unlikeliest of forms; that two people could part as young lovers and meet again happily as grandparents; that a Frito-Lay truck on an otherwise quiet, residential street might be all it took for someone to reconsider the meaning of the good life.

And that is the final level on which "The Liar's Wife" succeeds, as an indictment of our national devotion to material prosperity and security above all else. When Jocelyn first spots the delivery truck, she imagines it to be filled with kidnappers and terrorists, and can already see in her mind's eye a street strewn with severed limbs. Who hasn't had similar thoughts in twenty-first-century America, whether in a high school after Columbine, on a plane after 9/11, or in a movie theater around the release of *The Dark Knight Rises*? In our insistence on security, comfort, convenience, and the bottom line, something vital has been lost. Gordon shows real courage in attempting both to diagnose our national malaise and to offer a solution, even if she is cagey about her source of inspiration. When Johnny tells Jocelyn that he has always loved life, "behind those words other words came to her, from where? The Bible? Some long-dead poet. Love casts out fear."

Elsewhere in the book, Gordon's use of Christianity is similarly unclear. Characters repeatedly profess their lack of interest in religion, their conviction that nothing awaits us after death, and their inability to love or believe in a God who abides human suffering. The second novella, for instance, centers on a young French woman whose older brother was born with cerebral palsy. "Any God who would have allowed the fate of Laurent's body could only be a monster," Genevieve fumes. What she fails to notice—and it's not entirely clear, but I think Gordon might miss it too—is that Laurent is also a genius, and it appears to be the very combination of a sound mind in an unsound body that enables him to invent a device that can give voice to those with even profounder impairments. There is a strange way in which grace, even when it is in danger of being muffled or denied, keeps peeking through in this collection.

Which is not to say that all four novellas succeed equally. "Simone Weil in New York" charts Genevieve's complex and shifting feelings toward her brother and her famous former lycée teacher, as she copes with new motherhood and worries about her American husband, who is off fighting in the Second World War. In "Thomas Mann in Gary, Indiana," Billy Morton recalls being asked to introduce the German author at a high school assembly. Imagining historical figures in fiction is a tricky enterprise, and Gordon doesn't quite pull it off. Too often her attempts to raise important philosophical concerns—as she does so well in "The Liar's Wife"—come unmoored from the stories themselves, so that the reader feels he has unexpectedly stumbled into a series of mini-lectures on Weil and Mann. The last novella, "Fine Arts," places a consummate Mary Gordon protagonist—young, beautiful, smart, and universally admired, even when she does some pretty awful things—at a present-day college campus, with semi-disastrous results. No student alive today would need to be reminded by a friend that e-mail is an alternative to making a dreaded phone call ("Theresa felt like a fool. Why hadn't she thought of that?"). It's a shame that Gordon didn't have a better editor for rest of the book, because her fiction and her philosophy at their best are too good to be stitched together as hastily as they are here.

Ultimately, *The Liar's Wife* succeeds on the strength of the title novella and at moments when it confirms François Mauriac's claim that "only fiction does not lie," that it alone "opens on the life of man a secret door, through which slips in, altogether unchecked, his unknown soul." ■

Cassandra Nelson *is an associate editor at Oxford University Press. Her writing has appeared in* Essays in Criticism, First Things, *and* Literary Imagination, *and her edition of Samuel Beckett's* More Pricks Than Kicks *was published by Faber and Faber in 2010.*

John Wilson

Without Artifice?

My Struggle
Book Three: Boyhood
Karl Ove Knausgaard
translated by Don Bartlett
Archipelago Books, $27, 427 pp.

When I first read Philip K. Dick's *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep*, which was published in 1968, the futuristic setting of the novel (1992) seemed far distant. In later editions, issued well after Dick's death, the date of the action—and of World War Terminus, which precedes it, offstage—was pushed forward, into the 2020s, in an attempt (misguided, I think) to trick the reader. Pretty soon, it will need to be pushed forward again. The Future is elusive.

No one, no literary seer—as far as I know—predicted that the most striking literary phenomenon of the early twenty-first century would be a six-volume series by a Norwegian writer titled (who would have had the nerve to foresee this?) *Min kamp, My Struggle*, and cast as a novel, yet a novel about the life of the author himself, Karl Ove Knausgaard, his parents and his wives and his children, his friends and his enemies and his acquaintances, his relatives and his elementary school teachers, and countless others. After the spectacular success of the first volume in Norway—soon to be repeated elsewhere, not on the same scale but exceeding what anyone could have foreseen, as translations began to appear—howls of outrage were heard, and members of Knausgaard's father's side of the family disowned him. The second volume—*A Man in Love*, as the English translation is called, centering on Knausgaard's second marriage, and the experience of fatherhood—hit his first wife like a gut punch and prompted rejoinders from her, which took their place in the ever-building legend, still growing today.

That first volume, published in Norwegian in 2009, appeared in the United States in 2012, published by a very fine small press, Archipelago Books, and translated by Don Bartlett, who is scheduled to bring the entire six-volume series, some 3,600 pages, over into English. The translation of Book Two followed in 2013, and Book Three, *Boyhood*, late this spring.

On the day I received my review copy of the third volume (having earlier devoured the first two), I discovered a small, purplish lesion on my penis. This would have disturbed me greatly had I not had a similar experience last November, when I *was* quite upset and thus nonplussed when the doctor said he wasn't sure what it was or why it had appeared but no big deal, and here was a prescription for some ointment. Two days later...

That's probably enough. You get the point; you discern my shameful ambition, my dream that Lorin Stein, the superb editor of the *Paris Review*, would say that "Mr. Wilson's invention of a reviewer who is a real person and is in charge of the review has solved a big problem of the contemporary book review," bringing new life to a genre that many have dismissed as moribund. "Wilson is utterly honest, unafraid to voice universal anxieties," James Wood would add. And, best of all, Zadie Smith: "John Wilson. 'My Review of *My Struggle*.' I just read this five times and I need his next review like crack."

Of course, to revolutionize the book review, I would need to do more than reveal my own yearnings and humiliations—I would need to bring my "candor and fearlessness" to bear on my friends and family too, "not for shock value or self-indulgence, but to show that plainspoken honesty gets to the heart of the human condition," as the Kirkus review of "My Review of *My Struggle*" would put it.

Karl Ove Knausgaard

All right, I promise: no more of these disgusting platitudes. Plainspoken honesty! Without artifice! Nothing in literature is more saturated with artifice than the pose of a man who rolls up his sleeves and says, "I'm just going to write what happened." Compared to that, the conventions of the sonnet or the verbal duels of Restoration drama are without contrivance. Knausgaard himself has probably vomited more than once reading such absurd praise, or drunk himself into a stupor and then vomited: first, because he knows that what's being said about him and his writing isn't true; second, because he knows that there are passages in *My Struggle* (and, especially, bits in idiotic interviews he's given) that—taken in isolation—seem to encourage such banalities. But ultimately Knausgaard himself can't be blamed for such flagrant misreadings, for, far from constituting a triumph of plainspoken honesty and freedom from literary artifice, *My Struggle* is as twisty (hence as true to our twisty nature) and as stylized as Dostoevsky's *Notes from Underground*. What makes it a work of genius, for all its flaws (and they are many), is that the twisty self-consciousness that animates *My Struggle* is capacious and generous as well, acutely registering all manner of quotidian joys and sorrows and fluctuations of the spirit in a way that the modern masters of the perverse (you can supply your own list) would never allow themselves (they have a horror of "sentimentality"). Brooding, funny, tender, sometimes mired in navel-gazing, at other moments delivering revelations, shifting effortlessly from kitchen-sink realism to reflections on Holderlin, childhood memories of comic books, pop music of the 1980s, Hazlitt-like rants on the conformist culture of Sweden, the horror of endless diaper-changes, and much more, *My Struggle* is not going to change the course of literature, but it will more than adequately repay your time and attention.

In the first three volumes of the series, Knausgaard plays with chronology, both on the large scale (the sequence of the three books) and the small scale (within individual volumes). So, for example, *Boyhood* is the third volume, not the first, and within any of the first three books, he'll jump to a time later (or earlier) than the time of the principal action of that volume.

The subject at the heart of Book One is the death of Knausgaard's "Dad," a teacher for most of his working life, a man of meticulous habits, who ends up drinking himself to a premature death in utter squalor. Not until Book Three, when the author turns to his childhood, do we fully grasp what a malign presence "Dad" has been for Karl Ove, though there are clear indications of this from the start. Beginning with reflections on how we deal with death and the bodies of the dead, shifting around in time (in a very early scene, Karl Ove is eight years old), the narrative of Book One builds to an extraordinary set-piece that takes up roughly the last 150 pages of this volume of 430 pages.

Karl Ove and his brother, Yngve, have driven to Kristiansand, the town where their father had been living with his mother. They meet with the undertaker to make arrangements, then go to the house. Bottles are everywhere; rooms are piled with junk; a terrible stench is coming from somewhere, though not from the room where their father died, near the giant TV. Their grandma is suffering from dementia, and she stinks of urine. The brothers set out to clean the place up and restore some order.

This extended narrative, one of the most sustained in the first three books, never flags. Absurdity, pathos, and gallows humor mingle. Having visited their father's body once, Karl Ove—after Yngve has left, to return in several days for the funeral—decides to visit him again at the chapel, and the following passage concludes the book:

> This time I was prepared for what awaited me, and his body...aroused none of the feelings that had distressed me before. Now I saw his lifeless state. And that there was no longer any difference between what once had been my father and the table he was lying on, or the floor on which the table stood, or the wall socket beneath the window, or the cable running to the lamp beside him. For humans are merely one form among many, which the world produces over and over again.... And death, which I have always regarded as the greatest dimension of life, dark, compelling, was no more than a pipe that springs a leak, a branch that cracks in the wind, a jacket that slips off a clothes hanger and falls to the floor.

PHOTO: SOPPAKANUUNA

We touched earlier on the error—into which many writing on *My Struggle* have fallen—of seizing on certain passages in isolation. This passage, for instance, needs to be read not only alongside the meditation on death and the bodies of the dead that opens Book One but also in tension with others—for instance, the passage late in Book Two, at the christening of Vanja, the firstborn child of Karl Ove and Linda, his second wife. Karl Ove finds himself taking Communion.

> Why had I done it?
> Had I become a Christian?
> I, a fervent anti-Christian from early teenage years and a materialist in my heart of hearts, had, in one second, without any reflection, got to my feet, walked up the aisle and knelt in front of the altar. It had been pure impulse. And meeting these glares [from family members and friends, who wondered what he was doing], I had no defense. I couldn't say I was a *Christian*. I looked down, slightly ashamed.

And yet, he considers, in his writing he "was slowly realizing [what] I wanted to explore: the sacred." He has been working with biblical texts, "and the gravity, the wild intensity in them, which was never far removed from the sacred, where I had never been or would ever go, yet which I sensed all the same, had made me think differently about Jesus Christ, for it was about flesh and blood, it was about birth and death, and we were linked to it through our bodies and blood, those we beget and those we bury"—and the sentence builds to this: "and the only place I knew where this was formulated, the most extreme yet simplest things, was in these holy scriptures." In Book Three, we'll learn that—before his turn away in his early teen years—Karl Ove stood out from the other kids in the housing estate precisely because he was a Christian (a choice that Dad regarded sardonically). It will be interesting to follow this thread through the last three volumes. ■

John Wilson *is the editor of* Books & Culture.

George Dennis O'Brien

Keep Low

Christ Actually

The Son of God for the Secular Age

James Carroll

Viking, $30, 368 pp.

War puts the gods on trial. During the first Jewish war in 70 CE, Roman legions destroyed the Jerusalem Temple, God's very dwelling place on earth, leaving the faithful to wonder, Where was God to be found now? Almost two millennia later, Pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer, awaiting execution in a Nazi prison, found it almost impossible to use the word "God" with fellow prisoners. Meditating on the failure of Christendom manifested in world war and genocide, he asked himself, "Who is Jesus Christ, actually?" In James Carroll's *Christ Actually: The Son of God for a Secular Age*, Jesus actually—now as for the apostles—emerges from within the long, recurring history of Jewish persecution and bereavement.

As Carroll reminds us, the destruction of the Temple, the "absence" of Israel's God, led to varied religious responses. A group of rabbis persuaded the Romans to give them sanctuary in the town of Yavne, near the Mediterranean, where they affirmed that the Temple lived on in the teaching of Torah. The followers of Jesus, meanwhile, many of whom had continued allegiance to the Jerusalem Temple, retired to Pella on the far side of the Jordan, where they affirmed that the Temple lived on in the resurrected Jesus. For Carroll, then, both rabbinic Judaism and the Christian church are direct reactions to Jewish catastrophe,

Young Jew as Christ *by Rembrandt Van Rijn, circa 1656*

and both must be understood in the context of Jewish thought and history. Christianity is Jewish, root and branch; conflict between synagogue and church, like all tragedies, is familial.

On what does this Jewish family dispute turn? Who is Jesus actually? That Jesus of Nazareth should be regarded in some fashion as "God" appears wholly unacceptable to Jewish tradition. After all, at the trial before the Sanhedrin it is Jesus' refusal to deny he is "Christ, the Son of God" that leads to condemnation. In Carroll's view, the church's eventual development of a "high Christology" constituted a fatal breach with genuine Jewish tradition; it formed the root both of supersessionism and of Christian anti-Semitism. This break with Judaism was the church's first error, and its later presumed conversion to Constantinianism perverted Christianity into a structure of ecclesiastical power—such at any rate was the argument of Carroll's *Constantine's Sword* (2002). Combine everyday anti-Semitism with Constantinian power, and Nazi genocide is inevitable. A fatal compounding of error led ineluctably to the Holocaust.

Christ Actually seeks to undo this calamitous logic by rejecting high Christology, a task Carroll undertakes by questioning the historicity of the gospels. This is not difficult to do, since although many Christians read the gospels as factual history, in truth we have only the sketchiest notions about what Jesus actually said or did. Written decades after Jesus' death by authors who probably did not witness the events they chronicled, the Gospel narratives are compilations of tales told in various Jesus communities, and possess the unreliability of memoirs shaped by a mission. So Carroll's distinction between the Jesus of history and the Christ of faith is broadly accepted. Still, one should note that he relies heavily on the more radical examples of revisionist scripture scholarship. His most frequently cited author is John Dominic Crossan, co-founder of the controversial Jesus Seminar, which claims to have determined that no more than 20 percent of Jesus' gospel statements are authentic.

If, however, we have only a fragmentary knowledge of Jesus actually, there remains one incontrovertible historical reality behind the New Testament. Very shortly after Jesus' death, stories began to circulate about him, stories that made extravagant claims about his life and death; within five years of Jesus' crucifixion in 33 CE, Paul accepted him as Lord and Christ. Much modern biblical scholarship concentrates on how the exalted legends about Jesus grew up and were shared in disparate Christian communities across the ancient world; John Meier's *A Marginal Jew*, for instance, argues that one can extract significant historical data about Jesus from the meditations of the early communities.

Carroll does not cite Meier, and my guess is that he prefers the way Crossan thoroughly re-historicizes Jesus of Nazareth, leaving not a shred of the "high Christ," but only the human being. It comes as a surprise, then, to hear Carroll assert that if Jesus had not been regarded as the Son of God, he would long ago have faded into a pantheon of cultural heroes. For Carroll the real problem with the church's "high Christology" is that it is not Jewish, but Greek. So is there a Jewish "high" Christology? Carroll turns to Orthodox Jewish scholar Daniel Boyarin's *The Jewish Gospels: The Story of the Jewish Christ* (2012). Boyarin, arguing from the influence of the apocalyptic Book of Daniel at the time of Jesus, concludes that while "Christian and non-Christian [are] happy enough to refer to Jesus, the human, as a Jew, I want to go a step beyond that. I wish us to see that Christ too—the divine Messiah—is a Jew.... Many Israelites at the time of Jesus were expecting a Messiah who would be divine and come to earth in the form of a human."

Without trying to resolve a contention that has persisted for two thousand years—what Carroll rightly calls "the nightmare question" of supersessionism—I would argue that he and Boyarin have a case. How would a group of Jewish followers of Jesus of Nazareth have constructed the New Testament account? They would have turned to Jewish stories at hand. In the Emmaus story, Jesus, the mysterious stranger, speaks to the discouraged disciples; "beginning with Moses and all the prophets...he interpreted...the things about himself in all the Scriptures" (Luke 24:27). We know that even after the destruction of the Temple, early members of "the Jesus movement" saw themselves as Jews. Paul did not preach in synagogues to proclaim a non-Jewish religion. Did the Messiah "in fact" arrive in Jesus of Nazareth, or is he still awaited? Perhaps it is best to answer as Kafka did: "The Messiah comes the day after he arrives."

Carroll's use of contemporary scholarship to critique the historical content of the New Testament is persuasive—as far as it goes. The trouble is that no set of simple historical facts, however well established, could ever bridge the gap between the empty tomb and the proclamation of Jesus of Nazareth as the Christ. There is more to reading the Bible than recovering facts. Aquinas said we must read Scripture "literally"(*sensus literalis*), but he did *not* mean "as fact." "When Scripture speaks of God's arm," he wrote, "the literal sense is not that God has such a member, but only what is signified by this member, operative power." The ultimate question for the Bible—and its readers—concerns its authorship. If its author is God, then the Bible's messy conglomeration of law, history, legend, poetry, prophecy, and apocalyptic vision becomes "Scripture," a divine message, and its historicity may be the least of one's interpretive concerns.

As Scripture, the Bible claims to offer a message for all times and places. It exists as a focus for a community of worship—for Christians, the *ecclesia*. Here and elsewhere, Carroll criticizes the historical church for the sin of becoming too Greek or too Roman. In his view, Greek High Christology "went through the roof," and in the process destroyed a proper link to the historical Jesus. Carroll's critique repeats a common priority for church reform: return to the origins of Christianity.

Yet powerful as reformist purification can be, it simplifies the church community's difficult history of gains and losses as it looks at Scripture over many times and places.

If Carroll's ultimate aim, as his book's title suggests, is to claim that Christ is "Son of God" according to Jewish messianic thought, he still faces the problem that "the secular age" has little interest in God—Jewish, Christian, or whatever. "We have problems believing that Jesus is God because we don't really know what the word 'God' refers to," Carroll muses; "Believers confront an ultimate mystery." This book invokes the mysteries of quantum physics; but the thing about scientific mysteries is that lots of them get solved. The mystery of God, on the other hand, can never be solved. Carroll acknowledges as much when he commends the great medieval mystical meditation, *The Cloud of Unknowing*, but then slips back by alluding to the mystery of "cloud computing." Wrong cloud. Having opted for Jesus Christ as divine in a Jewish understanding, Carroll might have been better advised to consider a Jewish Jesus in terms of modern Jewish theologies like those of Buber, whom he briefly mentions, and Franz Rosenzweig, whose great *Star of Redemption* regards Christianity as a kind of missionary Judaism.

Written in the brisk, argumentative style that has won James Carroll a broad popular readership, *Jesus Actually* avoids the interminable maundering of academic prose, even as its extensive footnotes indicate attention to advanced, if radical, scholarship. Conservative Christians may well be shocked and annoyed at Carroll's configuration of Jesus. Nevertheless, for its pushback against the boundaries of conventional interpretations and, above all, for its passionate presentation of the sinfulness of Christian anti-Semitism, his book deserves serious attention. ■

George Dennis O'Brien, *a frequent contributor, is president emeritus of Rochester University. Among his books is* Finding the Voice of the Church *(University of Notre Dame).*

Molly Farneth

Blame Agriculture

Fields of Blood
Religion and the History of Violence
Karen Armstrong
Alfred A. Knopf, $30, 528 pp.

In the wake of his September 10 speech outlining his strategy against ISIS, President Barack Obama came under fire from across the political spectrum for his claim that the terrorist organization is "not Islamic." Atheist author Sam Harris argued on his blog that ISIS can only be understood in light of the fact that "a belief in martyrdom, a hatred of infidels, and a commitment to violent jihad...are supported by the Koran and numerous *hadith*." On Fox News, conservative commentator George Will scoffed, "ISIS says it's Islamic. Lots of people say it's Islamic. Only the President won't."

Perhaps they should all read Karen Armstrong's latest book, *Fields of Blood: Religion and the History of Violence*. Armstrong is known for her thoroughly researched and clearly written books on religion, many of which cut through simplistic truisms about religion and society. Her new book challenges the idea that the relationship between religion and violent conflict is simple and direct. By tracing the history of violence from the rise of agrarian societies to

MAGHAREBIA

An Al Qaeda militant in Northern Africa

the present and exploring its role in the development of major religions, Armstrong aims to show that religious traditions speak with many voices on matters of violence and warfare. Although she occasionally falls back on platitudes of her own, her book makes a convincing case that the relationship of religion to violence is complicated and ambivalent.

Organized violence, as Armstrong tells it, was not initially a product of religion. It was a product of agrarianism. With the development of agriculture, people were able for the first time to form stable communities that could produce more than they consumed. These agrarian societies were under constant threat from environmental disaster, as well as from bands of travelers who made their own living through organized theft. A small group of elites came to dominate their communities, offering protection in exchange for tribute. The elites supported themselves with the proceeds of the peasants' land and labor. The only way to expand their income was to expand the amount of land and the number of laborers under their control. Warfare was the means for this expansion. Territorial claims and resource control—political and economic concerns—have been mixed up with violence ever since.

Here, Armstrong says, is where religion enters the picture. Myth and ritual could make violence meaningful, justifying the brutal lives of peasants and warriors. But Armstrong shows that people also found resources in religion to question this form of life, challenging the systemic violence and economic injustice of the agrarian society. In ancient Aryan societies, for example, "no myth ever had a single definitive meaning; rather, it was constantly recast and its meaning changed. The same stories, rituals, and set of symbols that could be used to advocate an ethic of war could also advocate an ethic of peace." Aryan reformers would draw on the old stories with new aims—to deny the legitimacy of war and conquest. Nevertheless, throughout the ancient world, the desire for political and economic control continually trumped prophetic cries for peace and social justice.

In Armstrong's account, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam all began as alternatives to the systematic violence and economic injustice of empires. The belligerent acts of later adherents, she suggests, betray the radical and prophetic origins of the monotheistic religious traditions. Armstrong's account is strongest when she shows how monotheists, once they were no longer at the margins of society, drew on their respective traditions to make decisions about how to protect the community from internal and external threats, how to support it economically, and whether and how to expand its reach. The recognition and eventual adoption of Christianity by the Roman Empire linked the teachings of Jesus with the aristocratic rule and imperial violence he had criticized. Yet it is too simple to say, as Armstrong sometimes seems inclined to do, that Christianity was perverted by its association with statecraft and economics. As a religion with a long history of such associations, Christianity has a well-developed tradition of thinking about the responsibilities of rulers and the ethical limits of violence. The just-war tradition is one ongoing attempt to think through these questions. So is Christian pacifism—and, moreover, so is Christian realism (of which Obama is the latest prominent adherent). As the philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre said, a tradition is "an argument extended through time"—and among the important things religious traditions argue about is the ethics of violence.

Armstrong's premise is that the relationship between religion and violence is and has always been complex, and that we need to examine the details of particular conflicts and their historical context in order to understand the role that religion plays. However, she can only supply so much detail and contextualization in a book-length survey of the history of violence. As a result, Armstrong sometimes makes her own overly simplified claims, such as de-

claring that this or that example of "religious violence" isn't really religious after all.

This happens, for example, in her discussion of a group of radical Zionists who believed that the destruction of the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem would bring about the Messianic redemption. Although she notes that their belief was rooted in Kabbalistic philosophy, Armstrong writes, "far from being inspired by their religious tradition, the militants' conviction violated core teachings of Rabbinic Judaism." Instead, she emphasizes the historical and psychological motivations for their acts: "The Dome as a perceived symbol of Jewish humiliation, subjugation, and obliteration fed dangerously into the Jewish history of grievance and suffering, a phenomenon that, as we have seen, can fester dangerously and inspire a violent riposte.... Hence Jewish radicals, with or without rabbinic approval, continue to flirt with [Menachem] Livni's dangerous idea, convinced that their political designs have some basis in eternal truth." Armstrong's own insistence on the complexity of religion, however, would lead one to acknowledge that Rabbinic Judaism—like Christianity, like Islam—is a multifarious tradition involving not only its foundational texts but also lived practices, social structures, and ongoing arguments about how we ought to live.

In cases like these, it is enough to recognize that religions are internally complex—that they speak with multiple voices—and that religious motivations are almost always tied up with political and economic ones. That recognition would complicate Obama's claim that ISIS is not religious, as it would confound the conclusion that Islam is essentially violent—or even that ISIS's motivations and goals are primarily theological ones. It could also clear the air for those peaceful and prophetic voices Armstrong longs for to cry out and be heard once more. ■

Molly Farneth *teaches religious studies at Eugene Lang College at the New School for Liberal Arts in New York City.*

Thomas Noble

Twisted Sisters

The Nuns of Sant'Ambrogio
The True Story of a Convent in Scandal
Hubert Wolf
translated by Ruth Martin
Alfred A. Knopf, $30, 482 pp.

If this astonishing tale were not true, one would think it the work of an accomplished mystery writer. *The Nuns of Sant'Ambrogio* takes us back to Rome in 1859, when the Holy Office received a formal denunciation of suspicious goings-on at the convent of Sant'Ambrogio della Massima. For two years these allegations were investigated, and subsequently several members of the community were tried before the Inquisition. Though bits and pieces of this strange story would leak out over the next century and a half, it was only after 1998, when John Paul II opened the archives of the Holy Office, that Hubert Wolf, professor of ecclesiastical history at the University of Münster, was able to examine the full record. The result is a sordid tale of sexual misdeeds, false identities, cult worship, theft, and murder.

Katherina von Hohenzollern-Sigmaringen before 1893

Wolf's book teems with characters, many of them trailing lengthy aristocratic names, beginning with Princess Katherina von Hohenzollern-Sigmaringen, who made the denunciation. Born in 1817, Katherina spent her childhood in liberal Catholic circles, but a visit to Rome in 1834 brought her under the influence of Karl August Graf von Reisach, a reactionary and aficionado of women visionaries who was made cardinal by the even more reactionary Gregory XVI. Twice widowed by the age of thirty-six, the princess resolved to become a nun, and in 1858 Reisach placed her in the convent of Sant'Ambrogio. Fifteen months later she smuggled out a desperate and cryptic letter—"Save me," it pleaded—to her cousin, Bishop Gustav Adolf zu Hohenlohe und Schillingfürst, who marched into Sant'Ambrogio, rescued Katherina, and took her to his country estate in Tivoli. There, under the influence of her Benedictine confessor Maurus Wolter, she recorded her tale of woe in the document that reached the Holy Office.

Katherina's complaint centered on the convent's worship of a former abbess, Maria Agnese Firrao, who had presented herself as a living saint, partly via self-inflicted stigmata. Though Firrao was tried and convicted by the Inquisition, and died in banishment, her acolytes at Sant'Ambrogio continued to promote the cult of "Beata Maria,"

insisting that the Holy Office had erred in its condemnation of her. Katherina denounced the false sainthood of Maria Agnese as well as the claimed sainthood of the convent's vicaress and novice mistress, Maria Luisa. She raised questions about the convent's confessors, and told a disturbing story about Maria Luisa's relationship with someone Katherina referred to as "the Americano," a Tyrolean who went to the United States, married and had children, abandoned his family, and went to Rome seeking salvation—and, evidently, nuns to bed. But the most spectacular item in Katherina's denunciation was her claim that Maria Luisa had made repeated attempts to poison her in retaliation for her complaints.

The denunciation was brought to the attention of Pius IX, who worried that the affair might implicate people close to him, but considered the charges serious enough to refer the matter to the Holy Office. The investigation, led by Vincenzo Leone Sallua, OP, ultimately found that the convent's two Jesuit confessors, Giuseppe Leziroli and Giuseppe Peters, actively promoted the cults of both Maria Agnese and Maria Luisa. Sallua also discovered lesbian initiation rites in the convent. He presented his findings to Cardinal Vicar Costantino Patrizi, who happened to be Sant'Ambrogio's cardinal protector and had little choice but to ask Pius IX to refer the matter to the Inquisition. To keep tight control of the process, Pius put Patrizi and Reisach on the court of the Inquisition, an unprecedented step—and one that had serious consequences, as we shall see.

The trial set out to investigate the veneration of Maria Agnese, the pretended sanctity of Maria Luisa, and the reported lesbian relationships in the convent. As it progressed, it uncovered not only these religious offenses but actual crimes: poisoning and embezzlement. From December 1859 to February 1862, witnesses were interrogated, sometimes over several months, and confessions extracted. Of the late Maria Agnese, the court learned that she had claimed to have visions and to have received miraculous letters from heaven; she also seems to have introduced the lesbian initiation rites into the community. The court was distressed to learn that the convent's two confessors, Leziroli and Peters, not only believed in the founder's holiness but actively promoted her cult. Disturbing too was the discovery that the current abbess, Maria Veronica, had herself lied to the court about the veneration of Maria Agnese and had instructed her nuns to lie as well.

The story turned lurid with revelations about Maria Luisa. Born in Rome in 1832, a working-class girl who entered the convent in her teens, Maria Luisa was beautiful and charismatic. She long claimed to experience visions, ecstasies, and heavenly transports, in-

sisting that the Virgin Mary had anointed her the "first-born daughter of the mother of God"—and had bestowed on her the costly jewelry she had in her possession. In 1857 she brought Maria Veronica a letter, ostensibly from the Virgin Mary, demanding that she, Maria Luisa, be elected vicaress. In reality, the court determined, Maria Luisa was a fraud; she had dictated the letters to a young protégée who had beautiful penmanship; as for the jewelry, it had been bought with embezzled convent funds.

These discoveries were serious enough, but more was to come. It turned out that Maria Luisa conducted not merely lesbian initiation rites but long-term affairs with several sisters, and required each sister in the convent to spend the night with her before she pronounced her final vows. Even more explosive was the "Jesuit blessing," by which Peters and possibly Leziroli engaged in French kissing and a good deal of fondling with Maria Luisa. The court also learned that Maria Luisa had claimed to receive heavenly instruction to end the life of one of the sisters—namely, Katherina von Hohenzollern. Katherina was poisoned repeatedly but not fatally—though three other nuns who earned the enmity of Maria Luisa were less fortunate.

Maria Veronica eventually confessed to all the charges against her, as did Leziroli, though he stood by his belief in Maria Agnese's sanctity and Maria Louisa's "special gifts." The second confessor, Giuseppe Peters, was revealed to be living under an alias; in truth he was none other than Joseph Kleutgen, one of the foremost theologians of the nineteenth century, professor at the Gregorian University and adviser to Reisach and Pius IX. The court learned that Kleutgen/Peters had had an affair with a nun designated as "Alexandra N" in 1848–49—sexual encounters, he insisted before the court, that were purely spiritual, never descending into lust. Kleutgen waffled on his knowledge of the poisonings, and vehemently defended Maria Luisa. Because he was a gifted theologian and philosopher—and, perhaps, because he had friends on the court—he was able to tie the sessions up in knots on several points. It seems likely he was secretly given a copy of the *Relazione informativa*. This was a stark violation of procedure, and Wolf makes a good case for Reisach as the guilty party.

Having examined the witnesses, the court issued its verdicts. Sant'Ambrogio, the convent, was closed forever. Maria Luisa was placed in monastic confinement for twenty years. Maria Veronica was made a simple choir nun. The men fared better: Leziroli got little more than a slap on the wrist; and as for Kleutgen, it was recommended that he be confined in a Jesuit house for three years and be forbidden to hear confessions. This was a mild penalty for a man who had promoted false saints, carried on a sexual relationship with a nun, violated the sanctity of the confessional, and countenanced murder—and even then, Pius IX reduced his sentence to two years. Katherina von Hohenzollern, for her part, returned to Germany and dispensed some of her immense fortune founding the famous monastery of Beuron.

Wolf's book usefully puts the Sant'Ambrogio case into several historical contexts. First, it helps readers understand how the Holy Office and Inquisition worked in actual practice. Wolf notes the nineteenth-century fascination with miracle stories, and observes that Reisach, Kleutgen, and Pius IX were all believers in the constant eruption of the divine into the human realm. In particular, the century was a Marian era, and the proclamation of the Immaculate Conception—and perhaps also Maria Luisa's visions—fit well in a period that saw 119 reported appearances of the Virgin.

Another context is more instructive and disturbing. The years when the nuns of Sant'Ambrogio were on trial witnessed two major battles in the church. One hinged on centralization and papal authority, and the other on the struggle between the "Güntherians" and the New Scholastics. Anton Günther (1783–1863) led a loose group of liberal theologians—staunchly anti-Jesuit—who embraced some aspects of the Enlightenment, sought peace with the secular state and dialogue with Protestants, and urged a more historical kind of theology. Arrayed against them were people like Reisach and Kleutgen, who favored centralization of the church in papal hands and a tightly defined New Scholasticism in theology. Hohenlohe and Maurus Wolter, who rescued Katherina and fostered her denunciation, were "Güntherians." Did they send the denunciation to the Holy Office in an attempt to discredit Kleutgen and the Jesuits? It is also worth noting that after only two years of exile, Kleutgen was recalled to Rome, largely on Reisach's influence, where he contributed to *Tuas libenter* (1863), which articulated for the first time the concept of the "ordinary magisterium," a doctrine enshrined a few years later in *Dei filius* and *Pastor aeternus*. Kleutgen may have been a moral wretch, but he was deeply learned and theologically useful.

The decisions in the Sant'Ambrogio case were never published; Pius IX circled the wagons and defended his associates and advisers. That such a response is distressingly reminiscent of the way the Vatican (mis)handled the contemporary sexual-abuse crisis lends *The Nuns of Sant'Ambrogio* a kind of reverse historical echo. Wolf leaves me inclined to view Pius's behavior in the Sant'Abrogio case as no less a blemish on his record than the notorious case of Edgardo Mortara, the six-year-old Italian Jew who was taken from his family on orders from the Holy Office, because he had been secretly baptized by a Catholic family servant during an illness in infancy. Such lapses remain dismaying even today. The Nuns of Sant'Ambrogio has nearly as many characters as a Russian novel and its presentation is dense and labyrinthine. Nevertheless, Wolf has a marvelous story to tell and he tells it with gusto. ■

Thomas Noble *teaches history at the University of Notre Dame.*

Charles R. Morris

Slouching Toward Denmark

Political Order and Political Decay

From the Industrial Revolution to the Globalization of Society

Francis Fukuyama

Farrar, Straus and Giroux, $35, 752 pp.

Francis Fukuyama is a Stanford political scientist, perhaps best known for his much-discussed *The End of History and the Last Man* (1992). He has continued his meditation on the political order with a massive two-volume tome on successful political systems. Fukuyama's method is both taxonomic and encyclopedic. The first volume, *The Origins of the Political Order: From Prehuman Times to the French Revolution* (2006), starts with the similarities between "chimpanzee politics" and the rules of power and hierarchy that prevail in small human groups. From there, he moves to tribes and the practices of "patrimonial" states where the Big Man dispenses wealth and justice. The continent-hopping continues through the centuries to the early period of quasi-democratic solutions in moderately large states.

The new volume, *Political Order and Political Decay*, begins with the challenge of "getting to Denmark"—shorthand for "an imagined society that is prosperous, democratic, secure, and well governed, and experiences low levels of corruption." To accomplish that, the lessons from the first volume suggest, a society must have an effective state sufficient to maintain security and enforce commonly approved laws; it must have a reliable rule of law to enforce the property rights and contracts essential for economic development; and it must have a system of accountability, other than to an elite or to other special interests.

But the mere establishment of formal democratic processes doesn't get you to Denmark. A casual review of daily headlines exposes the many states "that are unable to deliver on the promises of newly elected democratic politicians to voters who want not only their political rights but good government as well." Somewhat paradoxically, effective states are usually the spawn of war. A series of strong and responsible German princes forcibly unified a squabbling roost of petty principalities, and created the classic disinterested, rule-governed, and smoothly functioning Prussian bureaucracy extolled by Max Weber. But mere fairness and competence could not substitute for the lack of accountability, and the whole edifice was swallowed up in the cataclysm of World War I and the subsequent turn to Nazism. The history of Chinese institutions has many parallels with that of the Prussian, over a much longer time span.

Fukuyama's writing is serviceable, if not sparkling, and there are interesting nuggets on almost every page. For example, he mentions almost as an aside that while Greece is the "birthplace of democracy," it "began the modern era as an Ottoman province in which domestic elites were recruited to work for an illegitimate foreign power." Ancient heritages mean little against modern facts.

The primary object of the book, however, judging merely from space allocation, is the rise and decline of the American political system. The United States, Fukuyama suggests, inherited a reverence for the Common Law and accountable government—no taxation without representation—but with a fundamentally antistatist twist. Alexander Hamilton was the only founding father with a serious interest in build-

Francis Fukuyama

PHOTO: FRANCIS FUKUYAMA

ing an effective state. The result was a "clientalist" state, with an inconsequential government mostly occupied with bestowing favors on friends. Under the pressures of the Civil War–driven expansion of the central government, clientalism inevitably mutated into the heroic corruption of the Gilded Age.

The evangelical fervor of the 1880s civil service reform movement attested to the public demand for competent, disinterested government. Its proudest results may have been the Forest Service under Gifford Pinchot, and over the longer term the Federal Reserve System and some of the New Deal regulatory agencies, particularly the Securities and Exchange Commission.

In more recent times, the American system of governing has become a ragtag mix of extreme delegation—as to the National Security Agency, for example—and absurdly trammeled mandates—as in the Affordable Care Act. Unlike, say, the British parliamentary system, in which elected representatives typically vote executive proposals up or down, a major law may have dozens of congressional committees involved in its crafting. The result is a feast for special interests, unworkable legislation, and endless opportunities for relegislating by litigation.

Fukuyama's critique is quite intelligent, although hardly original. While the analytic hooks he gives us provide a useful comparative framework, one can appreciate his diagnosis of our current ills without plowing through 1,000-plus pages on the war practices of the Papuans or the late-BCE triumph of the Han bureaucracy. In its own way, his project is a charmingly old-fashioned one, rather like Edward Casaubon's "Key to All Mythologies" in *Middlemarch*. Fukuyama is by no means as dry as Casaubon, and as a bit of an antiquarian packrat, I enjoyed much of his two latest books but, readers should be warned, at the cost of some long desert marches. ■

Charles R. Morris *is the author of* The Two Trillion Dollar Meltdown *(Public Affairs), among other books.*

LETTERS continued from page 4

RCIA, RENEW, and Little Rock Scripture Study, were eventually developed. But lifelong, comprehensive faith formation that prepares Catholic adults to participate fully in the decision-making and ministerial processes of the church for the transformation of society is not a major part of many parishes. Consequently, as Kaveny observes, a person's involvement in faith formation generally ends with confirmation.

In the years following Vatican II, there was an effort in many parishes to hire coordinators of adult faith formation. Diocesan offices also employed coordinators of adult faith formation to train parish committees. Sadly, over the past ten years many of these positions have been eliminated because of severe budget reductions.

One of the reasons for this situation is that too many church leaders are not comfortable relating with well-formed Catholic adults. Catholics who have been well formed in an adult understanding of the faith (the Baltimore Catechisms ended with high school) will inevitably ask difficult questions. They will also understand the scriptural challenge to pursue justice and peace and will seek to be involved in the church's social ministry. As Kaveny explains, a child or adolescent understanding of our faith is not sufficient to deal with life in our changing society. Well-formed Catholic adults want to be treated as adults.

How many church leaders today are willing and able to encourage and empower well-formed Catholic adults to participate actively in the decision-making processes at all levels of church life? To achieve this requires authentic dialogue, a willingness to address hard questions, and being open to considering new and challenging approaches to dealing with our rapidly changing society. Pope Francis seems to be very comfortable with this approach. Will it permeate the whole church?

JAMES J. DeBOY JR.
Catonsville, Md.

The next issue of **Commonweal** will be dated December 5, 2014

The Divine Spark

Kathleen Moore

Ever since Cat Stevens became Yusuf Islam, I've been fascinated by religious converts. A little envious of their enthusiasm, too.

While researching *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* for a graduate class in 2006, I discovered that the novel's author, Muriel Spark, was a convert to Catholicism. I was intrigued. Why had Spark, so accomplished and clever, embraced a faith I'd smugly left behind? I embarked on a journey to answer that question. The journey culminated two years later with my return to the Catholic Church.

Although I was raised Catholic and had attended Catholic middle and high schools, my faith lapsed by the time I entered college; I had difficulty with the church's teachings regarding contraception and sexuality, and doubts about God's existence. For decades, I vacillated between agnosticism and atheism; yet in dark moments, I still reached for my rosary, and from time to time, I attended Mass, hoping for an epiphany. Mircea Eliade wrote that "the man who has made his choice in favor of a profane life never succeeds in completely doing away with religious behavior." He was certainly right about me.

In my forties, intent on raising my children in the Judeo-Christian tradition, I joined a progressive Christian church, one that required little in terms of belief or behavior. Although the liturgy was familiar, when the pastor described himself as a "Buddhist Christian who worshipped in the Native American tradition," I realized I wasn't at home. Around that time, I discovered Spark and wondered why Catholicism had worked for her and not for me. What had she seen that I had not?

Born in 1918 Edinburgh to a Jewish father and an English mother who'd been raised Christian, Spark grew up in a home imbued with a generic belief in the Almighty. She attended Scottish Presbyterian schools, wrote poetry as a child, and went on to write more than forty short stories and twenty-two novels—the novels only after she joined the Catholic Church in 1954, at age thirty-six. While much has been written about her Catholic imagination, her fiction also reflects a broader, Judeo-Christian sensibility, a melding of Scottish Presbyterian, Jewish, Anglican, and Catholic influences. Her themes are, at times, more Old Testament than New, more Calvinist than Catholic, and occasionally more Jewish than Christian.

Spark came to the Catholic Church after first joining the Church of England. She described her conversion as the "step by step building up of a conviction," and the Catholic faith as corresponding to what she "had always felt and known and believed." Nevertheless, there were aspects of Catholicism with which she grappled, such as its positions on birth control and the ordination of women, and others in which she took little interest: popular Catholicism ("those terrible bleeding hearts") and priests' sermons (except John Henry Newman's), for instance. I began to think that if Spark could embrace Catholicism, reservations and all, perhaps I could.

In a review of Spark's *Reality and Dreams*, Penelope Fitzgerald wrote that Spark noted that after becoming a Catholic, she was able "to see human existence as a whole, as a novelist needs to." Immersed in Spark's writing, I wondered about this comment. Did she simply mean that a novelist, like the Judeo-Christian God, sees the beginning and end all at once, as her narrators often do, or was she alluding to something deeper? Had Catholicism enabled her to see life on earth as just the beginning? To view human existence as the union of matter and spirit, as organic and communal rather than atomistic, as the interplay of free will and Divine Providence? To see human beings as better than their worst action, and particular events as part of, but secondary to, the grand scheme of things—or in Newman's words, as "so much dust when weighed in the balance"? I'm still not certain, but my reflection led me to a fuller appreciation of the Catholic faith and worldview.

Muriel Spark in 1940

NATIONAL LIBRARY OF SCOTLAND

What I'm fairly sure of is that for Spark, the essence of Catholicism was the Christian creed, and she saw the Catholic Church as its keeper. In 1998, when asked about her faith, she said: "It's as simple as this: I hold by the creed. I would find it difficult to say that this is a load of rubbish...." She once described Christianity as "the religion that explains everyone to themselves" and "a natural fulfillment of what man is supposed to be." I believe she saw Christianity and Judaism as threads of the same Western moral tradition, and Catholicism as the thread that suited her best. I get that now. My journey with Spark allowed me to take a fresh look at the faith of my youth, to see it anew through the eyes of someone who had freely and thoughtfully chosen it, and to take that final step toward home. ■

Kathleen Moore *teaches humanities at Eastern Florida State College in Melbourne, Florida.*

The Theology of Cardinal Walter Kasper

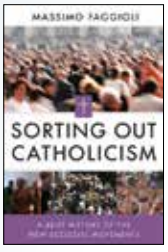
Speaking Truth in Love

Edited by Kristin M. Colberg and Robert A. Krieg; Foreword by Cardinal Walter Kasper

"This volume of contributions from leading Christian and Jewish theologians, and recent essays by Kasper himself, reveals the depth of his contribution both to theology and to the life of the church in the modern age."

Neil Ormerod
Australian Catholic University

978-0-8146-8315-6 Paperback, 330 pp., $29.95
978-0-8146-8340-8 eBook, $26.99
B8315 Paperback & eBook Bundle, $37.49



Sorting Out Catholicism

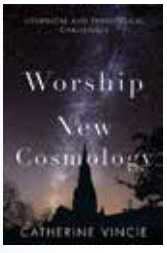
A Brief History of the New Ecclesial Movements

Massimo Faggioli; Translated by Demetrio S. Yocum

"Massimo Faggioli has become one of the most respected theological interpreters of Vatican II and the battle over its meaning. . . . How are we to assess the variety of new Catholic movements and their relationship to the legacy of Vatican II? Faggioli's analysis and findings will undoubtedly shape the future debate."

Bradford Hinze
Fordham University

978-0-8146-8305-7 Paperback, 240 pp., $19.95
978-0-8146-8330-9 eBook, $17.99
B8305 Paperback & eBook Bundle, $24.49
Available November 2014



Worship and the New Cosmology

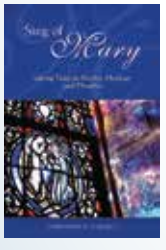
Liturgical and Theological Challenges

Catherine Vincie, RSHM

"Vincie's argument is timely and persuasive. A much-needed book that is vital to praying communities who wish to integrate the amazing discoveries of science into the patterns and language of their worship."

Mary E. McGann, RSCJ
Jesuit School of Theology/Graduate Theological Union

978-0-8146-8272-2 Paperback, 136 pp., $16.95
978-0-8146-8297-5 eBook, $14.99
B8272 Paperback & eBook Bundle $21.49



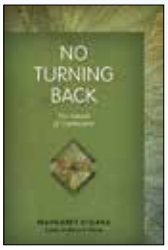
Sing of Mary

Giving Voice to Marian Theology and Devotion

Stephanie A. Budwey

Sing of Mary analyzes Marian hymnody throughout Christianity—and particularly in the Roman Catholic Church in the United States from 1854 to today—focusing not only on the texts and music but also on the contexts out of which these hymns came.

978-0-8146-8268-5 Paperback, 352 pp., $29.95
978-0-8146-8293-7 eBook, $26.99
B8268 Paperback & eBook Bundle, $37.49
Available November 2014



No Turning Back

The Future of Ecumenism

Margaret O'Gara; Edited by Michael Vertin
Forewords by Bishop Richard J. Sklba and *Professor David M. Thompson*

"These essays, across the breadth of the theological and ecclesial landscape, will readily speak to interested beginners in ecumenism as well as those deeply immersed in ecumenical dialogue and its theological challenges."

The Rt. Rev. Linda Nicholls
Area Bishop of Trent Durham & Bishop Suffragan Diocese of Toronto

978-0-8146-8313-2 Paperback, 280 pp., $29.95
978-0-8146-8338-5 eBook, $26.99
B8313 Paperback & eBook Bundle, $37.49

Humble Confidence

Spiritual and Pastoral Guidance from Karl Rahner

James J. Bacik

"Elegantly simple and profoundly pastoral, this is a beautiful, soul-satisfying book. Bacik has a lucid grasp of Rahner's theology. . . . An interesting, spiritually rich, and enlightening read."

Elizabeth A. Johnson, CSJ
Fordham University

978-0-8146-8316-3 Paperback, 200 pp., $19.95
978-0-8146-8341-5 eBook, $17.99
B8316 Paperback & eBook Bundle, $24.49

The Second Vatican Council

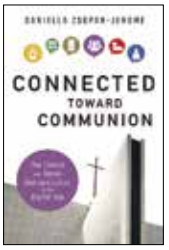
Message and Meaning

Gerald O'Collins, SJ

"The work of Gerald O'Collins, particularly this book, is a wonderful example of the vitality of the theology of Vatican II in light of the New Evangelization."

Massimo Faggioli
Author of True Reform: Liturgy and Ecclesiology in Sacrosanctum Concilium

978-0-8146-8311-8 Paperback, 240 pp., $24.95
978-0-8146-8336-1 eBook, $22.99
B8311 Paperback & eBook Bundle, $31.49



Connected toward Communion

The Church and Social Communication in the Digital Age

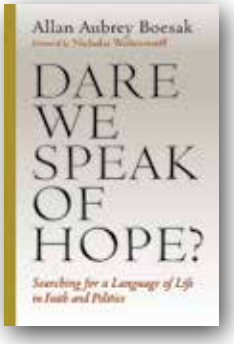
Daniella Zsupan-Jerome

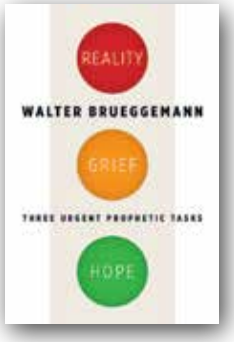
"[Daniella Zsupan-Jerome's] clear and thorough analysis of key documents reveals the Vatican's longstanding commitment to a theology of communications anchored in Christ and transcending particular forms of time- and technology-bound media.

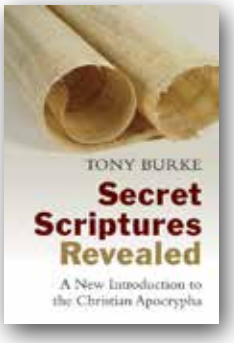
Meredith Gould, PhD
Author of The Social Media Gospel: Sharing the Good News in New Ways

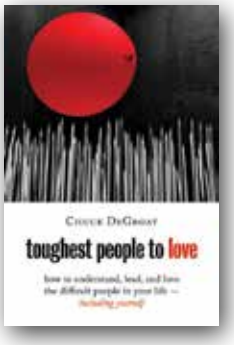
978-0-8146-8220-3 Paperback, 152 pp., $17.95
978-0-8146-8245-6 eBook, $15.99
B8220 Paperback & eBook Bundle $22.49

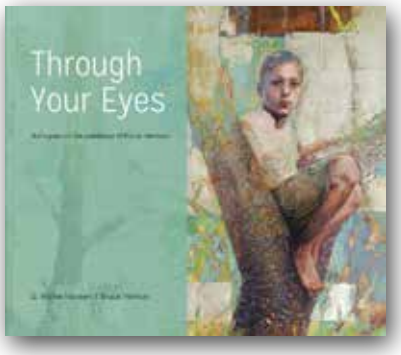
EERDMANS

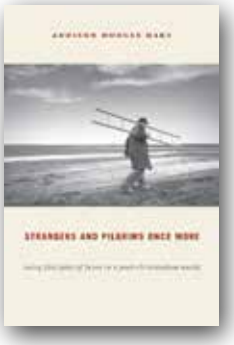


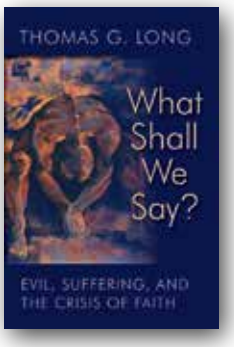


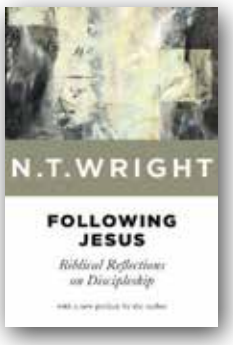












DARE WE SPEAK OF HOPE?
Searching for a Language of Life in Faith and Politics
Allan Aubrey Boesak
Foreword by Nicholas Wolterstorff
paperback • $18.00

REALITY, GRIEF, HOPE
Three Urgent Prophetic Tasks
Walter Brueggemann
paperback • $15.00

SECRET SCRIPTURES REVEALED
A New Introduction to the Christian Apocrypha
Tony Burke
paperback • $18.00

TOUGHEST PEOPLE TO LOVE
How to Understand, Lead, and Love the Difficult People in Your Life – Including Yourself
Chuck DeGroat
paperback • $14.00

THROUGH YOUR EYES
Dialogues on the Paintings of Bruce Herman
G. Walter Hansen and Bruce Herman
hardcover • $50.00

STRANGERS AND PILGRIMS ONCE MORE
Being Disciples of Jesus in a Post-Christendom World
Addison Hodges Hart
paperback • $18.00

HAUERWAS
A (Very) Critical Introduction
Interventions series
Nicholas M. Healy
paperback • $23.00

WHAT'S IN A PHRASE?
Pausing Where Scripture Gives You Pause
Marilyn Chandler McEntyre
paperback • $14.00

Now in paperback!

WHAT SHALL WE SAY?
Evil, Suffering, and the Crisis of Faith
Thomas G. Long
paperback • $18.00

New Issue!

FOLLOWING JESUS
Biblical Reflections on Discipleship
N. T. Wright
paperback • $14.00

At your bookstore,
or call 800-253-7521
www.eerdmans.com

4001
Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.
2140 Oak Industrial Dr NE
Grand Rapids, MI 49505