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OCTOBER 10, 2014

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THEOLOGY ISSUE

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Cover image: photo of Ignaz von Döllinger by Franz Hanfstaengl, c. 1860

LETTERS

Endearing anarchists, careless language

VISION QUEST

Thanks to Wayne Sheridan for the Tom Cornell interview in the September 12 issue ("Farmer, Anarchist, Catholic"), which provided a compelling snapshot of Tom and the Catholic Worker movement over the years. It showed how much the movement depends on the commitment of its members and supporters. The Catholic Worker has always been about individuals coming together to create new communities in a radical faith. It is extraordinary how endearing radical anarchist Catholics like Tom can be, on the one hand, and how challenging and visionary on the other.

I had the pleasure of working with Tom in the early 1970s at the Catholic Peace Fellowship (CPF). Nixon's air war against North Vietnam was intensifying. Tom and Jim Forrest had started the CPF as a response to the war. I was a sociology doctoral student at the City University of New York Graduate Center at the time. I was dissatisfied with the sterility of academics while the world seemed to be burning. When I walked into the CPF office on Lafayette Street, Tom, in true Catholic Worker style, never asked me who I was or what I wanted. He merely asked if I would start making phone calls to garner support for the CPF's anti-bombing campaign. I spent the next two years working with Tom and the CPF staff. During that time I met his wife Monica, the Cornell family, and, of course, Dorothy Day.

I've moved some distance away from those pacifist, anarchist days but still carry with me the vision of a better world in which people are moved deeply by faith and an unfathomable commitment to love.

ROBERT M. OLIVA
Floral Park, N.Y.

BAD GUYS

Whatever the merits of the line of reasoning in your editorial "Reluctant Rescue" (September 12), I am disturbed by your choice of language regarding so serious a matter. It suggests insensitivity at best.

Recall that what is transpiring currently in the Near East follows a century of military, political, and economic adventurism there on the part of the West that has aggravated and distorted life since the collapse of the Ottoman Empire after World War I. The increasingly inept intervention of the United States has produced a further deterioration. The spectacular failure of our policy would be comic were it not so tragic.

Under such circumstances it seems absurd to endorse the United States "working with the bad guys" when that is what we have been doing all along. From our Shah in Persia to our Saddam Hussein in Iraq, the Saudi and Jordanian monarchies, Egyptian and Libyan strongmen—these are "bad guys" indeed, and we have supported them all. Now when the elements of resistance to us base themselves on a revival of Islamic fundamentalism (ISIS), we label them "terrorists." But "terror" is usually the human response of the militarily weaker party, growing from its inability to resist otherwise. Beheadings are indeed "gruesome," but are they more so than the slaughter of women, children, and old men from twenty-thousand feet just because we do not see their blood or hear their screams?

One might also be careful about the use of the ambiguous term "homeland," which has become so popular in an increasingly militarized United States. Vaguely alarming to a population as naïve and spoiled as our own, it may help justify further aggressions on our part. On the whole, one expects more careful use of language on the part of a magazine usually so notably "literary."

BERNARD F. REILLY
Broomall, Penn.

From the Editors

Muddled?

The video executions of two American hostages have awakened this country to the sweepingly brutal campaign of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, but its savagery is only part of what has made the Sunni extremist group dangerous enough for the United States to commit to military action. ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi heads an efficient organization that is also well financed and well armed, having seized key cities and infrastructure, including oil fields that generate millions of dollars a day. It has exhibited the ability to govern in locales it has taken over and has attracted thousands of foreign recruits to a force already numbering, by some estimates, thirty thousand. It has conducted genocidal raids on Iraq's Shiites, Kurds, Yazidis, and Christians. Its ability to inspire or carry out terrorist attacks in other countries, including the United States, cannot be ruled out.

If ISIS represents a clear and present danger, then why do the messages from Washington seem so murky? In carrying out limited air strikes in Iraq and now in Syria, and in arming and training so-called moderate insurgents, President Barack Obama is working within both the constraints he has set for himself as a reluctant warrior and those set by an American public wary of the prospect of another full-scale war in the Middle East. Yet there is concern that a gap exists between the goals defined by the president in his September 10 address—to "degrade and ultimately destroy" ISIS—and the methods proposed for achieving them. This has recently been demonstrated in comments from the chairman of the joint chiefs of staff that U.S. ground troops might be needed to defeat ISIS, calling into question Obama's assurances that he will not send American soldiers to do what he proposes local fighters should.

Meanwhile, in searching for a legal rationale for executive action, the administration has cited two previous congressional authorizations for use of military force: one issued in 2001, just after the 9/11 attacks, the other granted in 2002 to begin the war against the Saddam Hussein regime. Either one is a stretch: the former refers specifically to "Al Qaeda and its associates," the latter to Iraq. As has been pointed out, ISIS is not Al Qaeda, and Syria is not Iraq. The Constitution may allow Obama to act without Congress, as he has done since August when he first ordered air strikes to save the lives of thousands of Yazidis and Kurds. But an extended military engagement should require congressional authorization, not legal subterfuge on the president's part.

Unfortunately, Obama's evasiveness is more than matched by the hypocrisy of Congress, which clearly wants to avoid any direct responsibility for intervention in Iraq or Syria. Before leaving for midterm elections, the House and Senate passed a relatively modest measure—appended to a spending bill—approving training and equipment for Syrian rebels. Though backed by leaders in both parties, it won mostly tepid support and was opposed by dovish Democrats, libertarian isolationists, and hawkish Republicans who protested it wasn't strong enough. "Muddled" was the word used by the *Washington Post* to describe the nature of the activities on the House floor before the vote, though it could apply generally to the interaction among all of the main players in Washington.

Of course, "muddled" is the last word the world wants to hear in connection with more U.S. military involvement in the Middle East. ISIS has committed crimes against humanity; indeed, it has provided the world with video documentation of its crimes. This should be enough to justify military intervention. But it still leaves two questions: Without the backing of Congress or the United Nations, is the United States legitimately authorized to use force? And does Obama's proposed strategy stand a reasonable chance of achieving its aims? "Degrade" and "ultimately destroy" are two very different goals. Thanks to the capabilities of the U.S. military, degrading ISIS is well within reach. But it seems unlikely that the group can be destroyed without deploying U.S. troops. While growing international support for confronting ISIS lends welcome legitimacy, other factors complicate the picture. Qatar and Saudi Arabia participated in the most recent air strikes in Syria, yet both have been sources for the financing of Islamist extremists. Turkey, fearful of empowering the Kurds, is noncommittal. Iran, while supporting the fight against ISIS, is also an ally of Syria's Assad regime.

How the administration gathers congressional and international support over the next months will be crucial in sustaining the fight against ISIS. But it will also establish precedents that will either limit or expand presidential war-making powers for Obama's successors, who are seemingly bound to inherit this fight and face others like it. The president has few good options, but the worst is to initiate another war in the Middle East without first securing the firm consent of the American people and their elected representatives. ■

September 23, 2014

John Garvey

The Illusion of Control

DON'T CONFUSE DECISIVENESS WITH WISDOM

The war to end all wars: soldiers examining a skull on Vimy Ridge, April 1917

Here's something priests often hear, sometimes from members of parish councils: "Well, Father, in the real world…"—the implication being that the real world is the world of—what? Banking? Business? Politics? Apparently. One of my priest friends responded, "In the real world everybody dies. What are you doing about that?"

As I look at our real world on the hundredth anniversary of the beginning of World War I—briefly referred to as "the war to end all wars"—I see a confluence of so much horror that it seems as though the same stupidity that led to two world wars might soon repeat itself in the same random and irrational way. The ongoing conflict between the Israelis and the Palestinians; the collapse first of Syria and now of Iraq; the emergence of ISIS in both those countries; the nationalistic battles in Ukraine; a deadly epidemic in western Africa—all lead me to wonder how many concurrent crises the international community can juggle before it drops one.

I was born during the war that followed the one meant to end them all, and have lived through enough others to know that you should never trust politicians who claim to have everything under control.

Both politicians and political writers tell us we should neither want nor expect saints to be in charge of our politics. Of course saints are unlikely to be interested in the kind of power and control that anyone who seeks political office cares about. It's the consuming hunger for power and control over others that leads to what is happening now in the Middle East. The same hunger is responsible for the gridlock in Congress. Winning the next election—gaining power or hanging on to it—is all that matters to too many of our elected leaders. Such people can't be trusted. We need to keep an eye on them.

Instead of accepting their cold calculus, we should look to something deeper than politics for clues about the real sources of peace and conflict. Look at a Buddhist manual for monks, for example, which says that a good monk, seeing what most people must endure in their lives, forms "a tender estimate of the true condition of human beings." Or look at the Epistle of James: "What causes wars, and what causes fighting among you? Is it not your passions that act at war in your members? You desire and do not have, so you kill. And you covet and cannot obtain: so you fight and wage war.... What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes" (James 4:1–2, 14).

In August the *American Conservative* (a fine magazine, by the way) published a good piece on WWI and WWII by Wesley P. Harker. It quotes Herbert Butterfield's 1949 book *Christianity and History*:

> The more human beings are lacking in imagination, the more incapable men are of any profound kind of self-analysis, the more we shall find that their self-righteousness hardens, so that it is just the thick-skinned who are more sure of being right than anybody else. And though conflict might still be inevitable in history even if this particular evil (of self-righteousness) did not exist, there can be no doubt that its presence multiplies the deadlocks and gravely deepens all the tragedies of all the centuries. At its worst it brings us to that mythical messianism—that messianic hoax—of the twentieth century which comes perilously near to the thesis: "Just one little war more against the last remaining enemies of righteousness, and then the world will be cleansed, and we can start building Paradise."

This kind of messianism still passes for realism with a lot of politicians and pundits. People as different from each other as John McCain and Maureen Dowd want President Barack Obama to act with this sort of passionate decisiveness, as if passion and a commitment to seeking total control were the same thing as leadership. My disagreements with the Obama administration are many and deep, but he is the first president I've seen in many years who tries to act like a grownup, and understands that there are limits to what force can achieve. His cautiousness does him credit.

The kind of compassion recommended in the Buddhist manual for monks and in the Epistle of James makes so much more sense than the false wisdom of those, in Congress and in the media, who promise that they can ensure our security by using force—and the threat of force—to control the rest of the world. Total control and total security are always illusions. Beware of anyone who pretends to offer them. ■

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Rita Ferrone

Easy Does It

ROME PUTS A DAMPER ON THE SIGN OF PEACE

In a July letter, the Vatican's Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments (CDWDS) warned against "abuses" such as "the movement of the faithful from their places to exchange the sign of peace" during Mass. The CDWDS also criticized "the departure of priests from the altar" to greet parishioners and the practice of expressing congratulations during the sign of peace, as sometimes happens on feast days. The document, signed by CDWDS prefect Cardinal Antonio Cañizares Llovera and approved by Pope Francis, was sent to bishops conferences around the world. They should ignore it.

In our time, when a wide variety of styles exists in Catholic liturgy and confusion sometimes arises over primary and secondary meanings of our rites, such a letter might have helped to "hold the center" by calling people to reflect on the essential meaning of the sign of peace. Instead, it meandered down sadly predictable pathways, criticizing alleged abuses and insisting on the advisability of occasionally suppressing the exchange of peace altogether (something neither Benedict XVI nor Francis has advocated).

What prompted reconsideration of the sign of peace was a discussion that took place during the 2007 synod on the Eucharist, presided over by Pope Benedict. During that meeting, some bishops suggested moving the sign of peace from its current place in the Communion rite to before the presentation of the gifts, where the Orthodox and Ambrosian rites and the Episcopal Church have it. Benedict, who favored this alternative, asked the CDWDS to study the question. Were experts consulted, historical and theological sources reviewed, wide-ranging practices evaluated? No. A poll was sent to bishops conferences

CNS PHOTO / DANIEL SONE

in 2008. Their verdict? Moving the sign of peace would be "inconvenient."

One might have thought the whole thing had fizzled. Yet, six years later, the CDWDS letter was published. The text itself has barely anything to say about its original purpose—the question of the placement of the sign of peace. Instead, the letter is padded with "didactic instructions" that bishops are supposed to use in catechizing the faithful. The list of "abuses" to be "definitively avoided" are well-known, well-accepted practices: singing songs, or moving around to offer peace to more people, or adding impromptu words to the exchange, such as expressions of consolation to the bereaved at a funeral. To average Catholics, the letter came across as a slap on the wrist for being "too sociable" during Mass.

This approach is not only wrong-headed. It also distracts us from a more important agenda. The central challenge for the post–Vatican II era, as liturgical theologian Andrea Grillo has pointed out, is not eliminating abuses. It is deepening use of the postconciliar rites.

Reading the letter, one might imagine that the sign of peace is floundering in the church today. In fact, it's one of the most successful rites we have. This is shown by how thoroughly it has been inculturated: with hand clasps and smiling exchanges in North America; with lively songs in the Caribbean; with bowing in Thailand; with monastic practices such as those of the Jerusalem community, whose members rush forth from their contemplative position in choir to share the peace joyfully with as many as they can; and more. Those are hardly abuses. Rather, they are ways of inculturating the sign of peace, of enabling its rich and meaningful use.

One lone paragraph in the letter sounds a different note, and it comes near the end. It raises concerns that Pope Francis has articulated elsewhere. If he didn't write it himself, he certainly inspired it. Here, the conceptual frame of the discussion widens to include the world. The focus shifts from what we may *not* do to what we *must* do for the sake of God's kingdom:

> Today, a serious obligation for Catholics in building a more just and peaceful world is accompanied by a deeper understanding of the Christian message of peace, and this depends largely on the seriousness with which our particular churches welcome and invoke the gift of peace and express it in the liturgical celebration. Productive steps forward in this matter must be insisted upon and urged, because the quality of our Eucharistic participation depends upon it, as well as the efficacy of our being joined with those who are ambassadors and builders of peace, as expressed in the Beatitudes.

Would that the whole letter had taken this passage as its keynote. ■

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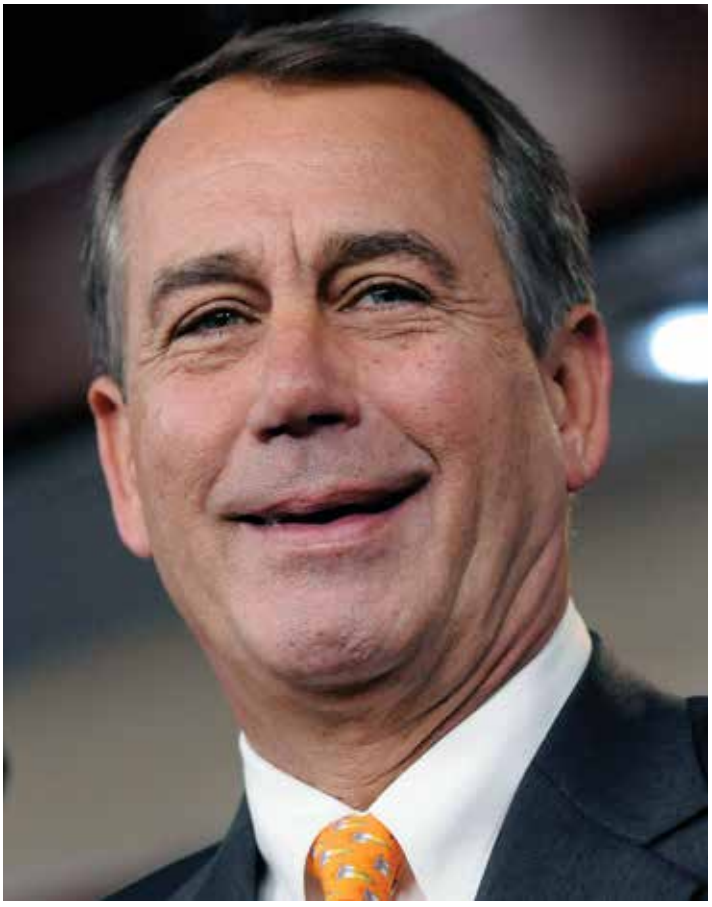
Nick Baumann

Get Used to Gridlock

THE MIDTERM ELECTIONS WON'T CHANGE MUCH

Most of us will never admit it, but almost everyone who works in or covers national politics already knows what will happen in November's midterm elections. You don't need a crystal ball to figure it out. A minority of Americans (and a minority of minorities) will vote on November 4. When the dust settles, Rep. John Boehner (R-Ohio) will still be Speaker of the House, which will in truth be governed by the unpredictable whims of a rump Tea Party caucus. Harry Reid, the current majority leader, or Mitch McConnell, Reid's Republican bête noire, will narrowly control the Senate. But whichever party is in the minority will use the filibuster to foil the majority party's aims. Finally, Barack Obama will still be president. The two parties, which deeply and sincerely disagree about most of the important issues facing the nation, will find little room for meaningful compromise. The only legislation that will pass both houses of Congress and win the president's signature will be of the most uncontroversial variety. Perhaps Obama will need to appoint a Supreme Court Justice before the end of his presidency—but, because of the filibuster, that will likely involve a fight no matter who wins control of the Senate in the midterms. And in 2016, Hillary Clinton, who will almost certainly be the Democratic nominee for president, will be a heavy favorite in the general election. In other words, neither party will control both Congress and the White House.



Not worried

CNS PHOTO / JONATHAN ERNST, REUTERS

In recent months, we've been granted a reprieve from this boredom—but only because of the sheer terribleness of the world beyond our borders. Little children swarmed across the U.S. border on their own, fleeing the poverty and deadly violence of El Salvador and Guatemala. The Israelis and Palestinians began killing each other with renewed vigor. Ukrainian separatists brought down a plane. Islamic fanatics too brutal for Al Qaeda took control of large parts of Syria and Iraq and started chopping off hands and heads. It's no surprise that, with divided government likely for the foreseeable future, most of the real action will have to do with foreign policy, where the president has far more power to act unilaterally than he does at home.

Conservatives will no doubt argue that legislative gridlock is a positive: Congress should be doing less, not more, they'll say. Others—including some in the White House—will note that, despite the paralysis in Congress, the domestic situation is better than it has been since the president took office: new unemployment claims are at their lowest level since 2006, well before the recession started; inflation is low; the stock market is up; Obamacare seems to be working.

But these coats of fresh paint mask a deep rot. America faces two major challenges that our leaders have done little, if anything, to confront. One is climate change. In May, two new scientific papers concluded that the collapse of most of the western Antarctic ice sheet—which contains enough water to increase sea levels by ten to thirteen feet—is now inevitable. Cable news networks barely covered the story. World governments once aimed to limit global warming to 2 degrees Celsius; scientists now believe that at least that much warming is already inevitable. A rise of 2.5 degrees Celsius would bring us to temperatures last seen about 3 million years ago, during the Pliocene geological period, when sea levels were between sixty and a hundred feet higher than today. Yet carbon emissions continue to rise unabated.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PICKING BLACKBERRIES AT JUBILEE

I have to lie down
The globular berries dripping black-wet
Hang heaviest inside.
I mourn the fallen ones too long undiscovered.
Some might be saved.
The deer have trespassed, by night,
Tearing the wick flesh of leaves
With doughy lips,
And the berries are shriveled, tart eraser ends
Where everyone looks.
But what delight goes undisguised?
In the secret shade, looking up into it,
A gasping coolness startles.
The branches are cupping their aubergine clusters
As you would a live animal.
I tickle them.
They loosen in my hands.
The fruit bolts juice over my cuticles
Signaling almost invisible ants.
I close my eyes, arms still plunged
In the center of the bush
Allowing their little bodies to
Work over me in the gorged sweetness, a second.
There is nothing that is not given.

—Emily Stout

Emily Stout is a graduate of the University of Illinois, Champaign-Urbana English Program. She is a postulant with the Little Sisters of Jesus.

America also faces a more immediate threat. The financial system has changed dramatically since the 2008 crash. Markets now move too fast for regulators to monitor them properly. Computer algorithms trade several times in the amount of time it takes you to blink your eye. Yet the only brakes on this system are automatic, designed in response to the previous crisis. There is no one who can hit the big red button if something goes wrong; indeed, there is no big red button. Bankers promise that they understand the systems they've designed, but we've heard that before. Can American democracy withstand the political stresses of another bailout? Can the American economy withstand the costs of letting another Lehman fail?

These problems are real and pressing. Yet our political system remains stagnant—and that's unlikely to change even after 2014. For decades, left-of-center voters have become increasingly concentrated in cities, where Democrats run up huge margins. Republicans, meanwhile, win by smaller but still mainly safe margins in exurban and rural areas. This dynamic essentially assures Republican control of the House of Representatives, except in years when Democrats can run against an unpopular GOP incumbent (e.g., George W. Bush). It's been made worse by gerrymandering: in 2010, Democrats were swept out of state legislatures and governorships, handing Republicans the ability to draw congressional districts in most states. Democrats are already spending millions to try to win those seats back. But even if they do, it may not be enough. The Voting Rights Act, designed to protect minorities' right to elect representatives of their choosing, all but guarantees that Democratic votes will be inefficiently distributed, ensuring perpetual Republican control of most rural parts of the country. Without a dramatic demographic change, or an equally dramatic change in the number of Americans who care enough about politics to show up to the polls, divided government is probably the most Democrats can hope for.

With Congress gridlocked, power will naturally accrue to other parts of the government—especially the courts and the executive branch. Unelected judges will continue to make huge changes in national policy, and Congress will be unable to respond. Executive action to deal with pressing national problems will become increasingly normalized, strengthening the national-security state and getting both parties used to the idea of rule by executive fiat. The few interest groups—mainly corporate ones—that manage to win bipartisan support will gain even more influence in Washington.

America's political system was not designed for the fierce ideological divisions that underlie the modern party system, and that's the kind of structural flaw that can end up destroying a country. If Americans don't want to go the way of the ancient Romans, we'll have to find a solution. Climate activists have their idea: a giant march, the largest in history, on September 21 to give national and international politicians (in New York for the UN summit) a sense of urgency about the problem. Alas, a recent study by the political scientists Martin Gilens and Benjamin Page confirmed what you've always suspected: "Mass-based interest groups and average citizens have little or no independent influence" on American government policy—only rich people and big businesses have that power. But average citizens don't have many other good options. For my money, if you want to make change in Washington, there are only two things to do: organize—and vote. ■

Nick Baumann *is a senior editor in the Washington, D.C., bureau of* Mother Jones.

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A Question of Conscience

The Excommunication of Ignaz von Döllinger

Thomas Albert Howard

While the fiftieth anniversary of the Second Vatican Council continues to be celebrated, 2014 also marks the one-hundred-fiftieth anniversary of the *Syllabus of Errors*—the now notorious document, issued by the Holy See under Pius IX, which, in presenting a list of "condemned propositions" about liberalism, rationalism, papal powers, and civil society, marked a veritable collision of the Catholic Church with the "modern age" that had arisen after the American and French revolutions. While Vatican II eventually eased matters in this regard, it's safe to say that the transition of the church from an age of feudalism and "prince bishops" to one of democratic pluralism has been anything but smooth. On a host of issues, such as religious liberty and ecumenism, change has taken place. Other issues, however—the nature of church authority, priestly celibacy, the role of the Curia, the place of women—sometimes appear, in the words of Matthew Arnold, to be "wandering between two worlds, one dead, the other powerless to be born."

Many U.S. Catholics find themselves stranded between those two worlds, especially when individual conscience comes into conflict with clear, if disputed, church teaching. Writing anonymously in these pages a few years back, an author summed up the nature of such conflict well: "I do not take the teachings of the church and its two thousand years of accumulated wisdom lightly.... But at the end of the day, one is left with oneself, one's conscience (however formed), and the stirrings of the spirit" ("Sins of Admission," April 15, 2010).

Some might be surprised to learn that the predicament described here has a long history. That history does not yield tidy lessons, but a glance back at the nineteenth century might yield insight for those unable to embrace certain church teachings yet still struggling to remain faithful Catholics—as well as for "separated brethren" attracted to Catholicism but unable to override the protest of conscience. Not only

Drawing of Ignaz von Döllinger by Adolf Neumann, c. 1870

was the nineteenth century roiled by the *Syllabus*; it also witnessed the controversial definition of the Immaculate Conception (1854), the collapse of the Papal States, the First Vatican Council (1869–70), the emergence of Catholic social thought, and the early stirrings of ecumenism. One particularly fascinating figure embroiled in those conflicts was the German priest, theologian, and historian Ignaz von Döllinger (1799–1890). Among the most renowned of Catholic scholars in his time, Döllinger is regrettably among the least remembered today.

A critic of the temporal power of the pope, an inspiration behind the so-called Old Catholic movement in Europe, and an ecumenist *avant la lettre*, Döllinger is sometimes portrayed as an early "liberal" Catholic. That label only partly fits, for his life and outlook—like those of the anonymous author quoted above—resist simple categorization. Appealing to conscience, Döllinger finally could not accept the doctrine of papal infallibility promulgated at the First Vatican Council, and for this he was excommunicated. Too critical of the modern papacy to be embraced by ultramontanes, but too mindful of tradition to be yoked comfortably with modernists and progressives, he has experienced a posthumous fate of neglect punctuated by intermittent scholarly puzzlement and interest.

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He deserves better. Whatever one makes of Döllinger's excommunication, the arc of his life helps us better understand some of the signature Catholic issues of his time and perhaps of ours. Above all, he affords insight into an archetypal modern religious dilemma: when to submit to religious authority irrespective of personal conviction, and when to follow one's own conscience—what John Henry Newman famously called "the aboriginal Vicar of Christ."

Born in 1799 into a family of eminent physicians and professors, Döllinger was ordained in 1822 and went on to spend the lion's share of his life teaching in Munich. Early in his career he leaned in a reactionary, ultramontane direction, joining a circle of conservative intellectuals, organized around the polemical journalist Joseph Görres and the short-lived journal *Eos*. This group has been described as "the living center of Restoration Catholicism" in central Europe. Yet Döllinger also established contact with Johann Adam Möhler and others on the Catholic theological faculty at Tübingen, where pioneering ideas about church unity and the "development of doctrine" were being hatched, and with such French Catholic liberals as Félicité de Lamennais and Charles de Montalembert. In 1836 Döllinger made his first visit to England, where he developed a firsthand appreciation of Anglicanism—a relative rarity for a Continental Catholic divine—and met a number of leading English intellectuals, including John Henry Newman and William Gladstone, with whom he maintained lifelong contact. For many years in Munich, a colony of young Englishmen boarded with him and received direction in their studies—among them Lord Acton, his most renowned and accomplished pupil.

By mid-century Döllinger had emerged as one of the most eminent Catholic theologians and historians in Europe, a man with the full confidence of Germany's bishops. But changes were afoot. In 1848–49, he spent a year as a member of the German parliament (which ultimately failed to unify Germany under a liberal constitution) in the process gaining a deeper appreciation of the political complexities roiling Europe, not least those involving church and state. The church-state question was felt acutely on the Italian peninsula, where movers and shakers in the *Risorgimento* had begun to call for the end of the Papal States as a condition of Italian unification. (Their mantra was *libra chiesa in libro stato*—"a free church in a free state.") This was blasphemy for ultramontanes, who, following Pius IX, regarded Italian church holdings as "the very robe of Jesus Christ on earth."

In 1857 Döllinger traveled with Lord Acton to Rome. What he saw there led him to view with mounting suspicion the direction of the papacy under Pius IX and his Jesuit backers. In his notes for a projected biography of Döllinger, Lord Acton offers the lapidary comment: "Experience of Rome. Luther not so very wrong after all." Both men expressed grave concerns about the Inquisition, which had recently placed several works by German biblical scholars and theologians on the Index. The neo-feudal police state that held sway in the Papal States struck them as hostile to the liberal spirit of the times. Döllinger, Acton later wrote, viewed his visit to Rome as a moment of "emancipation." In April 1861, he gave two lectures in Munich, in which he broke decisively with defenders of the pope's temporal power, arguing that the church had existed for seven hundred years without the Papal States and could exist without them in the future. "Will the Head of the church remain a sovereign prince," he asked, "or has the time arrived when the temporal power of the pope [should] be separated from the spiritual?"

From 1861 onward, distance grew between Döllinger and the Holy See; the papal nuncio in Munich, Flavio Chigi, had in fact stormed out of Döllinger's first lecture in Munich. Undeterred, Döllinger expanded his lectures into a book, *The Church and the Churches, or, The Papacy and Temporal Power: A Historical and Political Review*, which emphasized the ecumenical significance of the church divesting itself of temporal authority. In the fall of 1863, Döllinger helped organize a major gathering of German Catholic scholars. His keynote address "On the Past and Future of Catholic Theology" made a sharp distinction between scholastic theology, which he associated with Rome, and historical theology, which he associated with the emergent German nation and its prestigious universities. Scholastic theology was not without abiding value, he held, but its exponents were constrained by their Aristotelian method; without embracing (German) biblical and historical scholarship they possessed only one eye of theology, when two were necessary for the tasks at hand. Döllinger stressed that intellectual errors should be met by sound scholarship and good philosophy, not by the abrupt intervention of church authority. "The faults of science must be met with the arms of science," he urged, "for the church cannot exist without a forward-looking theology."

Lord Acton hailed the address as "the dawn of a new era" in Catholic theology. But in ultramontane circles, skepticism of German scholarship in general and Döllinger in particular only grew. Shortly after the conference, Pius IX issued the apostolic letter *Tuas libenter*, to Archbishop Gregor von Scherr of Munich. In it, the Vatican contested the idea that modern scholarship was a self-correcting enterprise, that scholasticism was unprepared to meet the intellectual challenges of the times, and that (as some at the Munich conference held) the Roman See impeded the progress of modern knowledge. Several lines from *Tuas libenter* were taken over directly in the *Syllabus of Errors*, issued shortly thereafter. One section of the encyclical, in particular, seemed aimed right at Döllinger, condemning his contention that "the method and principles by which the scholastic teachers cultivated theology are not at all adapted to the needs of our age and the progress of the sciences."

This was an extremely trying time for the church, with anticlerical vitriol in liberal and nationalist circles hardening the opinions of ultramontanes, and Döllinger was not

without sympathy for the plight of Rome. But he felt that the remedy sought—a dogmatic declaration of papal infallibility—was theologically and historically indefensible. As the Vatican Council of 1869–70 drew near, he published numerous articles against the doctrine of infallibility under the pseudonym Janus. In 1869, he gathered these articles into a book, *The Pope and the Council*, which like his prior book quickly found itself on the Index.

Döllinger regarded the idea of infallibility as a relatively recent development, one lacking foundation in the ancient, apostolic church. The church, he asserted, could not create new dogmas, but only declare and define what had always been held (*ubique, semper ab omnibus*). Furthermore, coming on the heels of the *Syllabus*, the doctrine threatened scholarly development in the Catholic world while creating ecumenical barriers. Turning infallibility "into an article of faith," he wrote, would "cripple all intellectual movement" in the Catholic Church even as it built up "a new wall of partition...between the church and the religious communities separated from her."

Of course, in 1870 the doctrine of papal infallibility, along with the See of Rome's jurisdiction over the universal church, was officially promulgated by the council, and from then on Döllinger found himself agonizingly at odds with the Vatican. Efforts were soon underway to secure his assent to the decrees. Numerous letters were exchanged between Döllinger and Archbishop von Scherr, who found himself uncomfortably tasked with procuring the assent of the man seen by many as the most learned Catholic in Europe. Döllinger for his part requested that a commission be assembled to meet and "in a calm discussion...refute me with reasons and facts." "The matter is already decided," von Scherr replied in frustration, and warned Döllinger against setting "historical scholarship above the church." In a letter explaining his final refusal to assent, Döllinger protested that "as a Christian, as a theologian, as a historian, as a citizen...I cannot accept this doctrine."

Excommunication came swiftly, the official letter charging him with "conscious, obstinate, and public denial of clear and certain ecclesiastical doctrines." It was a dark moment for Döllinger. "I have had only one sleepless night in my life," he later wrote, "and that was when I was considering the impossibility of reconciling my conscience to the dogma of infallibility, thinking it over and over and coming to the conclusion that I could not." His excommunication sparked a popular uproar across Europe and beyond; his letter was quickly translated into several languages and published far and wide. The *New York Herald* sized up the situation in May of 1871:

> The Christian world is on the eve of a momentous crisis. The declaration of Döllinger [against papal infallibility] may mark a new era in the history of the Roman Catholic Church equal in importance to that of Luther in the sixteenth century.... It may give birth to a new religion under the name of a Reformed Catholic Church. We forbear giving any opinion as to the merits of the controversy on either side. We have only to consider the momentous prospects involved in the case.

Two competing interpretations of the excommunication arose, surrounding Döllinger in a controversy not unlike those that today surround Hans Küng and Sr. Margaret Farley or the U.S. women religious rebuked by Rome. From the ultramontane standpoint, Döllinger got what was coming to him, paying the necessary price for bucking legitimate church authority. Pius IX praised von Scherr's action and, while admitting that Döllinger might have acted from honest motives, criticized him for displaying "the pride of a scholar" and a "spirit of opposition." The ultramontane press went farther, portraying Döllinger as a crafty Luther redivivus, leading well-meaning souls astray. At the same time, he was celebrated as a hero by an assortment of Protestants, political liberals, and liberal Catholics. Oxford University gave him an honorary degree. The prime minister of Britain, William Gladstone, praised his independent and courageous mind.

From the "Whig" perspective, in short, Döllinger represented the voice of academic freedom, conscience, and true faith standing against a "reactionary," "medieval" and "power-hungry" church. And while some prominent Catholics, such as Lord Acton and Newman, adopted more circumspect views, they also voiced misgivings about how the Döllinger affair was handled. Acton saw the excommunication as a species of persecution. Newman, too, was aghast. "My heart goes along with Dr. Döllinger with extreme sympathy in his cruel trial," he wrote in a letter. "I can hardly restrain my indignation at the reckless hardheartedness with which he and many others have been treated."

As for Döllinger himself, numerous attempts were made to gain his submission, but he remained firm. He regarded the actions against him as "an act of force and an injustice," and remained outraged that "an old man who during the forty-five years he was a public teacher never incurred any blame or even remonstrance from his bishop, and whose orthodoxy up to that time had never been exposed even to an established suspicion, has been summarily…'handed over to Satan.'" Until his death, he docilely abstained from administering or receiving the sacraments; yet he continued to believe in his ultimate vindication. "Convinced that the sentence decreed against me is unjust and legally null," he wrote, "I persist in regarding myself as a member of the great Catholic Church; and it is the church herself, through her Holy Fathers, tells me that such an excommunication cannot harm my soul."

Repeatedly Döllinger requested an "oral defense" to explain his position—requests that were routinely denied. In his reflections on his case, he again and again returned to the importance of historical scholarship and conscience. The decree on infallibility, he insisted, could not and would not stand up to historical scrutiny—and his conscience, he wrote shortly before his death in 1890, was "at rest and in safety."

What finally are we to make of the "Döllinger affair" a century and a half later? In many respects the liberal or Whig perspective recommends itself. Döllinger reviled the ultramontane spirit that he saw at work behind the council and his excommunication. But as agreeable as it might seem to view him from the liberal point of view, some facts work against it. For starters, while Döllinger advocated academic freedom and modern critical scholarship, he envisioned them as tools of the church, not unfettered, autonomous enterprises; his primary case against infallibility was not its potential abuse of power, but merely that the doctrine was not taught by the ancient, undivided church. In short, Döllinger saw himself defending tradition against innovation, not vice versa. He also resisted those who sought to cast him as a "new Luther." While he certainly sympathized with—and influenced—the Old Catholic movement, which rejected papal infallibility and grew rapidly in the 1870s and 1880s, he never fully signed on himself, but instead worried about the movement's sectarian tendencies. "I do not wish to be a member of a schismatic society," he wrote; rather, as he regularly insisted, his church remained the ancient Catholic Church, "the one holy catholic and apostolic church." Indeed, the reason he was especially keen about ecumenical contact with the Orthodox and Anglicans after his excommunication was that these two church bodies, in his view, still carried on the doctrinal consensus of the ancient church councils.

Those inclined to lionize Döllinger must also take into account some unsavory aspects of his outlook. A pungent nationalism accents his writings, which are given to sweeping generalizations about "national character." For example, he saw neo-scholasticism as a defective "Italian" phenomenon, and supported instead the enlightened "Germanic" way of scholarship; his advocacy of greater independence for German bishops from Rome is sometimes associated with "Febronianism," a German counterpart of Gallicanism.

More confounding is the question of whether Döllinger misrepresented the Vatican Council and the Decree of Infallibility. His interpretation of it veered strongly toward what scholars today would call "maximal infallibility," in which the pope is regarded as a veritable oracle of God. In fairness, this is how many of the ultramontane polemicists interpreted it—approvingly. Taking the bait, and often relying on partial knowledge of the council (much of it supplied by Acton, who attended in Rome; Döllinger did not), Döllinger was given to interpreting Vatican I in an unflattering light.

It is said that history is written by the winners. Döllinger was arguably a loser on two counts, first and most obviously vis-à-vis the ultramontanism that reigned triumphant within the Catholic Church in the nineteenth century. But even if one chooses to see the "Whig interpretation of history"—the eventual modern triumph of freedom, conscience, and individual rights—as the "big story," Döllinger cannot really be counted as a winner either. In celebrating the abiding

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I want to gather you like the accordion folds of a long dress
Around my wrists and run.
If you ask where, I say, breathless,
—The comfort & justice of an open field.

I want to hide you like the tender Seder bread
Our little fingers suspend over the plate,
For each plague, drip
"Blood (splash) frogs (splash) darkness"

Or, if you prefer, there is a place
In the slats of the granary
Where only the barn owl flashes its Oriental face
A slashed geode

You could hide there
The moon slit in half tonight—it reaches out
For spheres of fullness in the mist—No—
It is not just what you endure

She is casting into the rafters dark rainbows
Prisms in wood—the gauzy wings glitter over moon;
It is all my heart passing hopefully
Through your radiant—
very radiant, need.

—Emily Stout

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purchase of tradition on his intellect and conscience, he was no liberal in any conventional sense. He did not want to liberate himself—to become "Protestant"—but rather to proceed on the basis of a fairly traditionalist understanding of the ancient, undivided church. In this sense, one might even count him a conservative.

The nub of Döllinger's case and his relation to modernity remains his embrace of historical inquiry and scholarship. This new scholarly historical consciousness—historicism, as it is sometimes called—carried enormous implications for both exegetical and dogmatic theology and, by extension, for the authority of the magisterium and the practical workings of the church. It was, in short, the "Copernicanism" of its day. By robustly championing it, Döllinger found himself, willy-nilly, on a divergent path from those at the Vatican who viewed a return to scholasticism as the only coherent way forward for the church intellectually.

Döllinger's legacy has lived on despite neglect. His preference for earlier church fathers over scholastics can be seen as harbinger of the modern *nouvelle théologie* movement in France and Germany, which helped put the church on a path of *ressourcement*. His embrace of historical criticism foreshadows the work of the "Modernists" in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century—and, eventually, the church's guarded acceptance of historical criticism at Vatican II. Finally, his interest in questions of church unity adumbrates the work of such figures as the Dominican ecumenist Yves Congar and the Jesuit Augustin Bea, who helped lay the groundwork for Vatican II's Decree on Ecumenism and, later still, for John Paul II's *Ut Unum Sint* (1995).

Prior to Vatican II, a number of important figures found themselves disciplined by Rome only to be rehabilitated in the postconciliar period. Yves Congar himself is a good case in point: mercilessly reviled by the Curia in the 1940s and '50s, he was later made a cardinal by John Paul II. Another well-known example is John Courtney Murray, banned from teaching on church-state relations in the 1950s, only to have his ideas vindicated at the council. Döllinger, however, has never been rehabilitated. He took his criticisms too far; and he had the misfortune of living in the age of Vatican I instead of Vatican II. Perhaps the most appropriate thing we can conclude is that he represents a "tragic" figure in history of the church.

But tragedy has its purposes, as Aristotle reminds us in his *Poetics*. The tragic fate of a conscience-driven individual from another time helps us recognize more deeply the complexities and limitations of our own times—and the ambiguous role played by appeals to conscience in any age. For this reason, the Döllinger case serves as a mirror from the past, helping us see ourselves more clearly and live, if not more righteous, at least more examined lives. It teaches us not just about one man and his fate, but about the passage of the Catholic Church into the modern age, about the uses and complexities of knowledge in serving the church, and, not least, about the perpetual quandary of conscience and authority. Whatever our disagreements with the church, our first responsibility remains to take its two thousand years of accumulated wisdom as seriously as Döllinger did. His life shows that appeals to conscience, whether by Catholics or "separated brethren," might lead one to wander between the worlds of the past and the future. But it also suggests such wanderers might in fact serve the church. ■

A NUN IN THE COURTYARD OF SAN DAMIANO IN ASSISI. CNS PHOTO / OCTAVIO DURAN

'A True Story?'

A Mother's Fragmentary Faith

Debra Liese

When my oldest daughter was a baby, she carried with her, from car seat to crib, *My Little Golden Book About GOD*. A gift from her great-grandmother, it was full of cherubic children cradling birds, nursing wounds, and gazing, dumbfounded and sweet, at a vast and star-strewn sky. Now at eight, it's her quest to perfect "Adeste Fideles" on her guitar that obsesses her, and touches something in me, though my own belief in God is mercurial, and until she requested otherwise, I was more compelled to take my kids to play outside than to Mass.

Early on, my husband and I found vague common ground in seeing a relationship with nature as the closest thing to a true religious experience, though I never disliked church. While his Evangelical background and late-adolescent turn from its dogma left in its wake a gaping space and a lack of interest in organized faith, my own Catholic upbringing had felt like wandering a vast and fascinating museum and left me relatively unencumbered. As I passed into adulthood, I carried with me, more than a set of specific beliefs, a subtle passion and a sense of mysticism, a box with relics—an idea that things could not be easily explained.

We were married in the church of my childhood, complete

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with the formality of pre-Cana, but I never asked my husband to convert, or wanted such a gesture of conformity. When I went to Mass with my first daughter, she conducted the choir from her seat. But sitting next to her, getting serotonin hits from the curve of her angelic cheeks, I was more aware than ever that it was my human habitat that illuminated everything. Soon I had two more children, and each grew old enough to ask, "Is this story about God a true story?"

I'd sensed their souls from the moments of their births, but couldn't offer them certainty about the divine. What I could offer was my willingness to say "I don't know" to questions, and my hope that they would learn to accept mystery in a world ravenous for the definitive.

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When I was in my early twenties, I traveled to Italy, to the town of Assisi. I wasn't looking for religion per se, but I was disengaged from the adult world I had only just entered. Visiting the Basilica of St. Francis, I heard a guide speak about a fatal quake that hurled the vaulted inner roof of the basilica down on those below.

Death was not merely an abstraction for me; I already had some experience with it. My first boyfriend had died earlier that year. His death had been sudden and unexplained, its details enclosed in the privacy of his parents' grief. The circumstances tormented me—we had just broken up, promising each other a friendship that never had the chance to form. But his parents were kind to me. I was not their child, but I was lost too, and they would feed me lunch, take me to the beach. In the months we spent together, his mother saw him in everything—a pair of white butterflies in her garden, the words of a psychic, a dream. But my odd brand of soulful agnosticism evaporated into a feeling of absolute certainty that he simply wasn't *anywhere*. My post-college life began to falter. My new relationships were jagged things; I felt unmoored amid strange office creatures, accompanied by a ghost I couldn't even believe in.

In the basilica, as the guide played a grainy video of the vaults collapsing with a roar, I remembered an exchange my boyfriend and I had about the distant quake. "That's how I'd want to die," he'd told me. "Under a giant fresco." He was exquisitely intelligent, but also recklessly passionate in a way that always made him seem to be teetering at the edge of death, without its reality being even remotely imaginable. It had been one of our last conversations.

I left the basilica shaken, and wandered out into the town, which was beautiful but alien with its narrow streets, hidden enclosures, and storybook stone buildings. Assisi is a medieval hill town, rising above the valley of Umbria, its streets winding, its perimeter walled. I spoke no Italian, and, in my distracted state, I quickly became disoriented. In the middle of this confusion, which felt more dangerous than it probably was, I turned into a courtyard where nuns in all white were filling glasses of water.

When my kids started offering up prayers when an ambulance wailed by, I was comforted by their instinctive sense that living things are connected in invisible ways. I wanted them to have that.

I was struck dumb upon seeing them. The moment presented itself with a cinematic clarity: the serenity of their voices, the quiet that surrounded them, their smiles, sun on a pitcher of water. I stood there dazed, saying nothing, until one beckoned—a word that never felt quite so apt—and handed me a glass, which I drank. I stayed for what seemed a long time. When I emerged, something had changed. For many months afterward, thinking about those nuns offered a strange solace, though I knew my emotional response could be easily explained. The history surrounding us was palpable, the light on the water lovely; a person reached out to me with human simplicity at a time when I needed it most. Yet some kind of alchemy took place. It was a small shift, not from one certainty to another. But there it was, flickering in and out of visibility, the possibility that I had been mistaken.

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The alchemy didn't last. As a parent, years later, I was confronted first with practical concerns. Religion could be divisive, I feared, within ourselves and with those around us. It was easy, in the context of regular life, to justify what we stood to gain through avoidance. But what capacities, I came to wonder, were simultaneously being crippled? What possibility of reprieve in an unknown future was I denying my own children, whom I loved with a protective ferocity? When my little boy piped, "Ghosts aren't weal" on a walk through an old cemetery, my disappointment with his certainty surprised me. When my kids started offering up prayers when an ambulance wailed by, I was comforted by their instinctive sense that living things are connected in invisible ways. I wanted them to have that. I wanted them to experience a relationship with things eternal and mysterious.

Yet it grew difficult, with my complicated and shifting appreciation, to figure out what, exactly, my children's religious education should look like. Instinctively I felt their inquiry should be made from the inside out, not as outsiders peering in, drawing caricatures of what they saw. For a few years, I tried Catholic school, before settling into a comfortable, open-ended approach, telling my children that organized faith provided a place for contemplation of the divine, not an infallible moral or metaphysical system.

But what does this smorgasbord—a nondenominational performance of *Messiah* here, a lit candle in an empty church there—really leave them with? I find it strange, at times, to offer what amounts to religion-lite, when what attracts me is the potential for depth. Is it possible to engage in a way that goes beyond mere aesthetics, yet avoid dogma? Is all inquiry doomed to end at a lifeless impasse between true and untrue? In spring, girls in white veils spilled out of a church, and my daughter's eyes grew wide. "When will I make Communion?" she wanted to know, because she was seven too. She grew irritable when I told her she had more to learn, that it was important to be sure. Certainty was for the faint of heart; she still wanted to wear the white dress.

* * * * *

After the shock of the quake in Assisi I know there was another sound, softer but more ominous, as the pieces fell and fell inside that empty church. It could have lasted no more than minutes, but in my mind's eye it happened slowly, the way beauty or faith undoes itself. Sixteen years ago in late summer, I sat in a mother's garden, watching for white butterflies. "They always come," she'd told me, before I never came again. That garden is just ten miles from where I now live, and in the years since, I've driven hundreds of times down that stretch of highway, past that parallel world. I drove with my three children, their own lives invisibly unfurling.

* * * * *

My agnosticism is more than a way to hedge all bets. Each prong of it runs equally deep. My struggle for a balance of exposure and reason, for a sense of where faith ends and desire begins, is ongoing, a mystery of change in itself. When my kids practice the discipline of sitting quietly at Mass, absorbing the traditions, if not the catechism of their grandparents, I feel the weight of responsibility for nurturing their spiritual paths. Yet I also know that what they experience isn't for me to decide. Just as some are born with a talent for mathematics or music, I believe that some are born with spiritual receptivity. My cousin became a nun, a renunciate; my closest friend experienced recurrent dreams even before kindergarten about being shown the universe, and an understanding of a greater plan was placed in her heart. That there exist people of such devotion is a source of comfort. Envy too. Not everything is an intellectual choice.

I may never believe in a God I can explain, beyond sensing the divine in a flash in the eyes of someone I love. When my daughter confronts her own tangle of history and myth, truth and strangeness, she will sense, I hope, what to enclose in her heart and what to throw away. I think of myself not much older than she is now, how I wanted freedom from things that weighed me down with their falseness, without losing the mysteries that elevated me. And how hard it was—and still is—to know the difference. ■

Rand Richards Cooper

Roads to Nowhere

'THE TRIP TO ITALY' & 'LAND HO!'

Steve Coogan & Rob Brydon in 'The Trip to Italy'

As Hollywood knows perhaps all too well, road movies and buddy movies churn out powerful cinematic pheromones long proved to lure men into the theater. From *Easy Rider* to *Beavis and Butthead Do America,* and so much in between—*The Motorcycle Diaries, The Blues Brothers, Thunderbolt and Lightfoot, Midnight Run, 48 Hours, Lethal Weapon, Rush Hour, Butch Cassidy & the Sundance Kid, The Defiant Ones, The Hangover*—these odes to masculinity portray male camaraderie as equal parts raucous hijinks, frontier exploration, reckless boozing, violence, rock-and-roll, priapic excess, and lewd humor, while offering the primordial hunter-gatherer in all of us an escape from civilization and its domesticating avatar and warden, the Wife. Above all, the road-and-buddy fantasy of perpetual youthfulness—that miraculous elision of nature's laws that allows the Stallones and Willises to romp freely in their sixties—offers men an ironclad reassurance: You will never grow old, and you will *surely* never die.

Yet there exists a kind of counter-film, mostly of the art-house variety, that takes the narrative in a different direction—toward actual midlife, where the encroachments of mortality are allowed their sway. Michael Winterbottom's *The Trip to Italy* reprises his surprise 2010 hit, *The Trip*, in which a pair of British actor-comedians, Steve Coogan and Rob Brydon, played lightly fictionalized versions of themselves, as minor celebrities undertaking a culinary road trip for a British newspaper. The first film highlighted the Lake District of northern England; this time the setting is the sun-drenched Italian countryside, where the pair follow the steps of Shelley and Byron, fashioning their own Romantic grand tour. Comically, neither man knows much of anything about food; the junket is a chance to enjoy free five-star luxuries while trading stories of angst about marriage and career, and indulging in a scattershot comic banter that forms the movie's raison d'être.

The Trip to Italy is first and foremost a showcase for two irrepressible comic talents. In the film the men, both fiftyish, have suffered career setbacks: Coogan's TV show has been canceled, and Brydon's gig doing voiceovers for a big-box store has not been renewed. Their career anxieties are amplified by the prospect of middle age and their declining market value, both professional and amorous. "They look straight through us," Coogan complains, of a group of young women at a bar. "When did I suddenly become invisible?"

Highly combative, the two bicker like a long-married couple as they motor along the Italian coast, competitively trading actor impersonations. (Coogan does the better DeNiro, Brydon the better Roger Moore; their Michael Caines are both superb.) Some of their byplay is mere nonsense, as when a discussion of the benefits of eating game morphs into gruesome speculation on cannibalism and which celebrity's legs would be best to eat. But much of the japery has an edge; the film administers a stiff British dose of taking the piss out of one's friend. For example, when Coogan boasts about running on the beach in Los Angeles with the actor Owen Wilson, Brydon retorts, "Running *with* or running *after*? And are you sure he's not just running away from you?"

I'm hard pressed to recall a film this facetious and this serious at once. Throughout, Winterbottom flashes to restaurant kitchens where chefs labor at their trade; it signals a world where hard work proceeds apace and leaves, presumably, little time for the metaphysical angst in which our pampered squires indulge. Yet Winterbottom takes them seriously, and invites us to share their dismay at the predicaments of advancing age. Reminders of mortality are everywhere. Nervously the two joke at seeing the frozen corpses of Pompeii, or while studying a print of Edouard Fournier's lugubrious painting of Byron mourning at Shelley's funeral pyre (Brydon: "Did you ever think that one day you'll be on a slab and they'll be embalming you?"). The death theme culminates in a visit to the catacombs of Naples, where the two ruminate on skulls and exchange a testy back-and-forth about *Hamlet* and the proper rendition of "Alas, poor Yorick...."

In the previous *Trip* film, Coogan dominated; this time Brydon stands front and center. He's one of those manic comics who, like the late Robin Williams, is perpetually doing some voice or other—talk-show host, game-show host, news announcer, Hugh Grant. His agitation and constant need to perform betray deep insecurity about being in his own skin. In one scene, alone in his hotel room, he practices a single line from a movie script he's set to audition, and does it in a dozen increasingly hilarious voices and accents—all the while driving himself deeper into uncertainty about whether he can pull the audition off. Such moments are almost as unsettling as they are funny.

But it is left to Coogan to deliver the film's culminating monologue, there in the ossuary in Naples, surrounded by piled-up skulls. The moment encapsulates the film: two brooding men,

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standing in a boneyard, face mortality and create a diversion with a blitzkrieg of humor. *The Trip to Italy* shows again and again that laughter is indeed the best medicine. But it, too, shall perish. "Where be your gibes now?" Coogan recites, channeling Hamlet. "Your gambols? Your songs? Your flashes of merriment, that were wont to set the table on a roar?"

Land Ho! takes the setup of *The Trip to Italy* and fast-forwards twenty years. At roughly seventy and sixty-five, Mitch and Colin are ex-brothers-in-law (long ago, they were married to sisters) who take the occasion of Mitch's retirement to spend a week in Iceland, renewing a lapsed friendship while seeking to rediscover some pleasure in their lives—"to get our groove back," as Mitch announces to any and all who will listen.

As in *The Trip to Italy*, the relationship between the two men proves scratchy, though in this case polar temperaments, and not similar ones, are to blame. Mitch (Earl Lynn Nelson) is that familiar and nightmarish American, the pathological extrovert. Foisting himself gregariously on anyone in his path, spewing tall tales and unsolicited life wisdom, he's also incorrigibly lewd (lighthouses, boulders, and other features of the landscape unfailingly remind him of erogenous equipment), and uses the cover of old age as a license for boorish commentary. ("So how often have you two gone to the mat so far?" he crassly asks a young honeymooning couple.) He's also generous, and we suspect that somewhere amid the thickets of his egregiousness lies a good heart. Colin (Paul Eenhoorn) is Mitch's polar opposite. A mannerly Aussie, he's quiet and inward-looking, and backward-looking, too, burdened with regrets over a music career he abandoned for the security of banking; over the death of his first wife (Mitch's sister-in-law) and his recent divorce from his second.

During the course of the week in Iceland, Mitch's bluster presses in on Colin, threatening to precipitate a crisis. But it doesn't happen. Throughout *Land Ho!* I kept waiting for something garish to occur, especially in the middle of the film, when the codgers hang out with two women in their late twenties—one a distant relative of Mitch's—and I feared we were being steered toward a wince-inducing dual hookup. But that never happens (whew!), nor does the heart attack that also seems to be in the offing as the men huff and puff their way up various mountainsides. Instead what writer-directors Aaron Katz and Martha Stephens serve up is a larky form of therapy, the two men reviving their mojo by resurrecting the pleasures of boyhood. At times *Land Ho!* unfortunately resembles an advertisement for a retirement community—those montages of older people dancing around and being silly (a tenaciously upbeat soundtrack enforces the aura of jollity.)

But for the most part the film earns its sweetness. Less querulous than Winterbottom's duo, and far mellower, the two men exchange laughter, regrets, and the occasional cri de coeur. "I'm not dead yet!" Mitch shouts as they share a beer one evening, sitting outdoors at sundown. Like *The Trip to Italy, Land Ho!* traverses a conspicuously gorgeous landscape. But where the bursting, vivid beauty of Amalfi and Liguria at times seems almost to taunt Coogan and Brydon, Iceland's unearthly panoramas lend serenity and a stark sense of timelessness. A journey by old men to a country of ice and rock poses inescapable metaphors, and *Land Ho!* explores them with tactful adroitness.

Both films chart the male temperament as mortality heaves into view, and both situate their protagonists in a world where religion seems to have vanished; spiritual perspectives don't even make a blip on the radar. Wholly unequipped with faith, these men must counter mortality with other tools: memory, invective, reversions to boyish prankishness, awed admiration of nature, and most of all shared laughter—the ice of old age thawed, at least a little bit, by the consoling warmth of friendship. ■

Andrew J. Bacevich

Beyond the Parlor

Strange Glory
A Life of Dietrich Bonhoeffer
Charles Marsh
Alfred A. Knopf, $35, 544 pp.

Writing in *Commonweal* in 1980, the historian David O'Brien famously referred to Dorothy Day as "the most significant, interesting, and influential person in the history of American Catholicism." Historians more generally may yet render a similar judgment of Dietrich Bonhoeffer as the most significant and interesting figure in twentieth-century Christianity. One day perhaps they will deem him among the century's most prophetic voices as well. This much appears certain: Nearly seventy years after his murder at the hands of Hitler's SS, the witness that Bonhoeffer bore through his life has lost none of its power to illuminate, instruct, and challenge.

This splendid biography by Charles Marsh, professor of religious studies at the University of Virginia, does nothing to undermine and much to sustain Bonhoeffer's stature as theologian, pastor, and martyr. Yet the real contribution of *Strange Glory* is to provide a rich and detailed account of how Bonhoeffer's immensely eventful life unfolded—the personal, intellectual, and spiritual journey that ended in a Nazi concentration camp on April 9, 1945.

Marsh describes Bonhoeffer as "an exuberant and wide-eyed pilgrim," a phrase that captures the book's essential theme. As a young man, Bonhoeffer himself expressed a determination to live as "a sojourner on the earth." But if the pilgrim earnestly sought a clearer understanding of man's relationship with his creator, the journey itself did not require renunciation of what creation had to offer.

Raised in privileged circumstances, Bonhoeffer accepted privilege as his birthright. Here was a saintly figure who enjoyed good food, fine wine, and long vacations, preferably in sunny climes. Bonhoeffer collected art, books, and Persian rugs. He accumulated a library of phonograph records, his musical tastes ranging from classical symphonies to African-American spirituals. When he lived abroad for any period of time, his grand piano followed in due course. When it came to underwear, cotton would not do—he insisted on silk. In a day when private vehicle ownership was far from commonplace, Bonhoeffer had at his disposal both a smart Audi roadster and a motorcycle. As a backup, his father's chauffeur-driven limousine stood at the ready. And should cash become a problem—as it did with some frequency—he simply asked and his parents provided.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer in Berlin's Tegel Prison, 1944

FROM *STRANGE GLORY*

With privilege came obligations. Bonhoeffer's parents, Karl and Paula, inculcated into their eight children—born in 1906, Dietrich was third youngest—an affinity for learning, nature, and culture along with a commitment to service. Yet in the Bonhoeffer household, God did not occupy a place of prominence. So Dietrich's announcement at age thirteen that he intended to become a theologian came as a considerable surprise—think of Malia Obama forgoing the Ivy League college she is destined to attend in favor of joining the Trappistines.

But if an exuberant pilgrim, Bonhoeffer was a determined one as well. When he set his mind to doing something, he did it. Parental reservations over his choice of professions would number among the least of the obstacles awaiting him.

A rigorous education ensued. First at Heidelberg and then at the University of Berlin, Bonhoeffer mastered "theology according to the rules of the guild." By the 1920s, those rules

emphasized a Christianity that marginalized Christ, finding value in the message while largely dispensing with the messenger.

The prodigiously talented Bonhoeffer sailed through the academic program, even while developing reservations about the liberal turn of German Protestant theology. Doubts, Marsh writes, eventually led him to reject that theology as "algebraic and wintry." In its place, over time, came something more passionate and capacious. Bonhoeffer's was a theology shaped by direct experience. In that regard, his real education occurred away from the university and gained momentum only after his formal schooling ended. His pilgrimage took him to Rome and Paris, where he felt himself drawn to the allure of Catholic ritual and spirituality; to Barcelona, where he preached to German expats about the "great loneliness that has come upon our age;" and to New York, where the famous faculty of Union Theological Seminary impressed him far less than did the buoyant services and applied Christianity he encountered nearby at Harlem's Abyssinian Baptist Church.

From these and from other travels that took him everywhere from Morocco to Mexico, Bonhoeffer drew two conclusions that transformed his theological perspective and put him on a collision course with the Nazi regime then coming to power in Germany. First, writes Marsh, Bonhoeffer became "a theologian of the concrete." No longer viewing grace as an abstraction, he saw it instead, as "a divine verdict requiring obedience and action." The beatitudes were not commendations or suggestions; they were directives. "The Sermon on the Mount had moved to the center of his thinking and there it would remain." Second, as an antidote to ultra-nationalism and war, Bonhoeffer embraced a radical ecumenism. Beginning as a "radiant vision of Christian community," his conception of ecumenism became more inclusive as the crisis into which Hitler was plunging Germany deepened.

The unity Bonhoeffer eventually envisioned allowed room for both Jews and nonbelievers. He came to view as self-evident "the equivalence before God of the church and the synagogue, between the body of Christ and the chosen people of Israel." And as his own German church prostrated itself before the Nazi order, Bonhoeffer concluded that religion as such had become irredeemable. What survived, he wrote, was "only the garb in which Christianity is clothed." As such, he saw no alternative but to strip away the garb, rebuilding from the ground up a Christianity that would transcend religion.

These discoveries occurred against a backdrop of intensifying but ultimately futile activism on Bonhoeffer's part. Attempts to rally the German church to maintain its independence from the Third Reich fell flat. So too did pleas to European church leaders to come to the aid of their German brethren. Most dramatically, valiant efforts to build within Germany an alternative "confessing church" ended in failure, as did Bonhoeffer's personal attempt, drawing on Catholic traditions, to create a new form of monasticism in a world seemingly headed for the abyss.

In the midst of these serial disappointments, Bonhoeffer fell deeply in love. The object of his affection was Eberhard Bethge, a student at Finkenwalde, the underground seminary that Bonhoeffer had founded in 1935. Bonhoeffer was immediately "smitten," writes Marsh, and the two men became all but inseparable. They traveled together, frequently sharing the same room. They opened a joint bank account. When circumstance forced them apart—by 1941 Bethge was in the army—Bonhoeffer wrote his friend on at least a daily basis. In Eberhard, Dietrich had found his "soul mate."

The bond between the two men "always strained toward the achievement of a romantic love," Marsh observes, while adding that their relations were "ever chaste." On that score, *Strange Glory* contains no hard evidence to the contrary. Yet given our present-day tendency to see sex as integral to genuine intimacy, the claim invites skepticism. Readers will make up their own mind.

Whatever Bonhoeffer sought from Bethge—at the very least, long-term exclusivity—was more than his friend was ultimately willing to give. This became clear toward the end of 1942 when Eberhard, age thirty-three, became betrothed to a young woman of seventeen. For Bonhoeffer, according to Marsh, this "threw everything out of balance." Marsh speculates that with Bethge's engagement, "sustaining a romance with a woman and thus keeping pace" now became for Bonhoeffer "a test of his own mettle." Women had never previously interested Bonhoeffer. Now, after the briefest courtship, he announced his own engagement to Maria von Wedemeyer. Dietrich was then thirty-six. Maria was a mere eighteen and addressed her fiancé as "Pastor Bonhoeffer."

You don't need an advanced degree in psychology to sense more going on here than two happy couples pairing off. At any rate, Bonhoeffer's union with Maria was destined never to happen. In the end, it was "his love for Bethge that would endure."

Along with this personal upheaval came the developments that ultimately cost Bonhoeffer his life. As the Nazi regime tightened its grip and the war reached apocalyptic proportions, Bonhoeffer abandoned his longstanding commitment to nonviolence and enlisted in the anti-Hitler resistance. When he had first met Reinhold Niebuhr in New York, Bonhoeffer had come away unimpressed. Now, under extreme duress, his thinking assumed a Niebuhrean cast. In certain circumstances, he found, to "sin for the sake of righteousness" might become not only permissible but also imperative. In grappling with this conundrum, Marsh writes, Bonhoeffer "did not try to resolve the paradox by assuming moral innocence." Instead, much like Niebuhr, he "accepted the paradox by incurring the guilt born of responsible action."

Ill-suited to cloak-and-dagger work, Bonhoeffer played no more than a marginal role in the plot to eliminate Hitler. Although Marsh describes Bonhoeffer as a "minister to the conspirators," that comes across as a stretch. Serving as an occasional courier, he was at most a bit player. Yet combined with his prior dissident activity, his participation sufficed to attract the attention of the Gestapo.

Arrest and imprisonment were only a matter of time. Bonhoeffer's time came in April 1943 and landed him in Berlin's Tegel prison. Astonishingly, with the German capital under regular Allied bombardment, Bonhoeffer continued even as a prisoner to enjoy a privileged existence. During his confinement in Tegel, according to Marsh, he received "extra portions of food, hot coffee, and cigarettes." Visitors brought flowers and fresh fruit. An uncle stopped by to break open a bottle of champagne. Most importantly, Bonhoeffer had access to books, pen, and paper. During his confinement, he read and wrote ceaselessly.

All such niceties vanished in the crackdown that followed the failed July 1944 attempt to assassinate Hitler. Transferred to the custody of the SS, Bonhoeffer was moved to Buchenwald and then to Flossenbürg, where he was finally executed. Little reliable information about Bonhoeffer's last days is available, and Marsh does not pretend otherwise. That the end was grim and brutal suffices.

In 1928, on the cusp of his journey of discovery, Bonhoeffer had observed that in modern life "religion plays the part of the parlor." It had become a place "into which one doesn't mind withdrawing for a couple of hours, but from which one then immediately returns to one's business." In our own day, faith remains in the parlor, the subject of polite and passing attention. The work that matters happens elsewhere. For Christians daring to rethink that proposition, Bonhoeffer's life serves as an object lesson in what is to be gained—and lost. ■

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Thomas Baker

More Than Morals

Jesus the Forgiving Victim

James Alison
Doers Publishing, 591 pages, $39.95

The current market for "introductory courses" in the Catholic faith is crowded but depressing. On the one hand, there are the safe, diocesan-approved catechetical textbooks—uninspiring and confident, every page pockmarked with references to the authoritative paragraph numbers of the Catechism of the Catholic Church. On the other, there is now Robert Barron's popular *Catholicism*, a video extravaganza immersing us in traditional, even triumphal apologetics. All seem more likely to shore up the already convinced than to attract the unbeliever or the thoroughly lapsed.

Here, however, is a true outlier entering the lists. James Alison, the Oxford-educated theologian, itinerant speaker, and former Dominican, has spent the past dozen years developing his own approach to faith formation, *Jesus the Forgiving Victim*. His writing style alone (not to mention his ambiguous canonical status) marks him out from the start as playing an entirely different catechetical game; as Christopher Ruddy wrote here in 2009, Alison is "at once conversational and convoluted, witty and at times even campy." The outline of his course is similarly original: nothing on such instructional staples as the Trinity and the seven sacraments, no checklist of the basics that need to be learned in time for Easter initiation. Instead, Alison dives deep on his own list of fundamental issues of theology and Scripture: what it means to have "faith" and how we get it, how we read and interpret biblical texts, what sacrifice has meant throughout Jewish and Christian tradition, what Jesus was here to tell us and why we obscure it and fail to understand it.

Two themes from Alison's other work are central to *Jesus the Forgiving Victim*. The first is that Christians, to their detriment, have allowed the regulation of morality and behavior to overshadow the actual message of the gospel. "This, in my humble opinion," writes Alison, "is part of the great collapse of Christianity over the last two hundred years in the West: it has become so exclusively linked to morals, and morals tied to a pre-existing theory, that it has been rendered boring." Or, as he puts it even more succinctly, "being good or bad is not what it's about. It's about being loved."

Now, it's easy to imagine a doctrinal inspector at the Vatican marking up this last way of phrasing things as overstating the case (at best), and it does skate over the centrality of the word "repentance" in Jesus' preaching. Alison is trying to administer a radical corrective to how the faith is often presented, and he backs it up with a sophistication and persuasiveness that usually justify his excesses. Nevertheless, readers should be aware that this is a "catechism" unmoored from the language and style our Catechism uses to say things, although it rarely contradicts the actual content.

Alison's second central theme challenges the traditional theology of atonement, in which Jesus dies seemingly to satisfy God's own requirement of compensatory sacrifice for human sin. Alison believes instead that we are the ones who demanded Jesus' death, and that the crucifixion actually contradicts the idea that God in any way requires a death in order to be "satisfied." (Alison's development of this topic reflects the strong influence of anthropologist-philosopher René Girard, whose work sees Christ's death and resurrection as the ultimate refutation of our human tendency towards scapegoating and violence.) Alison devotes almost an entire volume of his course to tracing the Old Testament's practice and theology of sacrifice, a history now transformed by Christ into one we can read only from the victim's perspective. That perspective of the victim also needs to shape the Christian moral

James Alison

life; as the story of the Good Samaritan tells us, "the attitude toward victims is the criterion for neighborliness."

I can't think of another theologian writing today who has me reaching so often to underline a quotable passage, or who finds more surprising depths in familiar Scriptures. Any homilist, for example, will find new insights in Alison's line-by-line explication of the Our Father, or in his re-reading of St. Paul's famous paean to love in 1 Corinthians, which (he reminds us) is not only about human love, but about God's love directed to us. At its best, Alison's writing resembles that of his great Dominican teacher Herbert McCabe: the same clarity, originality, and approachability, with, like McCabe, occasionally a bit too much readiness to write as if what has just been asserted is simpler and more self-evident than it actually is. (But then, what catechism doesn't suffer from that flaw?)

It's also fair to say that a few of Alison's imaginative and rhetorical leaps come back to earth with a clunk, at least to my cynical ears. At one point, he imagines Jesus telling us, "Let's see whether we can't learn a new way of being together"—an *Eewww!* moment I can't picture the real Jesus falling into. And in Alison's central chapter on Jesus as victim, a too-long fictional parallel centers on a gay student viciously ostracized by his peers who returns to their school with tolerant forgiveness. It's not the introduction of gayness as an example of victimhood that doesn't fly, but rather the awkward dialogue and overextended symbolism.

For a free sample of the best of Alison's course, go to his website (tinyurl.com/alisonchapter) and read his funny, imaginative essay on the church. Here, he presents a series of images—restaurant, portal, embassy, halfway house—vaguely reminiscent of Avery Dulles's classic "models of the church" but with just the right edge of mischievous satire. In his first analogy, Alison asks us to imagine a restaurant with exceptional food prepared by a glorious, unseen chef, but with a dining experience undermined by the waiters, whose infighting, confusion,

and arrogance overshadow (although not quite) the miraculous cooking:

> They [the waiters] have a tendency to filter the very wide list of "specials" into something much narrower, which boosts their own understanding of what the restaurant is about and their place in it. They also come up with strange translations of the menu that make the food sound rather unpalatable.

If this sounds disrespectful, the humor is integral to his point: Our church's misguided attempts to rein in and repackage the message of divine love at the core of the faith can, in fact, be comical. At the same time, Alison wants us to recognize that, despite the church's laughable humanness, it is still an indispensable source of stability and orthodoxy. He asks: "How can you talk about a dynamic which enables you simultaneously to treat something [the church] extremely seriously, and yet not take it seriously at all?" Again, not a way of phrasing things that will please the inspector of doctrine, but many *Commonweal* readers will probably sympathize.

All in all, despite its originality and passion, it's clear this is not a "course" that will find broad adoption in parish life. Even leaving aside the fundamental conservatism of those who choose catechetical materials, I find it hard to believe that the average neophyte could cope with some deep plunges into anthropology, hermeneutics, and Old Testament ritual, as Alison's course does at various points. However, as a resource for either engaged Catholics or educated skeptics, *Jesus the Forgiving Victim* is a thought-provoking, engrossing presentation of faith that is also an excellent introduction to Alison himself. (Unfortunately, in book form it has been packaged inconveniently, and expensively, in a set of four little volumes with clip-art-quality covers.) Perhaps you can gather a couple of adventurous friends, believers or not, and do the course yourselves. You will find that few people make theology as interesting as this quirky, brilliant master teacher. ■

Thomas Baker *is the publisher of* Commonweal.

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Visions & Blind Spots

Living with a Wild God

A Nonbeliever's Search for the Truth about Everything

Barbara Ehrenreich

Grand Central Publishing, $26, 256 pp.

How does a dedicated religious nonbeliever make sense of recurring, "strange" episodes of altered consciousness in her life, episodes similar to those of mystics and believers? In her latest book, Barbara Ehrenreich tracks back through her interesting life story, confronting these unusual experiences head-on and attempting to make sense of them.

Living with a Wild God arrives as something of a surprise to fans of Ehrenreich, a muckraking political writer (*Nickel and Dimed, Bait and Switch*) and social activist who has called herself "a fourth-generation atheist." Yet an awareness of mystical-seeming experiences goes back many decades in her life. Early in adolescence, Ehrenreich began to experience anomalous moments both at home and school; at seventeen these climaxed in a "cataclysmic" event that occurred on an outing in the California desert. Awaking tired and hungry in the predawn, a groggy Ehrenreich stumbled into town, seeking a store to buy food. Suddenly, without warning, "the world flamed into life.... Something poured into me and I poured out into it." She found herself engulfed in a fiery and "furious encounter with a living substance." It was ineffable and overwhelming, an ecstasy more violent than euphoric.

Stunned by what had happened, Barbara nevertheless carried on meeting the daily demands of life at home, in school, and at her summer job. She confided in no one. Who would listen? Isolated and depressed, she feared she was going crazy. She had already rejected any and all claims of religious faith, and in her view the only rational explanation of what had happened to her lay in some pathological psychiatric diagnosis such as schizophrenia.

Though she didn't yet grasp it, Ehrenreich was poised atop a personal dilemma. Raised to reject religion, she was nonetheless a precociously intellectual adolescent, one who had declared herself to be "on a mission to discover the purpose of life." She read everything she could find that might help her discover "the point of our brief existence." What are we doing here, she wondered obsessively, and to what end? Her family, proud of their working-class atheism, derided such questions. Their outlook was formed in the tough life of the mining town of Butte, Montana. All authorities were to be distrusted; the defiant mantra, Ehrenreich recalls, was "We don't take crap from anyone, never have and never will."

Ehrenreich's young parents possessed sufficient energy and ambition to battle their way up and out, eventually gaining a foothold in the middle class. Her handsome and driven father was a copper miner who won a college scholarship and ultimately rose to be a senior executive at Gillette. Moving around the country, following his career assignments, Barbara's mother obtained neither the education nor the status that she craved. Both parents had endured deprived childhoods, and carried wounds that created marital misery, misery abetted by alcohol abuse. It is a familiar story. The adored but absent father was unreliable and unfaithful. The angry mother took out her bitterness on her academically gifted eldest daughter. After the predictable divorce, the downward course quickened, and lives dissolved in a welter of depression, alcoholism, suicide attempts, and finally dementia. "What a sodden mess they made of their lives," Ehrenreich writes ruefully.

From these unpromising conditions arises a tale of success. Young Barbara

escapes to Reed College, where she studies science—per her father's wishes—and wins a prestigious fellowship for graduate study at Columbia. There, she becomes disillusioned with big-time lab science. She is bored by the labors assigned to lowly assistants, and the hierarchical, competitive environment sparks her native defiance and mistrust of authority. At this critical moment the protest movement against the Vietnam War erupts. Awakening to politics, she quits the lab and throws herself wholeheartedly into the fray. Her formidable energy and intelligence are engaged. Her talent for effective organization emerges, as does her skill at writing. Barbara Ehrenreich finds her calling.

During the turbulent decades that follow, an unexpected career develops, as Ehrenreich becomes a feisty and eloquent activist for peace, civil rights, social justice, and feminist causes. Lectures, articles, and several acclaimed books proclaim the values of social democracy and offer no-holds-barred critiques of America's indignities and failures. Throughout, Ehrenreich upholds science and scientific method as the rationally verified path to truth. Animus toward religion and a public adherence to atheism remain her creed, pronounced with supreme confidence. Since God does not exist, only humans can relieve the suffering of the world. It is to promote this relief that Ehrenreich spends her career "taking sides" for the good.

Then, unexpectedly, converging circumstances return her in middle age to her teenage quest for the meaning of existence. A request from a university library to donate her collected papers prompts a long look back over her life. At the same time a diagnosis of breast cancer precipitates a struggle to fight off death. Ehrenreich turns both backward and inward. Her life takes on new directions. Recovering from cancer, she makes a dash to the Florida Keys and acquires a new boyfriend. The two move to a remote, shabby house, beautifully situated on the shore, where Ehrenreich experiences a dramatic immersion in a wild natural

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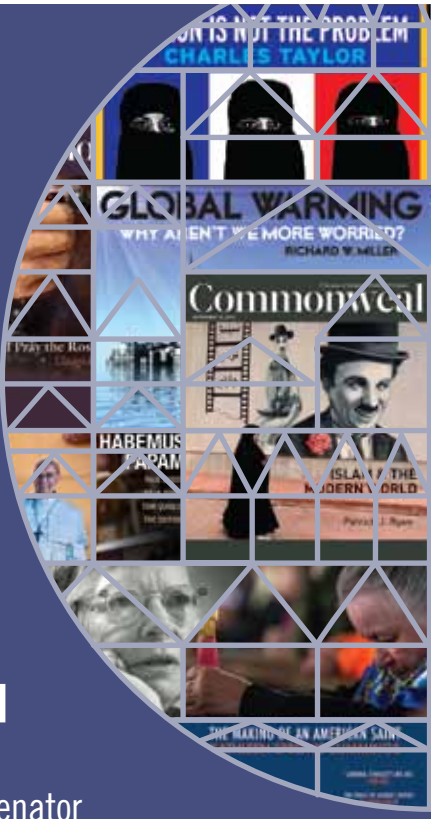

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world. Sudden thunderstorms, awesome lightning bolts, beautiful sunrises and moonrises are on display, along with teeming tropical flora and fauna.

Encounters with awesome forces bring home both the beauty of nature and its indifference to human life. As if in proof, a violent storm floods the first floor of Ehrenreich's house and wipes out all print and digital records. Everything is gone—except, by chance, her battered adolescent journal, kept by chance on the second floor and thus saved from ruin. Now Ehrenreich determines to revisit the girl she once was, examining her transcendental experiences, both past and present, and seeking a scientific meaning for them. She vows to undertake this inquiry as a "rationalist, an atheist, a scientist by training."

What Ehrenreich discovers is a vast and growing scientific literature devoted to investigations of religious experiences. Embarking on the quest, she is impressed with the genius of William James and his classic work, *Varieties of Religious Experience*. She goes on to pursue other works in search of support for the intuition that "mystic experiences" can be accepted as normal, natural, scientifically supported aspects of human life.

Oddly enough, she misses much of the current news in the field. Today, Freudian-based models of religious experience have lost their authority, and the consensus in the American psychological community is that anomalous experiences cannot be identified as mental illness. Some such "mystic experiences" do overlap with psychotic symptoms, but others are accepted as normal and indeed often contribute positively to human development. New neurological investigations of mystic states point to high-functioning creative persons. The psychiatric experts on hallucinations, hearing voices, ineffable bliss, and moments of union with nature no longer automatically diagnose them as pathology. Reports of "peak experiences" and "flow" are positive signs. Highly sensitive, intelligent young persons, searching for ultimate meaning, can be understood to undergo "spiritual emergencies"—a label that could be well applied to the young Ehrenreich.

Religion is universal, Ehrenreich finds, because of the psychobiologically unique way human brains, bodies, and social groups have evolved. The "faith instinct" persists, and religion does not wither away. In fact, a new cognitive analysis of religious belief sees it as inevitable, part of an invariant capacity that marks the human ability to think. Humans innately possess "a theory of mind" that infers that other humans have minds with intentions, wishes, and desires like themselves. Minds are invisible, intangible entities, and yet intensely real and important for human functioning. Thus from necessary beliefs in the invisible, rational deductions arise about other aspects of invisible reality. Other minds can exist—as even infants know. If other invisible minds can exist, why not a divine mind?

It is a question the young Barbara once presciently argued with her atheist father. If other persons' minds exist, doesn't that

open the way for God? It seems that the young Barbara had taken refuge from the implications of this question in a kind of solipsism, perhaps in order to protect herself from the pain other people inflict. Somewhat improbably, she claims that she only came to fully believe in the inner reality of other people when she "fell in love" with her children and discovered empathy. The discovery of love enlarges her worldview and makes it appropriate to include autobiographical materials as well as scientific information in her book. Her challenge is to integrate these diverse themes and materials into a coherent whole.

Ehrenreich is a skilled and engaging writer who will captivate even those who disagree with her conclusions. Her story is told in a wry, self-deprecating, occasionally arrogant but always intelligent voice. You want to keep following. Ehrenreich skims over her various career accomplishments, and much of her crowded personal life is also just glimpsed; references appear to boyfriends, lovers, two husbands (and divorces), two abortions, one depression, one major political disappointment, and those two beloved children, who never disappoint but rather are a constant source of joy.

So in the end, how does the quest for understanding turn out—for her, and for her readers? Ehrenreich's inclusion of her family's story enlarges the effort to understand her confrontations with anomalous experiences, and her commitment to rationality, science, and research both broadens and deepens her treatment of the subject. Unfortunately, the terrain of scientific material is so vast that this book's quick and partial survey doesn't—can't—do the job.

One limitation to deeper understanding arises from the constraints imposed by Ehrenreich's commitment to the atheistic faith of her father. Her easy acceptance of popular atheistic assumptions and dismissals of traditional theistic religion betrays her critical intelligence and cuts her off from hugely important intellectual resources. Religious believers have developed sophisticated strategies to detect and counter their own tendencies to self-deceit. Psychological acuteness can be found in the traditional investigations of authentic and inauthentic religious experiences. Believers analyze doubt as well as faith.

By contrast Ehrenreich embraces the science fiction she loved as a young person, finding insights in the imaginary speculations of her favorite authors. Is it because they too are atheists, they too pay tribute to faith in science and readily acknowledge the mysterious powers of Nature with a capital N? Perhaps science-fiction narratives fit well with atheism, dealing as they do in unknown, invisible powers that are not necessarily either good or benign. In considering a worst-case scenario of the ultimate meaning of reality, Ehrenreich floats the ominous possibility that invisible alien forces may use human beings for prey. After all, when she was young and went to Mass a few times, she concluded that Catholicism was a cannibalistic religion. And her reading of Meister Eckhart suggests that he saw God as using humans to effect new births of divinity.

Any Other or Others that Ehrenreich can imagine from science fiction might or might not be predators, but they would have to be "living, breathing" beings whose existence is subject to scientific proof. She asserts her credentials as an atheist by denying scientifically unfounded beliefs, yet she can still envisage the possibility of mysterious forces and beings in the universe beyond our present ability to detect. This embrace of science, fiction, and the possibility of unknown, wild, and threatening forces sounds a familiar note in popular American culture—think of the popularity of such TV series as *Lost*. Undemanding ambiguity is central to the appeal of the genre. But there is little ambiguity in Ehrenreich's rejection of traditional theistic religions. She and others who share her view are certain that they already know what Christianity is. Without a doubt.

Yet no one, nonbelievers included, seems to be able to do without a pious hope for their creed. A version of the hope for a scientific and atheistic revelation can be found in the closing words of *Living with a Wild God*. Does Ehrenreich believe, finally, in the possibility of some kind of Other? Indeed. "I have the impression," she concludes, "growing out of the experiences chronicled here, that it may be seeking us out." ■

Sidney Callahan, *a longtime contributor, is an author and social psychologist researching a book on the psychology of religious experience.*

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Giving Care

Joseph G. Murray

A Little Sister of the Poor shares a laugh with a nursing-home resident in St. Louis.

I used to think of compassion, caregiving, and fostering community as the special talents of the staff I so admire at the dementia residence where my wife Lisa, a psychiatrist, now lives. Over time I have come to see these aptitudes also in the lives of the residents themselves, as the indefatigability of the human spirit shines through the fog of a deteriorating brain.

On a recent afternoon I was at the residence on one of my daily visits with Lisa, a ninety-year-old in the late stages of Alzheimer's. Sitting in a sheltered alcove of the residence and absorbed in a Brahms piano trio, we were shaken from our trance-like state by shouts and clamor that seemed to bounce off every wall. A woman was obviously in profound distress.

A new resident—I'll call her Rhoda—had been admitted just a few hours before, accompanied by her husband and son. The two had stayed with Rhoda for some time, sharing coffee and a snack, and hoping to ease her transition to the new surroundings. The eventual leave-taking, visibly painful for them, was traumatic for Rhoda.

Within minutes of their departure she became severely agitated, angry, aggressive, lashing out verbally at any staff member who came near. Accusations were hurled about the cruelty being inflicted on her by an uncaring staff. She had been made a prisoner. Rhoda proceeded to rampage through the residence, banging on locked exit doors, barging into residents' rooms, at one point trying to break a window to get out. The staff, attempting to calm her with assurances, was met with defiance:

"I am a registered nurse and I can tell you I would never treat one of my patients the way you are treating me. I want to get out of here and go home!"

In the midst of the standoff Rhoda spotted Lisa and me sitting side by side on the sofa. She could tell that we were a couple enjoying each other's company. Rhoda stopped in her tracks, became silent, then headed in our direction. Expecting some kind of violent confrontation and worried about its effect on Lisa, I held my breath, trying to decide whether to leave or stay. We stayed. Rhoda approached and calmly asked our names and whether we were married. Then she crouched in front of Lisa and gazed up into her face. I was thunderstruck. Rhoda spoke first, and in the softest of tones:

"You know, Lisa, you are so lucky to be married to such a lovely man."

I jumped in: "And I am so lucky to be married to such a lovely woman."

"I know, I know," said Rhoda, "I was just going to say that."

She turned to Lisa again: "So, you understand why I just want to be with my own husband right now. I need to get out of here to be with him."

Lisa's response was to reach out and gently take Rhoda's hands into her own. No further words were exchanged; none were needed. Lisa's eyes shone with compassion, Rhoda's with tears. I struggled not to let my own tears take over.

When Rhoda stood up again, she was calmer but still somewhat agitated and disoriented. To the rescue: another nurse assistant with a brilliant idea. Remembering that one of her fellow CNAs was well along in her pregnancy, she presented the colleague to Rhoda: "Rhoda, this is Laura, a patient who was just admitted with a troubled pregnancy. Would you mind taking care of her? She has been given her meds and we have her vital signs. She is in her ninth month, and we just need you to attend in case she needs help."

Rhoda rose to the challenge, becoming again Rhoda, RN, giver of care.

Relatives of Alzheimer's sufferers are often reminded that the human person is more than memory and mind. A comforting thought, perhaps, but at some level we don't believe it—until we experience something like the Lisa-Rhoda-Laura interchange, when the human spirit that has shaped a life shines through. Beneath it all, finally, is that spark of love that may often sputter but is ultimately inextinguishable. ■

Joseph G. Murray *is a retired professor living in Waterford, Connecticut.*

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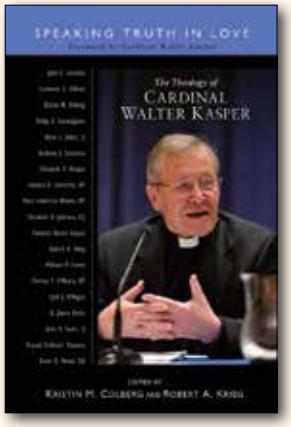

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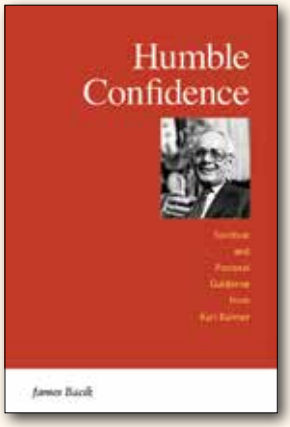

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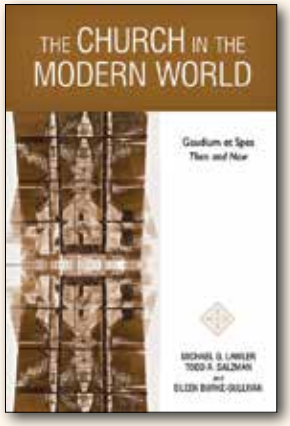

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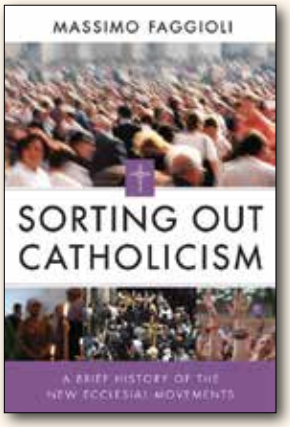

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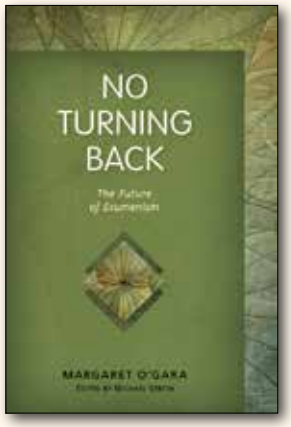

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