Religion, Politics, Culture

Commonweal

DECEMBER 2021

$6.95 US/$7.50 CAN
COMMONWEALMAGAZINE.ORG

5 ways to connect with

Commonweal

Get the magazine and unlimited online access

Subscribe at
cwlmag.org/subscribe
or call **845.267.3068**

Get your student subscription

Free for anyone currently in college or recently graduated.
Visit **cwlmag.org/freestudent**

Help make *Commonweal*'s voice stronger

Support our mission with your tax-deductible donations at **cwlmag.org/donate** or call **212-662-4200 x5**

Sign up for our email newsletters

Delivered twice weekly, they take you right to the stories we're featuring.
Visit **cwlmag.org/newsletter**

Join the conversation

Connect with local readers and friends through a **Commonweal Local Community** or **the weal**.
Visit **cwlmag.org/communities**

@commonwealmag
@commonwealmagazine
@commonwealmagazine

Religion, Politics, Culture

Commonweal

DECEMBER 2021 • VOLUME 148 • NUMBER 11

CHRISTMAS CRITICS

COVER DESIGN
David Sankey

COVER IMAGE
Giotto, *Stories of Christ of Nativity of Jesus*, 1304–1306 (Mondadori Portfolio/Contributor/Getty)

Commonweal

FOUNDED IN 1924

Commonweal [ISSN 0010-3330], a review of religion, politics, and culture, is published monthly, except for a single July-August issue, by the Commonweal Foundation, 475 Riverside Drive, Rm. 405, New York, NY 10115. Telephone: (212) 662-4200. Email: editors@commonwealmagazine.org. Fax: (212) 662-4183. POSTMASTER: send address changes to *Commonweal*, P.O. Box 348, Congers, NY 10920-0348.

LETTERS

Readers debate Eucharistic participation

'LIFE' AND THE LAST SUPPER

Both Peter Steinfels and Cardinal Blase Cupich have made valuable contributions to what I hope will become a Church-wide conversation on the Eucharist, a conversation that will not be just another USCCB statement ("Separate Challenges," September, and "Context & Commitment," November). One dimension of the Eucharist and our celebration of it in Mass is often overlooked, and it can be seen in the cardinal's statement: "The full and conscious participation that means internally joining ourselves to the death and resurrection of the Lord celebrated in the Eucharist seems to have eluded many Catholics." What is left out is Jesus' life up to his Last Supper. It was his life that the disciples shared and that led Jesus to be arrested, tried, and condemned to death. Our active, conscious, full, and fruitful participation must include our response to Jesus' whole life, not just the last three days. By focusing primarily on Jesus' death and resurrection, we ignore most of the content of the Gospels. Such a separation of the Eucharist from the rest of the Gospels is most obvious in Eucharistic adoration, but I think it is also a characteristic of Mass.

We can catch another sense of this imbalance in concentrating on Jesus' passion and death. Each Mass puts us not at Calvary but at the Last Supper. We are a group of his disciples who, like the twelve at supper, know each other and have shared lives. The action that Cardinal Cupich refers to—one that "summons our participation"—must evoke all those lives as they are lived. We must recognize that our ordinary, day-to-day deeds are where our active participation begins and where we hope to see the fruitfulness of the Eucharist manifested—personally and communally. Every day is not Good Friday, and if we prioritize that aspect of the liturgy, it is no wonder that the faithful find the Eucharist remote.

John D. Groppe
St. Joseph's College
Rensselaer, Ind.

HIGH DOCTRINE

Thanks to Peter Steinfels and Fr. Robert P. Imbelli ("Separate Challenges," September, and "Context & Commitment," November) for kicking off the conversation about "Eucharistic integrity." Steinfels, who has long worried about erosion of understanding of God's "real presence" at Communion, suggests a "pastoral" approach that pays attention to our Catholic people. Fr. Imbelli does not object but suggests we need to remember that we Catholics have a "high" doctrine about these matters.

It is possible that this high doctrine might, perhaps unintentionally, be connected to the problem that even the Holy Father acknowledges as "clericalism." Indeed, the first coherent and implemented response of the universal Church to the sexual abuse of children by priests was to declare a "year of the Eucharist" (2004–2005), and then a "year of the priest" (2009–2010), in case we might have forgotten our high doctrine. As for a pastoral approach, it seems Fr. Imbelli would begin a pastoral-strategy meeting by urging ministers to remind their people that deliberate absence from the Eucharist and "disaffiliation" is, in fact, "apostasy," meaning "defection from Jesus Christ himself." Other ministers might wonder about that, as some of the people they know are absent for reasons of conscience. Yet some actually seem to live out Fr. Imbelli's "all in" understanding of discipleship required by the real presence of Jesus in the Eucharist. They share with Fr. Imbelli and Pope Francis the very Catholic idea that "everything is connected," and so they work hard at the practice of nonviolence, welcoming strangers, practicing voluntary poverty, caring for the poor and vulnerable, and praying daily, almost up to Fr. Imbelli's discipleship standards. A more pastoral approach, as suggested by Steinfels, would not require dissent on doctrine, or even immediate consideration of the politics of the Eucharist, but it would suggest attending to such people. For example, an Irish gentleman hiking with my wife and me in Assisi some years

THE Commonweal PODCAST

"Genuine tradition doesn't always stay the same."

— RITA FERRONE
Ep. 63 - The Rite Stuff

Visit **commonwealmagazine.org/podcast**

Subscribe now:

Apple Podcasts

Spotify

Commonweal
FOUNDED IN 1924

PUBLISHER
Thomas Baker

BUSINESS MANAGER
James Hannan

VICE PRESIDENT OF ADVANCEMENT
Adrianna Melnyk

MISSION & PARTNERSHIPS DIRECTOR
Claudia Avila Cosnahan

MARKETING & AUDIENCE DEVELOPMENT DIRECTOR
Gabriella Wilke

ADVERTISING
Regan Pickett
commonwealads@gmail.com
(703) 346-8297

SUBSCRIPTIONS
commonwealmagazine.org/subscribe
(845) 267-3068

LEARN MORE

Follow us on
@commonwealmag
facebook.com/commonwealmagazine
@commonwealmagazine

Subscribe to our newsletter for free twice-weekly emails from our editors
cwlmag.org/newsletter

Send a letter to the editor:
letters@commonwealmagazine.org

STUDENTS/TEACHERS

Free subscriptions for students and recent graduates
cwlmag.org/freestudent

Editorial internships
cwlmag.org/interns

Teachers, would you like free resources for the classroom?
cwlmag.org/educators

LETTERS

ago told us of his beloved and recently departed wife. With a smile he concluded, "She was a better Christian, though not so good a Catholic, as myself." Asking the help of God and one another to get those two things closer together might be the start of a good strategy for achieving Eucharistic coherence.

David O'Brien
Holden, Mass.

ROBERT P. IMBELLI REPLIES

David O'Brien's letter would be better addressed in face-to-face exchange than in a brief written reply, but let me offer some notes toward future conversation.

First, his reference to "high" doctrine puzzles me. I did not use the phrase in my article. Are the quotation marks scare quotes? Surely belief in the Real Presence of Jesus Christ in the Eucharist is an exceedingly high doctrine that differentiates Catholic belief from less demanding views—as is belief in the very Incarnation of the Son of God that is its presupposition.

Second, one can acknowledge with shame the violation of innocents perpetrated by clergy (and others), while *also* lamenting the profanation of the Eucharist by priests guilty of abuse, who have both sinned and committed sacrilege.

Third, contrary to Professor O'Brien's suggestion, I would open his hypothetical "pastoral-strategy meeting" with prayer for wisdom and discernment, as the participants strive to accompany one another and those whom they serve toward growth in love and knowledge of Jesus Christ. As St. Paul insists, it is the living Jesus Christ who impels us, members of his body, to both worship and witness, to adoration and service.

Lastly, to O'Brien's hope that being a good Catholic and being a good Christian be wed, I can only respond: "Amen!" This would be to wed Vatican II's *Dei verbum* and its *Gaudium et spes*, uniting in creative synthesis the dogmatic and the pastoral—as the Council assuredly intended, but we have too often failed to do.

We mourn the death of
GERALD J. RUSSELLO,
friend and valued contributor
to *Commonweal*.

Commonweal welcomes letters to the editor. Letters can respond to both print and online articles, and should include your name, city, and state. Please send your submissions to letters@commonwealmagazine.org.

‘The Great Joy’

At his inauguration two weeks after the January 6 attack on the U.S. Capitol, President Joe Biden spoke movingly of America’s democratic ideals even as he soberly enumerated the country’s challenges: “A raging virus. Growing inequity. The sting of systemic racism. A climate in crisis.” For many who were listening, hopes were high that a new administration would bring a return to normalcy. Nearly a year later, however, the pandemic is still with us, despite the wide availability of effective vaccines. An otherwise robust economic recovery is held back by rising consumer prices and lingering supply-chain disruptions. The conviction of former police officer Derek Chauvin for murdering George Floyd has not quelled racial tensions. Another summer of deadly fires and floods has underscored the inadequacy of our response to climate change. And the Republican attack on voting rights continues, while our already intensely partisan country remains more divided than ever.

Small wonder, then, that large numbers of Americans are reporting symptoms of anxiety, depression, and exhaustion. Recent surveys by NPR and data from the U.S. Census Bureau show that a third of U.S. adults are struggling with mental-health challenges; children and young people—especially LGBTQ people and people of color—are faring even worse. The spike comes even as the nation’s patchwork mental-health system, already overtaxed before the start of the pandemic, has proved incapable of accommodating the surge in demand for services. Providers’ waiting lists have grown just as more therapists, as well as more doctors and nurses in COVID wards, report increased levels of burnout. The crisis is visible not only in the record sales of books on trauma and self-care or in unruly outbursts on airplanes; unable to find or afford relief, many Americans have turned to self-medication and substance abuse.

Whether or not things are actually worse than normal, they certainly *feel* that way. That may be at least partly by design. Bad news and sensationalism in the media are nothing new—doom and gloom have always sold best—but the ever-more sophisticated algorithms deployed by tech and media companies, engineered to favor incendiary and divisive content in viewers’ feeds, have incentivized media outlets to produce and highlight more of these negative stories than they otherwise might. The result is that other, more positive stories are crowded out. For instance, poverty has been drastically reduced thanks to the generous provisions of the American Rescue Plan. The passage of the Infrastructure and Jobs Act has paved the way for the country to begin repairing its crumbling roadways, bridges, and transit systems. And the approval of vaccines for children and the announcement of an effective new antiviral therapy from Pfizer may finally allow society to recover from the pandemic

Though we don’t always realize it, we are free to choose where and how to direct our attention. As the Advent season reminds us, the Christian tradition has always insisted that the way we see things—others, ourselves, our world—has moral, spiritual, and even cosmic stakes. In a 1966 essay titled “The Time of the End Is the Time of New Room,” Thomas Merton reflects on a single detail in Luke’s infancy narrative: Mary gives birth to Jesus and lays him in a manger because “there was no room for them at the inn.” Packed with travelers rushing to register for the Roman census, the inn in Merton’s telling becomes a mirror image of modern mass society, where “each new announcement is the greatest announcement, where every day’s disaster is beyond compare.” Such a world, awash in distraction, cannot help failing to notice Christ’s nativity: “There is so much news that there is no room left for the true tidings, the ‘Good News,’ *The Great Joy*.”

This joy—the fact of the Incarnation, which we celebrate at Christmas—is the alternative to anxiety and despair. It announces a different kind of “end times,” marked by the fulfillment of hopes and the definitive arrival of freedom. This is what Pope Francis has spent much of his pontificate trying to get us to see. Moving forward starts with allowing ourselves to dream of a more fraternal world, one animated by solidarity rather than anxiety. The pope’s decision to inaugurate a synod in the midst of a once-in-a-century pandemic ought to remind us that this is not the time to turn inward or surrender to our fears.

The trials many people in America and around the world are suffering are real, and they should not be minimized. As Pope Francis noted in his global prayer intentions for November, what those in pain need from us is neither judgment nor false optimism, but a listening ear and expanded access to care. There will always be bad news. But it need not overwhelm or deter us. As Christians, we’re supposed to see things differently. Merton said it well: it’s into this grim, broken world, “this demented inn, in which there is absolutely no room for him at all, that Christ comes unbidden.” We just need to be ready to recognize and welcome him.

Starving Afghanistan

"It is going to be hell on earth." That's how David Beasley, the director of the World Food Program, describes the catastrophe facing Afghanistan this winter. Twenty-three million people are at risk of starvation and the percentage of the population in poverty is expected to leap from just over half to 97 percent. Acute malnutrition will be widespread; 1 million children are expected to perish.

The proximate cause of the crisis is a drought that has ruined Afghanistan's wheat crop and driven up the price of food across the board. This would be manageable, however, under different political conditions. In August, when U.S. forces withdrew from Afghanistan and the Taliban took control of the country, Washington declined to recognize the new government in Kabul. Instead, it froze Afghanistan's assets, most of which are held in the United States. Because the Taliban has been designated a terrorist organization, the U.S. government placed sanctions on the new Afghan government as soon as it took power, making it nearly impossible for other countries or aid agencies to work with Taliban officials. Since then, international aid has come to an abrupt halt. This is devastating in a country where such aid constituted 75 percent of the economy. By threatening to withhold assistance from a fragile country, the United States hopes it can force the Taliban government to cooperate with U.S. counterterrorism efforts and improve its treatment of women and minorities.

As the Afghan economy has slowly collapsed under the weight of these restrictions, prices have risen, jobs have disappeared, workers haven't been paid, and more and more people are going hungry. Indeed, many of the children hospitalized with malnutrition are the sons and daughters of day laborers who can no longer find work. Families have gone so far as to sell their daughters, fearing that the alternative to such a grim choice is the entire family's death. "We've not seen this level of near universal poverty in any country in recent history," Kanni Wignaraja, a senior leader in the United Nations Development Program, told the BBC.

It is within the power of the United States to alleviate the worst of Afghanistan's suffering. Certainly, the Afghan economy was already in very poor shape before the withdrawal in August—or, for that matter, before the invasion in 2001. But the severity of Afghanistan's hunger crisis is the result of policy choices made by the U.S. government and was predicted months ago. In its effort to pressure the Taliban into being amenable to U.S. interests in the region, the United States is immiserating Afghanistan—again.

As some observers have pointed out, providing aid to the Afghan people does not necessarily equate to a formal recognition of the Taliban government. One option available to the U.S. government is to release Afghanistan's assets conditionally. The Center for Global Development recommends the "limited, monitored release" of funds to pay for essential items like food, which could "help meet the needs of ordinary Afghans facing food insecurity without giving the Taliban discretionary control." But so far, U.S. officials have shown no sign that they will make the funds available in any form.

Three months ago, Afghanistan dominated the headlines, and both critics and proponents of the war claimed to know what was best for the Afghan people. Now, as those people suffer in one of the worst catastrophes the modern world has known, Americans seem to have moved on. The harm we've done, and continue to do, to vulnerable people in faraway places is much more durable than our attention span.

—Regina Munch

Driven to Hunger Strikes

Richard Chow, Augustine Tang, and Basia Osowki may not end up being remembered alongside Mahatma Gandhi, Cesar Chavez, or Bobby Sands, all of whom famously undertook hunger strikes to protest injury and injustice. But maybe they should be—along with the dozen or so other New York City taxi drivers who, after years of fruitless pleading for relief from crushing debt, decided they had no choice but to starve themselves to draw attention to their plight. They were acting on behalf of thousands of others in the same straits, drivers unable to pay off the cost of the medallion required to own and operate a yellow cab in New York.

For many decades, medallions were marketed as sound investments, especially to immigrants. But in the mid-2000s, the market for medallions, like the real-estate market, became a bubble, with values rising many times over by the mid-2010s. And just like unsuspecting homebuyers, drivers were pressured by predatory lenders to take out ever bigger loans to cover the spiraling cost of purchase or to refinance, assured that the value of medallions would only continue to climb. The city, under Mayors Michael Bloomberg and Bill de Blasio, enthusiastically encouraged this practice, because medallion sales translate into tax revenue. (Indeed, the city sets the opening bid rate on medallions, which at one point hit $1 million.) But then came Uber and Lyft, which flooded city streets with tens of thousands of unregulated cars, and medallion values plummeted. Next came the pandemic: as the city shut down and riders disappeared, values dropped still more. Many yellow-cab drivers were suddenly facing ruin, owing as much as $600,000 on a medallion worth just a

fraction of that amount, with no way to make payments that typically exceeded their monthly income. At least nine despairing drivers killed themselves. One was Richard Chow's brother, Yu Mein, who abandoned his cab outside the mayor's residence and jumped into the nearby East River.

In September, drivers set up a twenty-four-hour picket line outside City Hall. They were met with paltry concessions, with de Blasio insisting that New York couldn't afford to do more. So much for America's most progressive big city (and big-city mayor). About six weeks later, the hunger strikes began: for fifteen days, Chow and the others subsisted on water and Gatorade. Their efforts paid off in early November, when the city and lenders finally agreed to restructure driver debt, significantly reducing monthly payments and guaranteeing the loans.

As Bhairavi Desai, leader of the Taxi Workers Alliance, later said, this is all that drivers wanted—fair terms, not a free ride. They also want to help their ride-app brethren, mainly other immigrants, who don't earn enough to live on, don't receive benefits, and are largely prevented by their employers from organizing. The way we think about full-time work has to change, she said, with labor at the center of our concern rather than municipalities, corporations, and banks. This will be especially important as New York and other cities welcome the return of foreign tourists. As for Chow and the rest, they were set to return to the job after a painful period of "refeeding"—adjusting to the intake of solid food. It should not have come to this, but through their actions they and their fellow drivers embodied the half-century-old example of Chavez, who on completing his own hunger strike in 1968 stated that "the truest act of courage…is to sacrifice ourselves for others in a totally nonviolent struggle for justice."

—Dominic Preziosi

The Pope, the President, and Paige

I confess I was relieved to see "Satchel Paige" and not "Eucharist" trending on Twitter following President Biden's October visit with Pope Francis. On a video feed released by the Vatican, Biden regales Francis with a story about the great pitcher, for whom Biden seems to have a special fondness. (Paige's 1953 Topps baseball card is among the framed photos on the table behind the "Resolute desk" in the Oval Office.) In April, Tom Shieber, senior curator at the National Baseball Hall of Fame and a leading researcher with the Society for American Baseball Research tweeted, "Biden likes to tell a story about baseball pitching great Satchel Paige's attitude towards age, ending with the quote, 'How old would you be if you didn't know how old you were?'" Biden's affinity for Paige was also noted by Bob Kendrick, president of the Negro Leagues Baseball Museum. Interviewed on Black News Channel after Biden's Vatican visit, Kendrick was overjoyed that Biden had recognized Paige in this global venue and imparted this particular "Satchelism," but he was even more impressed that "the pope got it!"

Lost in threads of contested interpretations on social media was the fact that Biden was speaking to Pope Francis in one of their common languages: sport. The story the president told tapped into many of Francis's favorite themes, from the importance of the dreams of elders to the role of sport as a catalyst for social change. Watch Francis as he leans in and listens intently to Biden's story. His posture reflects his counsel in the 2019 post-synodal exhortation, *Christus vivit*, that "these stories take time to tell, and we should be prepared to listen patiently and let them sink in, even though they are much longer than what we are used to in social media." For Francis, the dreams and stories of elders are necessary for building a better future. So he calls elders, himself included, to be "memory keepers" because "dreams are intertwined with *memory*." Even painful memories serve envisioning because they "show that it is possible to emerge renewed from an experience of hardship."

Satchel Paige was old in baseball years, and as a pitcher his arm should really have been past its prime. In 1948, after an accomplished twenty-two-year career in the Negro Leagues, he signed with the Cleveland Indians, becoming the first African American to pitch a Major League Baseball game, the oldest "rookie," and a key contributor to Cleveland's winning its last World Series. He wrote in his 1962 autobiography, *Maybe I'll Pitch Forever*, that people at the time said he was "forty-two going on forty-nine." The toll of racism and exclusion undoubtedly aged Paige beyond his years. To tell a story about Paige is to tell of all those made old before their time in the same way; to raise up the witness of Paige is an act of memory-keeping necessary to fuel visions for building a better day.

There's no mistaking Francis's understanding of sports as a vernacular to create spaces of encounter, narrate the struggles for inclusion, and foster solidarity. A story passed between elders that transcended regional dialects and ignited, on social media, a further sharing of the legacy of Satchel Paige. It transmitted a memory of a resilient elder who continues to motivate the ongoing work of racial justice. Following the encounter between pope and president, the Negro Leagues Baseball Museum tweeted, "You know who's trending today? @Pontifex, @nlbmprez, and @POTUS. All about one guy named Satchel Paige. Pope Francis, you have a standing invitation to the Negro Leagues Baseball Museum. What a day for America's pastime."

—Carmen M. Nanko-Fernández

A longer version of this article is available online.

MOLLIE WILSON O'REILLY

Struggling to Listen

Archbishop Gomez's reactionary defensiveness

Amid the protests in American cities that followed the May 2020 murder of George Floyd by police, Los Angeles Archbishop José Gomez, the president of the U.S. bishops conference, issued a statement. "It is true what Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. said, that riots are the language of the unheard," Gomez wrote. "We should be doing a lot of listening right now. This time, we should not fail to hear what people are saying through their pain."

It was a sensitive response, expressing compassion and a humble commitment to "listening" as the necessary first step toward a more just society. It bears no resemblance to the speech Gomez delivered to a Spanish conference last month, a speech that left me wondering who on earth he's been listening to.

That talk, a keynote address for a conference on "Political Correctness: Liberties in Danger," was pre-taped and delivered in Spanish but shared as an English text by the Archdiocese of Los Angeles. In it, Gomez explains that "new social justice movements" that function as "pseudo-religions" have been "unleashed" in American society, and demand resistance from Catholics.

Gomez says that "we should not be intimidated by these new religions of social justice and political identity," but he sounds pretty intimidated. His first section is conspiratorial and riddled with anti-Semitic tropes, as he describes the rise of "an elite leadership class…that has little interest in religion and no real attachment to the nations they live in… which is in charge in corporations, governments, universities, the media, and in the cultural and professional establishments" and "wants to establish what we might call a global civilization." Gomez is not building a specifically anti-Semitic argument—there's nothing specific about his argument at all—but the rhetoric he chooses has a very ugly history, and its presence here is alarming.

"For years now," Gomez continues, "there has been a deliberate effort in Europe and America to erase the Christian roots of society and to suppress any remaining Christian influences." Where does this reactionary vision come from? Which people has Gomez been listening to? Certainly not Catholics who work with the Black Lives Matter movement, who could explain how standing up for the dignity of their neighbors is an expression of their faith. Not admirers of Dorothy Day, who would have stopped him from ludicrously suggesting that her example somehow validates his idea that "the 'social justice' story" is an atheistic "rival" to Christianity.

It is disorienting to hear a bishop referring pejoratively to "social justice." Gomez eventually recognizes this dissonance, then dismisses it with a wave of the hand: "Of course, we all want to build a society that provides equality, freedom, and dignity for every person." If that is what "we all want," why the paranoia? Why not begin with that set of priorities and imagine a path forward? Gomez's next sentence identifies the hang-up: "But we can only build a just society on the foundation of the truth about God and human nature."

Local church members in the Bronx hold a prayer walk.

STEVE SANCHEZ/ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

Ah, of course, human nature. "The 'space' that the Church and believing Christians are permitted to occupy is shrinking," Gomez warns. "Holding certain Christian beliefs is said to be a threat to freedoms, and even to the safety, of other groups in our societies." When bishops start talking like this, you don't have to be "woke" to know it's primarily LGBTQ visibility and civil rights they're complaining about.

If the "certain Christian beliefs" Gomez is referencing are the ones that label same-sex love as sinful and transgender people as delusional, it is true that expressing those beliefs

can be uncomfortable, and enforcing them with policy is harder than it once was. Is that, as Gomez claims, because of the nefarious influence of an anti-Christian class of elites? Or is it because people, including many Catholics, have learned that those beliefs are not the truth, and it alienates people when you insult them or their loved ones in the name of Christ?

The Church is still struggling to listen, especially to the voices of the LGBTQ community. It is too threatening to imagine that the Church might yet have something to learn about sex and sexuality, or, worse, might find itself to have been on the side of hate and violence. It seems easier to cry foul, to close ranks.

When Catholic leaders insist on pushing marginalized people back into the shadows, other prophets will step up. The movements for social justice in the United States are not an attack on religion. They are a sign that what Gomez called for in 2020 *is* happening. People are hearing the voices of the oppressed and the suffering. They are embracing a vision of diversity that is enriching, not frightening; a view of history and humanity that is honest, not manipulative; an approach to politics that is generous and mutual, not defensive and tribal. And if bishops like Gomez are busy inventing reasons to stand in opposition to these efforts—people can hear their voices, too, and that is the real danger the Church ought to worry about.

MOLLIE WILSON O'REILLY *is editor-at-large and a columnist at* Commonweal.

Want to discuss this article in your classroom, reading group, or Commonweal Local Community? A free discussion guide is available at **cwlmag.org/discuss**

John Courtney Murray

SUSANNA DE STRADIS

Not Quite Silenced

What newly released documents tell us about the censoring of John Courtney Murray

The Roman parable of John Courtney Murray looms large in the modern American Catholic imagination. The Jesuit theologian argued that the First Amendment was in keeping with Catholic orthodoxy at a time when the Holy See still insisted that the American model of religious freedom was a suboptimal church-state arrangement—tolerable only when the optimal arrangement, a Catholic confessional state, was out of reach. Officially censored by the Holy Office in 1954, Murray's ideas would be vindicated a few years later by the Second Vatican Council, and specifically by the Declaration on Religious Freedom (1965), which Murray himself helped draft. As former *Commonweal* editor Margaret O'Brien Steinfels once said, it is "the Catholic rule of thumb, that anyone with a good idea for changing Church teaching or practice, I think here of John Courtney Murray, ought to be made to suffer for it." Yet, so far, we have known only the contours of Murray's pre-conciliar ordeal. Despite the meticulous historical work of Joseph A. Komonchak, who has been painstakingly piecing together evidence from a wide array of personal, ecclesiastical, and governmental archives, a crucial perspective was still missing: that of the Holy See itself.

The recent opening of the Pius XII–era archives has changed that. In a pandemic-stricken Rome, Vatican archivists have been working against both the clock and the virus to process the huge number of documents from the Pacelli pontificate and make them available to researchers. Scholars, too, have had to deal with sudden interruptions, longer waitlists, and retrieval failures. The Archive of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (ACDF), as the Holy Office was renamed in 1965, was no exception. By mid-April 2021, however, a new holding finally popped up on the ACDF's digital research portal: a four-volume file titled "Church and State. Ideology of John Courtney Murray, S.J." The file contains annotated copies of Murray's writings and addresses, correspondence to and from the Holy Office (including denunciations of Murray sent by Joseph C. Fenton, Francis J. Connell, and the canonist Thomas O. Martin); and the written evaluations of various Vatican officials.

What fresh insights can be expected from the newly available records? These documents help fill in what had been, until recently, a half-painted picture. Take the example of Murray's 1950 memorandum to Msgr. Giovanni Montini, who was then Substitute for Ordinary Affairs of the Vatican Secretary of State and would later become Pope Paul VI: "The Crisis in Church-State Relationships in the U.S.A.," a copy of which Komonchak retrieved among the papers of Claire Booth Luce in the Library of Congress and edited for publication in 2017. Several major questions remained about the memorandum's exact genesis and its fortunes in the Holy Office. When and how did the document make its way to Rome? Who reviewed it? How did it become part of the dossier used to censor Murray?

CNS FILES

While silent about the memorandum's genesis, the ACDF file can help us answer other questions. We learn that the memorandum landed at the Holy Office in September 1953, bundled with Murray's *Theological Studies* articles from 1948 and 1949, and with the responses that Montini had solicited from the three U.S. cardinals (Edward Mooney, Francis Spellman, and Samuel Stritch) and the apostolic delegate Amleto Cicognani. Acknowledging the importance of these responses for reconstructing the cross-Atlantic conversation on religious freedom in the 1950s, Komonchak published the only two he was able to locate, those written by Stritch and Connell, next to Murray's memorandum. But the context in which these essays were produced remained obscure. We now know that Connell's comments had been requested by Cicognani, while Spellman—who would later sponsor Murray's participation as a theological advisor to Vatican II—had sought the expert opinion of John Fearns and William O'Connor, rector and professor of dogmatic theology, respectively, at St. Joseph's Seminary in Dunwoodie, New York. That means the Holy Office could count on *seven* responses to help gauge the attitude of the U.S. hierarchy toward Murray and the issues he raised in the memorandum. Scholars finally have access to all these responses as well.

Even more importantly, the newly available ACDF records shed light on how Murray's ideas were actually perceived in Rome. The Holy Office's cardinal-members usually relied on expert theologians and canon lawyers (*consultores*) to review each case that came before them and to indicate the appropriate course of action. Reading the different resolutions (*vota*) proposed by the *consultores* who worked on Murray's case helps us understand exactly what part of his argument was suspect in Roman circles.

These *vota* reveal a surprising degree of sympathy toward the American Jesuit. They generally acknowledge the good faith of Murray's attempt to square traditional Catholic teaching on church and state with the reality of increasingly pluralistic societies. While sharing Murray's concerns, however, even the most sympathetic Holy Office officials remained unpersuaded by his claim that the American religious-freedom regime was a legitimate alternative to the confessional state. The *consultores* were particularly critical of Murray's argument that the state need not be confessional in order to ensure the harmony of positive law with natural and divine law. In his 1950 memorandum, Murray argued that a lay state, too, "is subject to the sovereignty of God and it recognizes that its acts and legislation ought to be in harmony with the law of God; but the political form of the State requires that this harmony be effected by the people." But how would that work, exactly? The Holy Office's reviewers pressed the point. They argued that a state programmatically unwilling to judge religious truth would not be able to protect Catholic values from their repudiation via democratic procedure. Sometimes majorities were wrong. As embarrassing as the defense of the confessional state was becoming for the Church in the 1950s, the American model seemed like a non-starter.

The *consultores*' appreciation for the seriousness of the questions Murray raised, if not for the soundness of his answers, led them to recommend relatively mild disciplinary measures. The German Jesuit Franz Hürth, then a professor of moral theology at the Pontifical Gregorian University, recommended in his *votum* that Murray be ordered to refrain from holding and teaching propositions that were contrary to the traditional doctrine of the Church—but only actual *doctrine*, not just the prevailing opinions of particular theologians. By distinguishing these opinions from doctrine, Hürth was not just narrowing the scope of Murray's censurable infraction but also carving out some space for legitimate scholarly debate on the subject.

The *consultores*' opinions, however, merely constituted the first step in a complex process. Next, the cardinal members of the Holy Office had to discuss the different *vota* and decide whether to adopt their recommendations or to issue an alternative verdict. A first draft of the Holy Office's decree on Murray's case rejected Hürth's recommendation and outright forbade the American Jesuit to ever write or lecture on the church-state question again. Yet, when Pope Pius XII reviewed this draft together with the *vota,* he found such blanket prohibition excessive. It would be enough, he decided, for Murray to submit any writings to the Jesuit General Curia for accurate review. Hence came the censorship verdict that scholars are familiar with. We now know that this final verdict was the result of compromise and of the pope's own mitigating intervention.

Like all historical documents, the newly accessible ACDF sources open as many questions as they answer. What led Pius XII to make his decision on the Murray case? How did this case resemble, or differ from, other comparable cases the Holy Office dealt with during this pontificate? What does this livelier-than-expected debate within the Holy Office reveal about the *status quaestionis* of religious freedom at mid-century? Further research in ACDF and other Vatican archives is still needed to help scholars answer these interpretive questions.

Still, early findings already suggest that we might soon tell Murray's story in a different way. Rather than merely exemplifying institutional obstinacy in the face of progress, it might illustrate the Church's ongoing struggle to find a path between secularism and the confessional state. As Vatican II's legacy of religious freedom elicits renewed debate in American Catholic circles—and present-day "Murrayites" face the challenge of a new generation of "integralists"—this newly released material from the Vatican archives offers an opportunity for deeper engagement with the relevant historical precedents.

SUSANNA DE STRADIS *is a PhD candidate in history at the University of Notre Dame.*

BRIAN DEVLIN

Minding the Church

How should the hierarchy respond to whistleblowers?

When four whistleblowing priests in Scotland went public over the sexual hypocrisy of Cardinal Keith O'Brien in 2013, it resulted in his being prevented from attending the conclave that elected Pope Francis and ultimately in his removal as leader of the Archdiocese of St. Andrews and Edinburgh. I was one of the whistleblowers. When we sought a meeting with O'Brien's successor, I remember keenly his obviously rehearsed instruction to us: the Vatican's view was, "We are done here." In reality, the removal of the cardinal was the beginning, not the end, of what was to become an important change in the way Church authorities deal with the malfeasance of high-ranking members of the hierarchy, including previously untouchable cardinals. The Catholic Church in Scotland—and later in the United States with the Cardinal McCarrick case—felt the power of whistleblowing in action. But what, exactly, is whistleblowing? How does it help the Church? And what can the Church do to make sure it has the proper effect?

As a whistleblower, I can attest that the act itself can occasion a terrible case of imposter syndrome. You're constantly asking yourself—because you know you are likely to be asked by others—"Who do you think you are?" There is a passage in the Book of Amos where Amaziah, the priest of Bethel, tells Amos to back off. *We'll not be having any of that stuff going on here in the royal sanctuary*. Amos replies, "I was no prophet, neither did I belong to any of the brotherhoods of prophets.... I was a shepherd and looked after sycamores: but it was Yahweh who took me from herding the flock." God himself asked this of Amos. The first thing that the Church, as well as the whistleblower, must do is discern the motivation of those who speak out. In the cases of O'Brien and McCarrick, the motivation of the whistleblowers was not to "out" an elderly gay cardinal. Why would we want to do that? There are plenty of those. No, our aim was to prevent the further abuse of power by men at the head of a Church that claims to be holy.

The behavior of both men was widely known before their stories became public. Yet Church authorities had remained silent when victims brought allegations of clerical malfeasance—in our case, via sworn testimonies written to the nuncio. The degree to which papal nuncios and the Congregation of Bishops tolerated such behavior still requires investigation. But their icy silence has a purpose: it is intended to intimidate, to put victims and whistleblowers in their place. You are, from their point of view, just a keeper of sycamores.

Outside the Church such failure to respond would be completely unacceptable. It would be regarded as piling further abuse onto people who have already been traumatized. Church authorities need to adopt a universal set of standards that govern precisely when, and in what form, they will respond when allegations are made. These standards should be written with the help of lay Catholics who have experience supporting and protecting whistleblowers in secular society. If my own views were sought, I'd recommend that any Church official to whom an allegation of misconduct is sent acknowledge it within twenty-four hours and then come up with an initial plan for addressing it within three days. This would demonstrate that the allegation is of urgent importance to the Church.

I also recommend that whistleblowers feel no shame about bringing their grievances to the press when they have exhausted internal processes and met with either active resistance or indifference. Many of the faithful now recognize the internal machinations of the hierarchy and its tendency to suppress damaging revelations as akin to the omerta of organized crime gangs.

The authorities would do well to heed a presentation given by Archbishop Charles Scicluna on February 21, 2019. Though talking specifically about clerical child abuse, his comments apply more widely: "As shepherds of the Lord's flock, we should not underestimate the need to confront ourselves with the deep wounds inflicted on victims of sex abuse by members of the clergy. They are wounds of a psychological and spiritual nature that need tending with care."

Let's talk about the ethics of whistleblowing. Ethical decision-making is about measuring actions against often competing principles. In the O'Brien case I found myself having to assess whether going public would do more to help the Church than to hurt it. And I had to search myself. Was there a residual hunger for revenge motivating me? In the end that process of discernment led me to the ancient principles of justice (righting wrongs) and veracity (telling the truth, like Amos). When those are the real motivations, then whistleblowing must be seen as an ethical action, no matter how uncomfortable it makes the wider organization. Until recently, too many bishops justified moving priests known to have abused children to different parishes on the grounds that the highest priority was to avoid scandalizing the faithful. If we are to put that mindset permanently behind us, then our default as a Church must be to support whistleblowers rather than to impugn their motives.

Since the publication of my book, *Cardinal Sin: Challenging Power Abuse in the Catholic Church*, I have been approached by a number of laypeople and priests who have told me that the archdiocese O'Brien once led is now rife with bullying, intimidation, and clericalism. It would appear one kind of abuse of power has been replaced by another.

The bullying of "lower" clergy by other clergy higher up the ladder is not new, but it is seldom discussed. Though less conventionally scandalous than the sexual abuse of seminarians and younger priests, it nevertheless creates a toxic environment for those in ministry.

Seven years after the O'Brien case became public, the Social Care Institute for Excellence (SCIE) reported the findings of its independent audit into the safeguarding of children and adults in the Archdiocese of St. Andrews and Edinburgh. The report concludes: "While there are clear improvements in the processes, there has not been the same progress in achieving a rebuilding of trust and relationships to allow a safeguarding culture to flourish." The archdiocese appears to have rejected a God-given opportunity to replace a culture of hypocrisy with one of humility.

Some diocesan processes have improved, thanks to the input of skilled laypeople, yet calls for greater transparency in governance have gone unanswered. The report that sealed O'Brien's fate, written following an investigation by Archbishop Scicluna, has never been shared with the victims of O'Brien's abuse. This stands in stark contrast to the comprehensive report on McCarrick, which was released to the public. The Church can be transparent, but in the O'Brien case, it doesn't want to be. In this, we see the same mean culture of self-preservation that led to so many cover-ups and quiet reassignments. I have no doubt this culture extends well beyond the Archdiocese of St. Andrews and Edinburgh. Why wouldn't it? One priest, choosing his words carefully, told me, "It's evil, Brian. That's the only word I have to describe it."

Then-Cardinal Keith O'Brien, pictured in 2010

Members of the laity who have skills in these matters should be commissioned to work with bishops' conferences to produce clear, binding policies on whistleblowing and inter-clergy bullying, just as they have for safeguarding. However, we all know that bad institutional cultures eat new policies as a snack. The culture that pervades the Church remains too often one of over-deference to clerical power. And that cannot be left to fester. It is deeply un-Christian and will undermine the real procedural progress that has been made. Whistleblowers in the Catholic Church must never be punished for following their prophetic calling. Bishops—and those they choose to appoint to senior positions—who try to punish whistleblowers must be investigated by the Holy See and subject to formal due process. The motu proprio *Vos estis* leaves operational choices to the diocese, "and these may differ according to various cultures and local conditions." This is a prudent position since, as a *Commonweal* editorial argued, "In places where Catholics are a persecuted minority, [the automatic reporting of priests to the police] would do little to ensure justice—and perhaps put the lives of priests at risk" ("Francis Follows Through," June 2019). However, such local discretion needs constant and independent audit. We can no longer trust bishops to grade their own homework.

I'm an Irish Scot. We use the word "minding" a lot. "Who's going to mind the child?" or "Who'll mind the place when I'm dead?" It means "caring" or "nurturing." In a Church that often seems to be teetering on the brink of irrelevance, we must ask the laity to help "mind" the Church. To really nurture and care for it. This means being very brave in our faith. It means standing up to the bishops who have poisoned the well we Catholics drink from. It means adopting a stance akin to that of the civil-rights movement. Unhealthy cultures must not go unchallenged. As Pope Francis wrote in his "Letter to the People of God" in August 2018: "[The victims'] outcry was more powerful than all the measures meant to silence it, or [that] sought even to resolve it, by decisions that increased its gravity by falling into complicity. The Lord heard that cry and once again showed us on which side he stands."

BRIAN DEVLIN *is author of the recently published* Cardinal Sin: Challenging Power Abuse in the Catholic Church *(Columba Books). He left the priesthood following the ordination of Keith O'Brien as archbishop of St. Andrew's and Edinburgh. He went on to become director of corporate affairs on a National Health Service Board in Scotland.*

CNS PHOTO/PAUL HARING

Benjamin's Warning

Alexander Stern

When politics becomes an exercise in style, democracy suffers.

"The logical outcome of fascism is an aestheticization of political life." This is a central thesis of Walter Benjamin's famous essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Mechanical Reproduction." Benjamin considered the aestheticization of politics logical because he viewed fascism as an attempt to mobilize the public in such a way that it could express a desire for a different kind of society, with "changed property relations," while leaving those relations intact. When you want expression without effect, you get aesthetics.

This kind of aestheticized politics is clearly not unique to twentieth-century fascism, nor does it require one-party rule. What we have today in many Western democracies, including in our own inane culture wars, are political systems aestheticized on the Left and the Right, largely to the benefit of the status quo. Instead of one all-consuming aesthetic vision we are entertained with two interdependent ones. It's tempting to call it a fascism with two faces, but that would be reckless and ahistorical. These aestheticized politics aren't fascism, at least not yet, even if part of their aesthetics is to loosely bandy about the charge.

A rally with U.S. President Donald Trump in Grand Rapids, Michigan, March 2019

ANTHONY LANZILOTE/BLOOMBERG VIA GETTY IMAGES

That said, there are some echoes of the crises of the first half of the twentieth century. A small elite has control of the economic and political system; it has brought repeated ruin on the lower classes and precarity on the middle class; and it has managed to escape not only unscathed, but also richer than ever before. People are demanding a more just distribution of power and resources. And, once again, forces have emerged to sate them with aesthetics instead. While not equivalent to fascism, the aestheticization of our politics does reveal a vulnerability that our society shares with those that succumbed to fascism. More specifically, up and down our failing political system, atomized, isolated people cling to destructive narratives created and fueled by stage-managed personalities. One salient difference between now and the 1930s is that cults of personality are not just confined to the top. Everyone is a star, at least potentially.

How did we get here? The answer is not as simple as economics, the internet, loneliness, consumer culture, therapeutic culture, or a failed education system, though a full accounting would have to include all those things. The answer might have as much to do with historical changes to the concept and role of art, implausible as that may seem.

Benjamin's essay deals provocatively with a shift he locates in the very concept of art when media like film and photography came on the scene, and as the techniques of modern reproduction got hold of the old art. Technology rends art from the elevated, quasi-religious domain occupied by the masterworks of painting and music, which were imbued with a certain "aura" or authenticity. With mass reproduction these are brought into the grasp of the masses—a new audience that floods into the marketplace and

begins to erode the aristocratic stratification of culture and aesthetic elitism.

No longer do artworks occupy a withdrawn sphere, Benjamin argues; no longer are they to be contemplated with detachment by a hushed, pious, and privileged audience; no longer do they gleam with originality and uniqueness. Instead, they seek out their audience, integrating themselves into our experience and asking little of us in the way of attention or effort. Art goes from an object of veneration to a print on a coffee mug, a video we watch on the toilet, a narcotic beat injected into our heads while we try to endure the miracle of air travel.

Benjamin's term "aura" is famously hard to pin down, but it is essentially the uniqueness of an object, the quality that separates it from everything else and brings a hush over an audience. It manifests, as Benjamin puts it, "the phenomenon of a distance no matter how close the thing may be." He does not restrict the concept to art: nature and even individual human beings have an aura in this sense.

Aura in art is evident in the difference between being present at a Bach concerto and calling it up on your iPhone so that you can listen to it while you do the dishes. In the concert hall it commands respect and attention—even among those who don't understand it or don't think much of it—just by virtue of its irreducible presence. It has an authenticity and authority that can't be subsumed by its viewers. It stands against us in a certain way, challenging us. It is something that, as Benjamin puts it—citing a Chinese myth of an artist who literally steps into one of his paintings—we can get absorbed in, forgetting ourselves in the process.

Whereas we might be absorbed in the live concerto, we absorb the one on our iPhone. "The distracted masses absorb the work of art into themselves," Benjamin writes. "Their waves lap around it; they encompass it with their tide." Far from forgetting ourselves, if we listen to it enough it may even become part of us, a kind of appendage. We feel we deserve credit for liking it. It becomes part of our personality, like a pair of jeans or sneakers. We "share" it with others, not to expose them to something awe-inspiring outside of themselves, but to exhibit our own style and help them build theirs.

For Benjamin, the vulnerability of aura to reproduction means a complete shift in the role of art. Before, art had been tied to cult, religion, and ritual. Even after it loosened itself from religious tradition in modernity, art retained the feeling of something sacred and set apart. Any political significance it had was derived from this connection. Even after the concept of divine right had lapsed, for example, the statue or portrait of a king or nobleman—or even a bourgeois merchant—established him as an object of authority and elevated status. Art still had something of a ritual function, placing the privileged at a distance from the viewer.

But with the decay of aura, Benjamin writes, "the whole social function of art is revolutionized. Instead of being founded on ritual, it is based on a different practice: politics." This doesn't mean that all art has political content, but rather that its significance lies not in its past—its moment of creation, its ownership, authenticity, the tradition to which it belongs—but in its future—the impact it has on people, how it gets incorporated into their lives, how it spreads, and the mass movements to which it contributes.

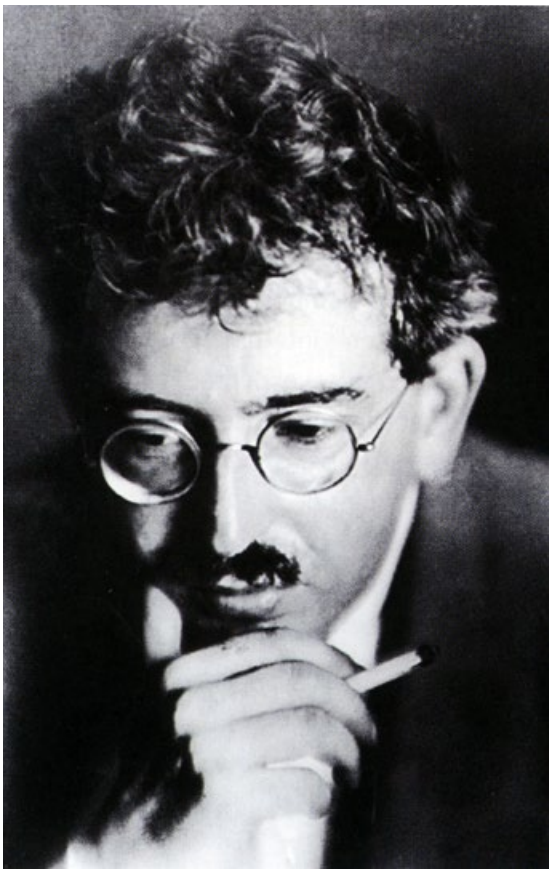
It thus makes possible and accelerates the intertwining of culture and politics that characterizes our society. The new art is readily available, easily assimilated, profane, disposable. It is more akin to what we now call "media." No longer capable of taking our breath away, it is instead the very air we breathe.

In the tendency of reproducible art to liberate itself from cult, Benjamin saw something potentially very positive. In the films of pioneers like Charlie Chaplin and Russian realists like Dziga Vertov, Benjamin saw films made "straight from life," inaugurating a "right to be reproduced" and showing "there exists no judge superior to the actual audience." The destruction of aesthetic stratification could work in parallel with an end to social and political stratification.

But by the mid-1930s, the revolutionary potential for film was already beginning to look grim, in the quickly commodifying Hollywood of Chaplin, in the authoritarian Soviet Union, and, of course, at home in Germany. Benjamin had before him far more evidence of the "counterrevolutionary purposes" to which the new art was being put, by both fascism and capitalism. In Nazi propaganda films like those of Leni Reifenstahl and in works of Italian futurism, Benjamin saw fascism reinjecting a cultic quality into the works of reproducible art. The most obvious example is *Triumph of the Will*, Riefenstahl's documentary about Hitler's Nuremberg rally, which came out shortly before Benjamin wrote his essay. In that film, sophisticated camerawork turns Hitler into something like a Hollywood star.

Critic and film theorist Siegfried Kracauer, a close friend of Benjamin's, would later identify authoritarian tendencies in the German film industry even before Hitler came to power. His 1947 study of Weimar-era film, *From Caligari to Hitler*, explored a series of historical movies about Frederick the Great. In these films, Kracauer argued, a tension between the ideal of individual autonomy and submission to a charismatic leader was eased by plots that tended to evolve "from rebellion to submission." Through these plots, he wrote, "one could participate in the ruler's glory and thus drown the consciousness of one's submission to him. The halo of glamour surrounding the screen Frederick lured the audience into acts of identification with this supergenius."

Film was being used not to make reality more accessible but to distort it, elevating Hitler's cult and Nazi mythology into something supernatural and distributing them to the masses. This gave art a new kind of cult power—not the cult of the king or god, but "the cult of the star." From Benjamin's point of view, the parallel between Hitler and Hollywood was no accident:



Walter Benjamin

> The cult of the star promoted by film capital preserves that magic of the personality, which has long consisted in no more than the false gleam of its commodity character; its complement, the cult of the audience, at the same time promotes the corrupted condition of the masses, which fascism seeks to put in the place of their class consciousness.

Where film itself contained "a compelling urge toward new social opportunities," contemporary film was "clandestinely exploiting" the medium "in the interest of a property-owning minority." The cult power of the new art was very different from that of the old. Traditional art established a distance, which those in power used to facilitate submission. It helped keep populations in place by defining a realm inaccessible to them from which they must take orders. The new art, by contrast, mobilized the masses by giving them access to something and an opportunity for self-expression. But forces were conspiring to ensure that such expression did not threaten the positions of the powerful. In Hollywood, this meant an ever-accelerating drive toward consumption, but Hitler and Goebbels were showing how the same machinery could be diverted to serve totalitarian ends.

The most successful pop idols and demagogic political leaders understand that they are not simply objects of fascination, but vehicles for the audience's own self-expression. To truly succeed, they must become a product and a platform on which their audience's fantasies can be projected. Their power comes not from premodern distance or veneration but from an imagined intimacy. Whereas loyal subjects kneel before their sovereigns, modern audiences reach out to touch their stars. Stars don't absorb: we don't imagine them in a transcendent world that we might step into, forgetting ourselves in the process. Instead, they are absorbed, themselves becoming a kind of media through which we express and understand ourselves.

Donald Trump's insight was to see himself and his personality as a work of art in this mold. Much of his act was not new, of course. Politicians from both parties have long used mass media to generate cults of personality. And conservatives have long played to a base of white middle- and working-class people resentful of distant and disconnected elites.

What was new was that Trump didn't purport to simply represent the interests of this base; he didn't just play to their fears and resentments. Rather, he became—with the help of online media and an obliging legacy press similarly desperate for attention—the star of a daily soap-opera reenactment of their resentment. Instead of expressing a desire for a different kind of society, alienated Trump supporters found themselves cheering on a vulgar, self-obsessed anti-hero despised by all the right people. As one Trump supporter put it, "The more they hate him, the more I want him to succeed. Because what they hate about him is what they hate about me." Trump was not simply admired; he was absorbed. He became a means of aesthetic expression for his base. He explicitly acknowledged this role on the campaign trail when he told his audience: "I am your voice."

Trump's soap opera played out on TV and on Twitter. Just as radio in the twentieth century helped bolster demagogues in both Europe and the United States, Twitter now provides apparently unmediated access to star politicians operating beyond the control of corrupt elite interests and institutions. Indeed, Twitter ramps up access considerably. Audiences no longer need to content themselves with the passive and vicarious thrills of radio or the moving image. On Twitter, the consumption of stars becomes active and public. Audiences can cobble together online identities

Instead of expressing a desire for a different kind of society, alienated Trump supporters found themselves cheering on a vulgar, self-obsessed anti-hero despised by all the right people.

largely on the basis of their favorite celebrities. Fans can even become minor stars themselves.

On Twitter and Facebook, cowering shut-ins create confident, outgoing lives (and then bemoan their "impostor syndrome"). Platforms that promised to connect people instead interject themselves between them, turning friendships into relationships that are not only externally monetizable, but take on the internal character of mutual consumption. Each party acts and poses for the other. Every tweet is self-advertisement. There is no cooperation, only mutual self-congratulation; no genuine debate, only smug one-upping and putdowns; no genuine inquiry, only the escalation of one's prior beliefs into hatred and hysteria. Most importantly, nothing much is built except individual brands and, on occasion, mobs who set out to destroy them.

These dynamics are not organic. In the same way that the genre films of Hollywood or Berlin were not a necessary upshot of film technology, social media as we know it is not a necessary upshot of the internet. Mainstream social media, as Benjamin said of film, actively amplifies and "preserves that magic of the personality" and "the false gleam of its commodity character." Instead of democratizing communication, access to information, or political influence, the internet—primarily through social media—has been made to democratize the cult of the star.

It's a commonplace to say that on these platforms you are the product being sold to advertisers, but you're also made into a product sold to your friends and acquaintances. The latter commodification underpins the former and is arguably more damaging. We are forced into the cult of stardom by design choices and profiteering that have fostered a new kind of interpersonal consumption and a set of attendant pathologies.

One result is a proliferation of the mental anguish once reserved for Hollywood stars. When your persona replaces your self, the connections you form with it remain forever tenuous. You can't trust anyone, since they only ever engage with a commodified version of yourself. You become needy—dependent on constant affirmation that is, by design, never enough.

Another result is the further aestheticization of politics. Like stars, political content and opinion no longer exist at a distance from their audience. They are absorbed and re-expressed by them as an appendage to the consumer's personality. The average Twitter political junkie casts about for content much like Trump does, creating a pastiche of causes, grievances, and commentaries as she curates the daily disposable micro-dramas in her orbit. (Some part of the overwrought aversion to Trump is self-recognition.)

For the Twitter star, truth is prized (when it is prized at all) not for its inherent value but for its secondary aesthetic value. Science, expertise, and "facts" become fetishized and, in the process, undermined. Conspiracy theories flourish because they express deeply felt resentments or fantasies that require only emotional "correctness." Even initially well-grounded views begin to wander toward the terrain of conspiracy theory as their value as an aesthetic accessory begins to overwhelm their empirical merit. A view held as a feature of one's identity is much harder to revise in the face of new facts than one that is simply an interpretation based on the available evidence. Your views become precious parts of a narrative about the world starring you. As such, any challenge to them begins to feel existential. Objections to your views automatically take on the character of "gaslighting": they can't be taken to reflect a legitimate difference in interpretation, but instead represent a more radical attempt to undermine your experience of the world and sow self-doubt.

The aestheticization of politics occludes important social and political issues that cut across the culture war and might present an opportunity for solidarity—issues like globalization, governance by "public-private partnership," a crisis of meaning. Meanwhile, it mires in exaggeration and venal idiocy the problems that do end up enmeshed in the culture war: the legacy of racism, global warming, COVID-19, to name a few.

Even if aestheticized politics mainly serve to distract from any actual changes to an unjust and anti-democratic economic structure, they are far from completely inert. Aesthetic expression may not change the balance of power but it can lead to other serious results, as we saw on January 6. In its search for a totalizing fulfillment, such a politics courts disaster.

In the most extreme example, Hitler, the failed artist and master propagandist, attempted to bring his deranged political vision to reality. As Benjamin wrote in 1935, "'Fiat ars—pereat mundus,' says fascism." *May art be made, and the world perish.* Benjamin concludes his essay by writing about fascism's drive toward war as an aesthetic climax:

> Humankind, which once, in Homer, was an object of contemplation for the Olympian gods, has now become one for itself. Its self-alienation has reached the point where it can experience its own annihilation as a supreme aesthetic pleasure.

Of late we've seen both Right and Left speculate about the possibility of a second civil war. Thus far, only the most deluded and troubled march the streets looking for a fight. But there is a more widespread tendency to revel, whether in enlightened despair or morbid curiosity, in apocalyptic futures. At the same time, our leading tech industrialists and their acolytes indulge in fantasies wherein technology facilitates a transcendence of the human condition. Benjamin would see this as further evidence of our self-alienation. Media that drive us relentlessly outside ourselves and turn us into god-like spectators of even our own personalities tend ultimately toward visions of fantastical transcendence or destruction. If it's all a TV show, as people like to pretend on Twitter, then there must be a finale.

Benjamin believed that instead of aestheticizing politics, we ought to "politicize art." Although he offers no real explanation of what that might mean, he is certainly not referring to the kind of the ham-fisted pseudo-satire or "statement art" that is often criticized today for being too political. In Benjamin's terms, that kind of political art is not strictly speaking political at all. It aestheticizes political content, removing it to a sphere of fashion where it can't be contested or truly engaged with, only embraced or reviled. This kind of art or media is actually anti-political, because it is convinced that everything is already settled and it's just a matter of whether the viewer "gets it" or is, in that heavily self-alienated phrasing, "on the right side of history."

So it is not that the new media needs to be depoliticized; rather, this media must be genuinely politicized for the first time. This would involve rescuing it from cult and culture war so that it can fulfill its democratic potential. It would mean envisioning and building alternative platforms that are not designed and controlled with only profit in mind. The interest in extracting as much money as possible from human attention requires and produces isolated, narcissistic subjects concerned most of all with their own appearance and incapable of banding together for any higher purpose.

We can already see glimpses of a more genuinely politicized media. Well-intentioned writers invested in genuine discussion and debate attempt valiantly to open up a space for something like real politics on their Twitter feeds, even if they frequently succumb to protective irony and defensiveness themselves. Meanwhile, with the "GameStonk" episode on Reddit in January, we saw a creative (and hilarious) attempt to protest and change property relations, even if it came with a large dose of materialism and trolling. And Substack has demonstrated the earnest, nearly desperate desire for a less-aestheticized journalism, even if the platform's financial model still seems dependent on Twitter stars and the dynamics that drive engagement there.

These successes, such as they are, share a common feature. They occupy a middle ground between the isolated user and the undifferentiated whole. Whether by accident or intention, they delimit an actual community, however fragile, where like-minded people can talk to one another without having to curate themselves for the entire world. They offer a partial refuge from the self-alienating abyss that the average social-media user faces—a single scantily protected individual confronting an endlessly diverting but also endlessly hostile arcade. It is in these kinds of mediated communities that we might escape from the cult of stardom and begin to make real politics possible again.

ALEXANDER STERN *is a writer whose work has appeared in the* Hedgehog Review, *the* LA Review of Books, Aeon, *and the* New York Times. *He is the author of* The Fall of Language: Benjamin and Wittgenstein on Meaning *and a writing fellow at Heterodox Academy.*

POETRY

ROADRUNNER

Michael Cadnum

This feathered knife,
this hatchet with eyes, this
killer is here first. For her
everything is too late.
Laughter, song are windless
in her reckoning,

and for her the story is sand.
She grows a long reach to kill
the rattler, the diamondback,
the sidewinder and

she asks no questions, her grammar
the bridges over dry rivers,
shattered litter along the highway,
blue thunder. She stands
upright. She stands even taller.

Noon. Steel crickets, iron scorpions.
She can count but has no numbers,
knows the viper by the night
of his eyes and she forgets
nothing. Forgets
nothing. She cannot fly.

MICHAEL CADNUM *has published nearly forty books. His new collection of poems,* The Promised Rain, *is in private circulation. He lives in Albany, California.*

A United Ireland?

John Connelly

It may be only a matter of time.

The Irish author Fintan O'Toole has drawn attention to a sad fact of British politics brought to light by Brexit. Not only do the British—meaning mostly the English—public not care about Ireland, but they hardly concern themselves with Northern Ireland, including the population there who consider themselves British. Brexit was conceived and propagated as if Ireland and its people did not exist. Now we see, more clearly than before the 2016 referendum, that Britain's EU membership formed the foundation for the peace and stability that have prevailed since the Good Friday Agreement of 1998, an accord that settled the lengthiest civil strife in Ireland's history.

While Britain was in the EU, questions of identity that had been murderously divisive faded into the background. Protestant unionists could live fully within a British world, Catholic nationalists within an Irish one. (Regardless of heritage, the Northern Irish can receive passports from both the U.K. and the Republic of Ireland.) But now that Britain is out of the EU, there has to be a border between it and the rest of Europe, including the Irish Republic. From the beginning of negotiations on Brexit, talk of a land barrier in Ireland has been anathema, with many fearing it would provoke a new round of violence.

Riots in Belfast circa July 1971 (RAY BELLISARIO/POPPERFOTO VIA GETTY IMAGES/GETTY IMAGES)

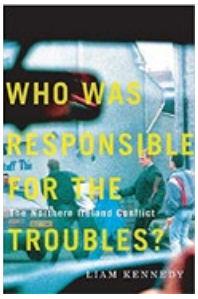

KING

The solution has been to keep Northern Ireland in the EU common market and to erect a customs barrier between it and Britain in the Irish Sea. That arrangement is enshrined in the Northern Ireland protocol worked out between Boris Johnson and Leo Varadkar, then the Irish Republic's Taoiseach, in October 2019. As of this writing, it's become difficult to find some cherished British products on the shelves of Northern Irish stores; Marks & Spencer, facing 120,000 pages of customs forms a week, has announced that it will be delisting holiday items like beef and bone-marrow pie. Hobby gardeners can't find favorite seed varieties and prices have doubled on beloved rose plants.

With good reason unionists fear that Britain has abandoned them. In County Tyrone, a mural featuring a masked gunman appeared: "Our forefathers fought for our freedom and rights; no border in the sea or we continue the fight." Even moderates agree it's an absurdity to be divided from one's own country by a customs barrier. In a riot in April—probably provoked by loyalist paramilitaries—youths set a double-decker bus on fire at one of the interfaces to Catholic Belfast. It was the first such incident in a quarter-century.

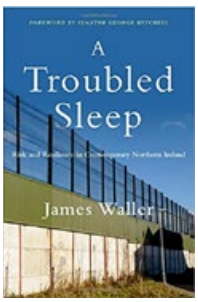
What the future holds is a mystery. The Good Friday Agreement calls for a referendum on Irish unity (known as a "border poll") whenever the (British) secretary of state for Northern Ireland believes there is a majority in the north and south favoring a united Ireland. This need only be a simple majority—50 percent plus one. But what if most unionists oppose unity with Ireland and lose the vote? Thanks to Brexit, we would then be back to one of Europe's most vexing nationality problems: suddenly, against their will, Northern Irish Protestants would be citizens of a country they consider foreign.

Two recent books on Northern Ireland, Liam Kennedy's *Who Was Responsible for the Troubles?* and James Waller's *A Troubled Sleep*, remind us how we got here and help us see what might come next. Kennedy and Waller are both leading authorities on the subject, and their books combine rigor with absorbing, elegant prose and a sense of moral purpose that is rare in academic writing.



WHO WAS RESPONSIBLE FOR THE TROUBLES?
The Northern Ireland Conflict

LIAM KENNEDY
McGill-Queen's University Press
$34.95 | 256 pp.



A TROUBLED SLEEP
Risk and Resilience in Contemporary Northern Ireland

JAMES WALLER
Oxford University Press
$40 | 376 pp.

Waller, a social psychologist, has been asking for decades why some divided societies produce violence while others don't. Soon after the Good Friday Agreement, he began visiting Northern Ireland with school classes and recently spent a semester as a visiting professor at Queen's University in Belfast, interviewing witnesses from both sides. Before delving into his research, Waller shares an insight from the psychologist Henri Tajfel, who pondered the ramifications of social identification while a captive of Nazi Germany (Tajfel survived because he was categorized as a French POW rather than as a Polish Jew). While studying at the Sorbonne after the war, Tajfel discovered almost no pretext was needed to split one group of people into mutually suspicious halves. As an experiment, he arbitrarily divided his students in two, and before long they began preferring members of their own group—as well as discriminating against those on the outside.

For people outside Ireland, the divisions in the Irish North likewise seem arbitrary and trivial. Unionist and nationalist communities not only speak the same language but do so with the same accent. Both are overwhelmingly non-observant Christians, indistinguishable by race and sharing a deep, common history—a history they understand very differently. Waller surveys the salient contours of this difference. According to nationalists, the Irish were victims of centuries of British aggression, including theft of land, expulsion of native elites, and the transplanting to Ulster of Protestants loyal to the colonial regime; Northern Ireland consists of six counties carved from Ulster in 1921 in order to assure Protestant domination (the remaining twenty-six counties became the Irish Free State). Into the late 1960s, the regime in Belfast gerrymandered and discriminated to make sure Catholics remained second-class citizens. According to unionists, their forebears civilized Ulster by fostering liberty and opposing papist obscurantism. The most visible expressions of this "culture" are yearly parades featuring men in bowler hats, deafening drums, banners of William of Orange, and bonfires that sometimes feature the burning of the pope in effigy.

The Troubles proceeded as a chain effect. In the late 1960s nationalists organized a civil-rights movement to demand equality, but the Protestant response, often aided by the police (the Royal Ulster Constabulary), was so violent—burning out Catholics from enclaves in Derry and Belfast—that London sent soldiers to keep the peace. Yet after being sent to ransack Catholic homes for weapons, the troops favored Protestants more and more openly. Then, in the Bloody Sunday massacre of January 1972, British paratroopers shot to death fourteen Catholics protesting peacefully in the streets of Derry.

This is one of Waller's "inflection points"—moments at which violence either escalated or went in a new direction. Outraged by the impunity with which British forces used

violence against Catholics, volunteers streamed into the clandestine IRA, providing soldiers for its campaigns against "British interests" (like British-owned department stores) and British officials, including off-duty policemen and soldiers. A more transformative inflection was the hunger strikes of the early 1980s. Ten IRA inmates starved to death in a vain protest to secure status as political prisoners, including the poet Bobby Sands, who had been arrested after an attack on the Balmoral Furniture Company in Dunmurry. The spectacle of men dying for their convictions made Sinn Féin, the IRA's political arm, so popular that it began winning elections, thus gaining an incentive to pursue its goals by peaceful means. By the 1990s Sinn Féin leaders also had to acknowledge that campaigns of terror could not solve the problem of Irish partition.

That terror is Liam Kennedy's core concern. The question posed by the title of his book—"Who was responsible for the Troubles?"—is intentionally provocative. Some nationalists would no doubt consider it scandalous. How could one side carry the blame for thirty years of killings when IRA and loyalist paramilitaries routinely avenged each other's acts? At some point it seemed impossible to say just who was responsible; the death spiral became self-perpetuating. Catholics had mobilized for equality, but Protestants claimed this mobilization was itself aggressive. By the early 1970s the volunteers streaming into paramilitaries on both sides believed they were protecting their communities.

Kennedy has been listening to the rival justifications since arriving at Queen's to teach economic history in 1977. He asks readers to get outside their echo chambers and consider what party may have been *primarily* responsible for perpetuating the conflict. Violence, he argues, does not happen by "inertia." The people who blew up crowded pubs or gunned down magistrates at breakfast with their children were not automatons. They thought what they were doing was not only necessary but right.

Kennedy gets to a "prime" culprit by a process of elimination. The police and army were indeed often partisan, but their basic job was containing violence, and if not for the introduction of British troops in 1969, the region might have descended into a full-blown civil war. In any case, these "crown forces" did not drive the violence. "Had there been permanent paramilitary ceasefires at any point from say 1972 onwards," writes Kennedy, "the British army would have been recalled to barracks."

What of the denial to Catholics of basic rights from the moment Northern Ireland was founded? Kennedy argues that systemic injustices were being dealt with via reformist policies pursued by British officials from the late 1960s: "Many of the key reforms in housing, local government and voting had been conceded by the time the Provisional IRA went on the offensive." What of Protestants as agents of violence? According to Kennedy, the unionist side was primarily responsive.

At some point it seemed impossible to say just who was responsible; the death spiral became self-perpetuating.

By "Provisional IRA," Kennedy means the main IRA faction that remained after a split in 1969 (the other faction is called "Official"). After decades of dormancy, the Officials had arisen once more in the late 1960s, setting bombs and killing British soldiers. But in May 1972, after their volunteers murdered Ranger William Best, a nineteen-year-old Catholic on leave in Derry from his unit in Germany, the Officials declared a unilateral cease-fire, worried that the violence would spiral out of control. For Kennedy this proves that continued armed struggle for "Irish rights" was unnecessary: had other republican groups emulated the Official IRA in its radical rethinking of armed struggle, loyalist violence toward the nationalist community would have fizzled out.

Yet rather than retreat, the Provisional IRA (also PIRA or "Provos") scaled up its campaign of bombings and assassinations. Kennedy thus assigns primary responsibility for the Troubles to a tight-knit Provos leadership group that pressed forward with targeted terrorism into the 1990s, killing more people than all other sources of violence combined.

Critics will ask whether the search for culprits can stop at the PIRA leadership. After all, they did not create themselves, but grew out of generations of official contempt and hypocrisy capped by human-rights abuses during the early 1970s. Anyone who watches documentaries on the Troubles—Arthur MacCaig's *The Patriot Game*, for example, or the BBC's eight-part series *Spotlight on the Troubles: A Secret History*—will conclude that arrogant officials from Britain, abetted by security forces displaying a colonial mindset, made the emergence of a radical faction in the IRA inevitable. Photojournalists recorded police kicking down doors, violating the elderly, roughing up and arbitrarily arresting young men, and clubbing everyone in sight when entering Catholic areas. After being dragged, sometimes by their hair, into paddy wagons, the arrested were held without trial and subject to abuses condemned as torture by the European Court of Human Rights in 1976.

Kennedy writes that the British learned a lesson from Bloody Sunday: it "was not repeated." Yes, technically Bloody Sunday was an event of one day, but the images of that event never disappeared from journals and televisions, becoming a perennial call to arms for young men and women—despite desperate efforts of peacemaking clergy and socialist politicians on the nationalist side.

Thus, if Kennedy is right that the violence was propelled by a monstrous coterie of ideological extremists, that mon-

ster's life was made possible by officials located in London, men with impeccable manners and an unquestioned belief in their right to govern supposed inferiors. They took for granted that, for example, the massive internment of Catholics without trial from 1971 to 1975, a "painful decision" arrived at after "due consideration," would quench the resistance. The effect was the opposite: an unquenchable rage.

By 1972 the Provos seemed to many Catholics the only force speaking a language adequate to their desperation, a fact well documented in Patrick Radden Keefe's *Say Nothing*, which tells the story of Dolours Price, an idealistic civil-rights activist from a republican family who was radicalized by direct witness to the persecution of Catholics. After swearing an oath of loyalty to the PIRA, she helped plant car bombs in London in March 1973, wounding some two hundred people. She and her accomplices were apprehended while attempting to board a flight back to Ireland. Decades later it emerged that Price had also belonged to a unit that kidnapped, shot, and buried Jean McConville, a West Belfast Catholic mother of ten who was suspected of treason. McConville's remains were not located until 2003 in a bog south of the border.

Yet as easy as it is to understand the rage that drove young men and women to the Provos, in retrospect we see that no goal justified their bombings, targeted assassinations, and maimings. Kennedy takes special aim at a central myth promoted by Price and her comrades: that they were protecting Catholics. Only three Catholics had died at loyalist hands between 1966 and 1969, while in the succeeding decades hundreds lost their lives. The Provos proved "hopeless" against their purported enemies: "Less than 2 percent of IRA killings," Kennedy tells us, "or 28 to be precise were of loyalist paramilitaries." Moreover, the IRA itself killed Catholics, including its own people. And contrary to the powerful images of Derry in January 1972, only a small minority of the Catholics who died were killed by security forces.

In fact, the Provos' goals did not lie in immediate self-defense. According to their doctrines, Catholics suffering persecution by the police or unequal treatment were surface problems: peace, justice, and popular welfare were unattainable as long as Ireland remained divided. Thus, the Provos' operations aimed to drive "British imperialism" from the island. An early leader, London-born John Stephenson (later called Seán Mac Stíofáin), wrote in his memoir, "we believe that only by force of arms can Ireland achieve her complete freedom." As in any war there would be casualties on both sides, justified by the cause; what the Provos did was exploit mass rage for their own program of national unity. Protestants would either accept united Ireland or get out.

Kennedy and Waller agree that Irish unity is only a matter of time, but the momentum in its favor has little to do with the IRA and its "armed struggle." The 2021 census revealed that for the first time Catholics outnumber Protestants in Northern Ireland, and British authorities may be bound in the foreseeable future to require a border poll. Signs of change are already in the air, including the fact that Northern Ireland now exists in an effective customs union with the south. In the nineteenth century a customs union in Germany preceded German unity.

Still, it's hard to dispute that the Good Friday Agreement was in part made possible by IRA terrorism. The major role in bringing the various sides together belongs to Northern Ireland's Social Democratic Labor Party (SDLP)—in the 1990s the major nationalist party, committed to peace and a moderate Left politics—yet Tony Blair admitted to SDLP politician Seamus Mallon that what really worried him was the IRA and its political wing Sinn Féin: "They have the guns, Seamus." And they did not fully surrender those weapons until 2005.

Yet the agreement has left Northern Ireland poorly prepared for unity. Much like the Dayton Treaty that ended the Bosnian conflict in 1995, it assumes the existence of ethnic communities and thereby perpetuates them. Because the Dayton peacemakers guaranteed power-sharing, office-seekers in Bosnia have had to declare themselves Croat, Muslim, or Serb. The result has been to reward the ethnic mindset, causing even moderate Serb leaders to highlight their nationalist profile and become more sectarian. Similarly, the 1998 Belfast agreement requires elected officials to declare allegiance: nationalist, unionist, or "other." Since that time power-sharing in Belfast has meant joint governing by the leading unionist party (DUP) and Sinn Féin, and because both of those parties are proudly sectarian, they do little to bring the two communities together.

The most striking failure is in education. If one wanted to unite people of diverse backgrounds, the obvious way would be to mix the young in schools, producing countless friendships across ethnic lines, "mixed" marriages, and a constituency opposed to binary distinctions. In theory, the task is an easy one. Schools are state-funded, and more than 70 percent of parents desire integration. Yet some 93 percent of students continue to attend either Catholic or Protestant schools; most do not meet people from the other community until they are in college. Beyond rhetorical gestures, the political class does little to promote integration. One unionist politician told Waller: "We like the rigorous segregation of neighborhoods and communities because it gives us an easy and solid voting bloc."

The segregation seems especially strange in Belfast, a small city where the population comes into constant contact at the center—in its shops, museums, and restaurants—then goes home to predominantly unionist or nationalist neighborhoods. The government owns public housing and might promote integration, yet its officials make sure that Protestant "estates" remain Protestant, Catholic ones Catholic. It does not help that paramilitaries remain active just beneath the surface. A few years ago, Catholic families were moved quietly into Protestant East Belfast, but soon they met threats of violence and were relocated to safer quarters. Though disarmed, paramilitaries remain eager to exploit fear, often trading in drugs and prostitution, similar to the mafias of the Balkans who grew out of the front-line forces responsible for ethnic

Belfast in the 1980s during the Troubles

HOMER SYKES/ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

cleansing. Brexit has given a new life to men who live by intimidation. For now, this is most visible on the unionist side—witness the rioting earlier this year.

Unfortunately, some on the nationalist side are deaf to the challenges of assuaging anxieties. After Brexit, and in light of the growing Catholic demographic weight, Sinn Féin politicians seem gleeful at the apparently unstoppable momentum toward Irish unity. Party leader Mary Lou McDonald has called on the British government to set the date for the unity referendum. In her view, "Change is underway, it cannot be resisted but it must be managed."

Such overconfidence could prove a set-back for unification, alienating not only unionists in the north, but also people in the Republic regardless of heritage. According to polls, a substantial majority (two-thirds) of southerners would support united Ireland, but only 54 percent are willing to pay higher taxes to fund it. Some estimates place the cost of unity as high as 30 billion euros a year. Perhaps with these facts in mind, mainstream politicians speak in measured tones, with the current Taoiseach, Micheál Martin, saying he prefers an evolutionary approach, building north-south trust through projects of mutual interest. His government is not pushing for a border poll.

Commentators in the Republic also pay attention to the nationalist-unionist dynamic north of the partition. Southerners will support unity, Fintan O'Toole writes, only if it seems not to leave them with a mess. "They will not vote for a form of unity that merely creates an angry and alienated Protestant minority within a bitterly contested new state." But the south is also no longer the place that that minority once feared; it is highly educated, almost post-national in sentiment, and secular. The Irish Catholic Church, which once took its political relevance for granted, has been much reduced by scandal and attrition. Only 2.1 percent of respondents in the Republic felt there would be no recognition of unionist identity in a united Ireland.

What if the border poll happens and 52 percent of the Northern Irish are in favor, but 80 percent of Protestants among them remain opposed? Europe's history gives little guidance. The sense in France, Spain, Italy, or Poland has long been that the nation existed from time immemorial; there have been quarrels over the centuries about France's boundaries, but when the French Assembly spoke of the French nation in 1789, they had something real in mind: it was the people that had been subjects of the French crown. That nation needed the vote, but it did not need to be created through referendum. In the Italy of the 1860s, despite cavernous regional disparities, support for the new nation state was overwhelming along the peninsula. Likewise, Poland at the dawn of independence in 1918 was regionally complex, but few doubted that a Polish nation existed and should govern itself after the collapse of the powers that had occupied it for more than a century.

The Irish case mixes such standard expectations for national unity with unusual complexity and doubt. On one hand, the Republic's constitution speaks of the "will of the Irish nation,

in harmony and friendship, to unite all the people who share the territory of the island of Ireland." The assumption here is that the population of the island is one nation. On the other hand, we know that some 800,000 people in Northern Island still consider themselves part of the British nation.

The most comparable European case may be at the other end of the map: Bosnia. Like Ireland, it's been a distinct political entity for centuries. As in Ireland, its people speak one language and, if one accepts ideas about race popular in the United States, Bosnians are racially indistinguishable from one another. As in Northern Ireland, the population is divided by religion, and, until about thirty years ago, no clear lines could be drawn: Muslims, Croats, and Serbs lived interspersed. Then, in 1992, a rash political decision disrupted this arrangement. That was the year the Bosnian parliament, dominated by Muslim and Croat representatives, set a referendum on independence. In order to pass, the referendum needed only a simple majority—50 percent plus one. The vote was overwhelmingly in favor, but there was a problem: Serbs had refused to take part. In March 1992 the Bosnian parliament declared independence from Yugoslavia and within weeks Serb paramilitaries were laying siege to Sarajevo. Three years of civil war followed, capped by the creation of a dysfunctional statelet called Bosnia at Dayton.

As different as it is from Northern Ireland, Bosnia gives a sense of the futility of trying to establish national unity against a substantial minority. Shortly before he died in January 2020, Seamus Mallon appended to his memoir, *A Shared Home Place*, urgent concerns about the border poll. Was it not absurd, he asked, to pursue unity in a way that ensures disunity? In a legal sense it may be correct to insist that a simple majority decide the poll, but in moral terms such an outcome would court disaster for the "peace and harmony of the island." Leo Varadkar has agreed, saying in 2017 that "bouncing Ulster Protestants into a unitary Irish state against their will would be as grievous a wrong as was abandoning a large Catholic minority in the North on partition. It could lead to alienation and even a return to violence."

Mallon insisted that a border poll must enjoy consent in both communities, and that meant making unity more pal-

A Loyalist sign in Dungannon, County Tyrone, about the Irish Sea border, February 15, 2021

PA IMAGES/ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

If related to a population the size of Britain, the 3,636 killed and 42,216 injured in the Troubles would translate into 130,000 killed and 1.5 million injured—three times the casualties of the Blitz.

atable to opponents—perhaps through detailed talks on the constitution of a new Ireland. Will it retain devolved institutions for Northern Ireland? Will it be a unitary or a confederated state? If the latter, there might be significant provisions for local self-rule. Yet what concerns Liam Kennedy is not so much the future as the past. Likening the Troubles to Europe's Thirty Years War, he calls for an open dialogue about responsibility. "Without such truth-telling and much else besides," he argues, "it is difficult to see how relationships of trust between north and south, and within Northern Ireland itself, can be made to bear much political weight." Though not comparable to the hecatomb of the seventeenth century, the casualties in Northern Ireland were nevertheless immense. If related to a population the size of Britain, the 3,636 killed and 42,216 injured in the Troubles would translate into 130,000 killed and 1.5 million injured—three times the casualties of the Blitz.

Far from telling the truth, Sinn Féin has not even been willing to say that IRA killings were evil acts. The party's current leader, Mary Lou McDonald, has said "the politics of condemnation is a rabbit hole that I will not go down because it becomes a tit for tat, 'you said, I said,' and it becomes a tennis match between very, very hurt and very, very damaged people and communities."

For Kennedy, the idea of parallelism—"we and they" equally culpable—fails in several ways. First, Britain's government has issued apologies, for example for the Bloody Sunday Massacre. It has also spent hundreds of millions of pounds investigating killings. (Its security forces were responsible for 10 percent of Troubles-related deaths). Furthermore, Sinn Féin is the only political party that served as a paramilitary's political wing. Finally, republican paramilitaries accounted for the lion's share of the deaths during the Troubles (59 percent), including a substantial minority of the 1,200 Catholics who died.

Each of the many atrocities they perpetrated seems to reflect a new low in heartlessness. What could be worse, one wonders, than orphaning ten children and leaving them with no sign of their mother's fate? But then one reads of Patsy Gillespie, a Catholic who worked as a cook for the British army in Derry. In October 1990 an IRA unit burst into Gillespie's house, took his wife and children hostage, chained him to the seat of a truck with explosives and forced him to drive to a British army base. When it reached the gate, IRA officers detonated the truck, killing Gillespie and five British soldiers. The killing was not limited to Northern Ireland. On the morning of June 7, 1996, an IRA unit sprayed fifteen rounds from automatic weapons in the direction of Garda (Irish policeman) Jerry McCabe. They failed to seize money from the post-office van he was guarding in County Limerick, but succeeded in killing McCabe, who left behind a wife and five children.

Earlier this year the reporter Fran Curry wanted to know whether Sinn Féin's representative (TD) for Tipperary, Martin Browne, would condemn the men who shot McCabe. "I would not go as far as saying condemn," Browne said, "that is a hard word to put out there." Then he added: "We all have, eh…we all have our own opinions of what happened, at that time." Pushed by Curry, he struggled to clarify: "Well, sure, I told you my opinion that it was a sanction, or an action that wasn't supported by the Provisional movement at the time, and they made that clear, and they made their apologies and that, down through the years, for that." In response to Curry, Jackie Cahill, a Tipperary politician from the mainstream party Fianna Fail, had this to say:

> I fail to understand why anyone would even have to pause to think about whether the killing of a detective on duty couldn't but be condemned. How any public representative wouldn't condemn this out of sight is beyond my comprehension. But the thing that really got me was the implication that if it had been "sanctioned" by the "movement," it would have been okay. It beggars belief.

Belief was precisely the issue: IRA members swore loyalty to a movement that tolerated no thinking outside its doctrines. Killing McCabe was necessary because it served the "war" to oust Britain from Ireland. Even in our day that ideology is difficult to surrender, and not only because it gives purpose and meaning. As anyone who has argued with an IRA supporter will know: its teachings seemed to answer all questions, quieting pangs of conscience. The situation was not much different for veterans of fascist paramilitaries on the continent after World War II. If anything was wrong with the struggle for the rights of "their" nations, it was only that they did not win.

Sinn Féin politicians not only fail to condemn terrorists; in some cases they still celebrate them. Sinn Féin MP Matt Carthy said of Séamus McElwaine, a once-prolific IRA killer, "Séamus and all of those who fought for Irish freedom continue to inspire us." Sinn Féin's newspaper, *An Phoblacht*, even published a full inventory of such "heroes" in April of this year. In August, Michelle O'Neill, the party's leader in Northern Ireland, expressed reverence for Thomas McElwee, a man "unbowed and unbroken" who had starved to death for Irish freedom forty years earlier; she failed to note that an incendiary device planted by McElwee's unit had burned to death Yvonne Dunlop, a twenty-seven-year-old mother of three.

But it's not only Sinn Féin that has work to do, if the two sides are to move closer to each other. Nationalists will ask what they would get in return for following Mallon's advice and reneging on their right to an all-Irish vote on unity. In a sense, Mallon is asking them to be more British than Margaret Thatcher: the Good Friday Agreement stipulation that a majority vote in Northern Ireland be respected dates to the 1985 Anglo-Irish Agreement, which Thatcher forged with Irish leader Garrett Fitzgerald. It was vehemently opposed by Ian Paisley, and should have led to serious reconsideration in DUP ranks about how much the British establishment could be trusted. Just four years earlier Thatcher had said that Northern Ireland is "as British as Finchley" (her own constituency).

Here's an idea for an olive branch from the unionist side: an enlightened leader might embrace Kennedy's style of moral politics and concede that Irish unity would make amends for the outrageous 1921 partition, concocted to create a "Protestant parliament for a Protestant people," and justified by no democratic mandate. The anti-Catholic discrimination in the generations that followed was so intense that even the rumor that a Catholic was employed at a major enterprise, like a ship-building factory, would cause the work crew to strike until the "offense" had been removed.

Such an expectation is fantasy, however. If unionist politicians utter the words "Irish unity," it's only to make clear that they oppose it. Their party line is simple and unwavering: Northern Ireland is British to the end of time. Arlene Foster, who was DUP leader into the spring of this year, has said that she anticipates no border poll in her lifetime, and she has just turned fifty. Yet such stubbornness is self-destructive. Foster loyally supported Brexit, and in return her ally Boris Johnson negotiated the protocol that puts up a barrier between Northern Ireland and Britain—after loudly promising never to let the DUP down. Logically, the graffiti in East Belfast should be anti-British. In fact, only 4 percent of the population in Northern Ireland expresses trust in the British government.

Waller keys us in on why unionism is marching lockstep into oblivion: fear extending from leadership to base. Psychologists speak of a "higher level of perceived cultural threat" among Protestants. Their communities, Waller writes, have a "collective and self-protective zero-sum response to changes in contemporary Northern Ireland that have challenged the dominant status they have enjoyed in the past." The fear is especially stark among workers, who once enjoyed the rare certainty that no matter how poor their own position, it was better than that of Catholics. Waller finds that immigrants feel more at home in Northern Ireland's Catholic communities than in Protestant ones; according to the police, "most of the major race incidents that we have seen have occurred generally in loyalist areas." Fears mix, in more candid statements, with guilt. One former loyalist political prisoner confided in Waller: "When the boot is on the other foot, they will do to us what we did to them."

Such private sentiments are drowned out in the drum beating of annual marches, with banners celebrating British Protestant victories over Catholic forces many centuries ago. But precisely these parades, with the men in bowler hats, trigger naked derision in Britain proper. One British observer reports that most British people outside Northern Ireland find the unionists "embarrassing, provocative, and risible, and think they appear to be living in a past century." Another said that the marcher in an Orange Order parade seemed to him to be from "another planet."

Nevertheless, the Orange Order feels it is the last repository of true British sentiment, with a duty to "remember" a glorious past—for example, the Ulstermen who died at the Somme in 1916 *for Britain*. That sacrifice of thousands generates raw emotions even now. According to the historian Ruth Dudley Edwards, the Orange Order is now mostly a social organization, adding vigor to communal life, organizing self-help, and of course spending lots of time preparing the annual parades.

History suggests that if left alone, cultural expressions like this eventually shed their aggressiveness. The Republic's constitution speaks of the will to unite Ireland's people "in all the diversity of their identities and traditions," and as a liberal democracy, it upholds the cultural rights of Protestants—a practice unionists might appreciate if they glance across the border to the Ulster counties not included in Northern Ireland. Donegal, for instance, has a relatively sizable Protestant minority and an Orange Order, with lodges and yearly parades featuring William and other heroes. But the parades are not accompanied by chauvinist symbols. No one burns the pope in effigy. Catholics often watch and join in the fun. And why not? These parades do not reflect a fear of decline, but focus on the cultural life of the community.

But history also urges caution. We don't understand how or why some ethnic identities—the Bavarians in Germany or the Gorales of southern Poland—become "subethnic," fading in cultural and emotional significance, perhaps celebrated on a particular day and excluding no one. In New York City, everyone is Irish on March 17. But there are other cases—such as the Serbs in 1980s Bosnia, or Germans in 1930s Bohemia—in which an ethnic group, led by desperadoes, lashes out violently against discrimination and economic decline.

It is still too soon to say with certainty how it will go with the unionists in Northern Ireland. At a minimum, interested states should employ all conceivable instruments to allay their fears: ample opportunities for education and employment, significant self-rule, cultural rights. There has to be an unbureaucratic way to ensure that the men and women of Ulster can enjoy their favorite British goods. The unionists have been poorly served by their political class, but no one in Northern Ireland deserves to suffer from Brexit. The population there did not vote to leave Europe, and any simmering anti-European or anti-British sentiment will only serve the disciples of misinformation and violence.

JOHN CONNELLY *teaches history at the University of California, Berkeley, and was Fulbright scholar at Queen's University Belfast in 2020. He is author of* From Peoples into Nations: A History of Eastern Europe *(Princeton).*

I REMEMBER YESTERDAY. THE WORLD WAS SO YOUNG.

Christian Wiman

On the radio the scientist is speaking of other earths.
There are in light red shifts and blue shifts
and some people learn to read in these
the probability of planets that might harbor life—

Our life, perhaps? the fossil-voiced host suggests,
whose despair over what our species has wrought
is countered by wonderment that we—and in particular *she*—
might wrest from death a whole new world.

She is vivid and avid, this scientist, effably intelligent,
and despite myself what lizards into me
are multiple moons and dunes and other obvious
and no doubt inappropriate planetary metaphors
for a beautiful nude.

And God? the host asks shyly. Religion and all that?
(Who hung the moon and the stars,
I think, and changes deep darkness into morning.)
I want to kill it, she glees.
We've lost one world to illusions. That's enough.

Some people read the stars, some people read people,
some sit in a vise of silence trawling God.
Love and death, love and death, red shift, blue shift.

CHRISTIAN WIMAN'*s most recent book is* Survival Is a Style.

Give Them the Facts

An interview with Katie Worth

Isabella Simon

Katie Worth is an investigative journalist who writes about the intersection of science and politics. Most recently, she worked for Frontline PBS *for six years on multimedia projects, including the Emmy-winning interactive documentary* The Last Generation, *which focused on the effects of climate change in the Marshall Islands. Worth spoke with assistant managing editor Isabella Simon about her newly released book,* Miseducation: How Climate Change Is Taught in America. *This interview has been edited for clarity and length.*

ISABELLA SIMON: Your book analyzes the question of how climate change is taught, or frequently *not* taught, in schools across the United States. What motivated you to choose this topic for your research?

KATIE WORTH: I was on a reporting trip to the Marshall Islands, a low-lying atoll in the Pacific Ocean and one of the nations whose very existence is threatened by climate change. It's only ten feet above sea level. While talking to kids there, I was stunned by how fluently they could talk about climate change in a way that is not common in the United States.

One of the kids that we met was a nine-year-old named Izerman. His family was considering moving to Oklahoma because they had extended family there and they wanted their kids to get a better education. That immediately brought up the question: What would their kids learn about climate change in Oklahoma?

I wound up spending time at the high school in the Oklahoma town where Izerman's family was considering moving. Of the five or six kids that I spoke to, only one had ever heard a teacher bring up climate change. That gave me a sense of the real disparities in climate change education: in some places there's a serious discussion around the subject, and in others it's absent. I wanted to answer the question of why is this happening—and does it matter?

IS: You grew up near Paradise, California, a town that burned down in a 2018 wildfire. Tell us about your personal connection to climate change.

KW: I'm from Chico, in the same county as Paradise, which burned down in 2018. Ninety percent of the buildings were destroyed and eighty-seven people perished in the flames, and everyone in Paradise evacuated that day to Chico. I wondered what kids *there* were learning about climate change.

I reached out to a teacher at Paradise Intermediate School, which had been displaced by the fire and was temporarily housed in a former big-box store. I spent a week or two observing a seventh-grade science class. The teacher was teaching a unit on climate change to a group of kids who had all been burnt out of their homes and were arguably climate refugees.

Politically, Paradise is fairly red. So for many of the kids, if they'd heard anything about climate change at all, it was that it was a hoax. Of course, scientists can't pin any given disaster on climate change, but we know that climate change had its fingerprints all over this fire, which was preceded by the five hottest summers in California's history. It also hadn't rained. These kids were actual victims of climate change, and it was gutting to see them reject the very idea of this phenomenon that had already transformed their lives.

IS: *Miseducation* includes a map of the United States in which every state is labeled with its partisan affiliation and graded on the strength of its climate education from A to F. Perhaps unsurprisingly, no Democratic states earned less than a B-, while nineteen Republican states earned a C or below. How has partisanship created what you call a "two-tiered system"?

KW: Every state has its own set of academic standards, specifying everything a kid should know at the end of each grade or class. These are usually updated every five to ten years. The process works like this: a panel of educators in a given subject looks at the old standards, figures out what's working, what's not, and so on. Then they make a recommendation to the state legislature, which issues either a thumbs-up or thumbs-down.

Sometimes, there's conflict. Almost invariably, science educators advocate for including climate change in science education. But then the state legislatures, especially in red states, reject them.

IS: Another place where this partisan divide appears is in the language used in textbooks. What did you discover about the ways publishers market books in different states, and how one state's standards can affect the content of textbooks across the country?

KW: There's actually a lot of variation in how textbooks are approved across the country. Some states approve them at the state level, while others leave it to the discretion of individual school districts.

Katie Worth

One of the largest states to approve its textbooks statewide is Texas, whose legislature reviews textbooks with a fine-toothed comb and a political eye. Textbook companies don't want to just make a special textbook for Texas alone. They need a version that can be sold and used in districts across the country. So this gives Texas an outsized influence in textbook content nationwide.

My team found a remarkable amount of climate denialism in dozens of middle-school textbooks. Sentences like "many scientists believe that climate change is being caused by humans, but some scientists believe that it's natural." That's patently false, but it helps the books make it through Texas's arduous approval process. Publishers pay attention to the political winds, and preemptively censor themselves.

IS: One seemingly innocuous result of this self-censoring is that textbooks often frame climate change as a debate. Why is that so dangerous?

KW: Well, debate is actually good pedagogy for critical thinking, and good teachers often try to incorporate debate in classes. But there's harm done when you ask kids to debate something that's not actually a matter of debate. Scientific findings are indeed turned over all the time, but when a finding is replicated tens of thousands of times, and there are no other studies showing something else, that finding takes on the status of a fact.

It's something we've known for a long time. The evidence for climate change dates back to the beginning of the twentieth century. In fact, fossil-fuel companies were some of the first people to realize it, and even hired researchers to study it throughout the forties, fifties, and sixties.

In 1965 the scientific community was worried enough about climate change that they created a report to brief President Lyndon B. Johnson about it. They stated that fossil fuels "may be sufficient to produce measurable and perhaps marked changes in the climate by the year 2000," which turned out to be true.

So there hasn't actually ever been real scientific debate over why it's happening or whether it's going to happen, though there has been some debate over what the effects are going to be. There is no evidence to support theories about solar cycles or gravitational waves. There's a lot of pseudoscience out there, but no alternate theory supported by any real evidence.

The trouble is that once you accept these facts, it requires an overhaul of a pillar of our economy. For the last couple centuries that has been fossil fuels. This is obviously very concerning to people making money in that industry. And in the 1980s, the fossil-fuel industry became increasingly defensive and was much less interested in the facts. They laid off their scientists and invested in communications experts instead.

IS: Big Tobacco faced a similar dilemma when scientific consensus linked smoking with cancer in the mid-twentieth century. Instead of changing their business model, tobacco companies invested in a campaign of denial. What did the anti–climate science movement learn from Big Tobacco?

KW: A book called *The Merchants of Doubt* by Naomi Oreskes and Erik M. Conway details this in a really helpful way. After a lawsuit, Big Tobacco had to turn over all of their internal communications documents. They realized that if you can get the public to doubt the science even a *little*, that inoculates against change. The status quo had inertia: people didn't want to give up smoking or think it was going to make them sick. If there's not *incontrovertible* proof, if there's *any* question around it, they can justify it to themselves and regulators can justify not regulating it.

So the tobacco companies hired scientists who went on TV and produced reports that cited "other factors" as the cause of cancer and highlighted lifelong smokers who didn't get sick. Their doubt campaign probably delayed regulation of tobacco products by decades. In the meantime, the tobacco industry made lots of money.

When the fossil-fuel industry was starting to think about communications with the public, they actually hired some of the exact same people who were working for Big Tobacco. Most scientists aren't going to go against the majority of people in their field, but there are some that will. One was Frederick Seats. Another was Fred Singer. Both were well-known and well-respected in their fields. But then they started working for corporate interests and not only spoke out against tobacco regulation, but also questioned the science linking asbestos and health, as well as chlorofluorocarbons and the hole in the ozone layer.

After climate change came to greater public attention, Seats and Singer started questioning the science relentlessly.

EMMA VARSANYI

They were on TV all the time, publishing op-eds and criticizing reporters who didn't include "both sides" of the issue. The media completely lapped it up. They provided "both sides" of an issue that didn't have two sides for many decades, and surely slowed action by doing so.

IS: How did that doubt campaign affect education?

KW: There are a couple of threads that are worth mentioning. One is a leaked memo from a 1988 meeting hosted by the American Petroleum Institute and attended by Exxon as well as several other members of the coal, oil, and gas industries. Conservative think tanks were there, too. At the time they were worried about carbon regulations emerging from the Kyoto Protocol. They created a communications plan to hire more scientists to plaster the media and lobby politicians with the fossil-fuel industry's message on climate change.

In that memo, there are some tactics listed specifically to get into classrooms. And it says that the purpose of this is to "begin to erect a barrier against further efforts to impose Kyoto-like measures in the future." So they really laid it out, and they succeeded. They partnered with the National Science Teaching Association to create pro–fossil fuel curricula that wound up in classrooms. They funded books, lesson plans, and an ad campaign, some of which did explicitly deny climate change, but most of which was more subtle than that.

And that continues to this day. In 2019 I was in a classroom in Arkansas, and a lobbyist working for an Arkansas oil-and-gas-industry organization walked in. She was there to give a presentation to the seventh graders about Arkansas's oil industry. Some of it was legitimate: the geology, the technology. But then there was a whole portion telling kids that every source of fuel has problems, and climate change wasn't something that they needed to stress about.

This campaign has also been so effective with adults that it seeps into education in a much more natural way, because teachers exist at all points along the political spectrum. A lot of them didn't learn anything about climate change in their own education, so they're going to present it as a debate if they don't know better. Kids also absorb the views of their parents. It's an adult problem, but it gets into the classroom by osmosis, if not through a direct campaign.

IS: But not every classroom is this way. You observed dozens of teachers in classrooms around the country. What were some examples of what victory in the battle for accurate climate education looks like?

KW: There are intrepid teachers in every community in America who are taking this on and that are giving kids a real, robust education about the climate crisis. I've seen teachers give kids the chart of carbon levels in the atmosphere and then have them look up their city and its historic average temperatures to see how temperatures are trending. Almost always, they're trending up. Then the kids start putting it together themselves. They learn what the greenhouse effect is, and they can come to some conclusions about cause and effect and discover it themselves like scientists have.

That is really powerful because providing kids with direct data helps seed some protection against anti–climate science messages. If we say, "I'm just going to give you the evidence, you get to decide, you get to think for yourself on this issue," maybe the kid doesn't walk out that day believing in it, but enough of that information adds up to help them find the truth.

IS: Once they have the truth, there is still a question about whether the goal of our climate education should be action. How do you address people who are concerned about turning classrooms into a "political space"?

KW: Many people push back on the idea that classrooms are neutral to begin with. And then there are also people who say teaching climate science *is* neutral, since it's simply a matter of looking at the evidence. Imposing the framework of "debate" is where politics comes in. Sure, there are things you can debate: Should we do anything at all about this? How much should we overhaul our society? What should we do when we start seeing these major changes and people are displaced? Those are things that adults debate, and bringing them into a classroom is reasonable, especially if your goal is to create future citizens who are participating in civic discourse and tackling society's problems.

If that's a goal that you have for a good public education, then climate change should absolutely not just appear in science class, but in civics classes and history classes, too. There are ways to incorporate the issue across all subjects.

Somebody put in just eight words what kids should know by the end of their education about climate change: "It's real, it's us, it's bad, there's hope." If they leave their education fundamentally understanding those four things, they will be ahead of most of the American population.

That last part about hope is essential. Frank Niepold, the climate-education czar for the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, put it like this: "Kids know there's a problem. And often, when climate change is taught, it's presented as 99 percent problem and 1 percent solution. But kids don't want that. They want 20 percent problem and 80 percent solution."

Not only is that better received by the kids, but it primes them to become adult decisionmakers. Climate change is a massive challenge, and we need their brains working on how to fix it. Education not only alleviates the despair that they—and many of us—might otherwise feel right now. It helps them roll up their sleeves and get to work.

ISABELLA SIMON *is the assistant managing editor at* Commonweal.

Hear the full interview with Katie Worth on Episode 67 of the Commonweal Podcast.

LISTEN **commonwealmagazine.org/podcast**

DELAYED

at LAX

Eric Rawson

Christmas Eve is a hive of frustration.

Snowstorms in Denver or endangered birds
  nesting in Chicago—reasons. Bags all

checked thru. Feliz Navidad card from her
  domestic worker (more a friend really)
    in the carry-on. Phone dead but nothing

(now that there is something) to text. Cannot
  even in the anxiety form a

complete thought. She was going back any-
  way—wasn't she?—with good reports, making
    good money with good friends. Going back now,

more a child than ever, caught out despite
  having practiced off and on now and then

for the eventualities of ill-
  ness, then (probably) more illness and the
    non-alternatives that precede the deaths

of others.
      Runways haze into the sun-

  set.
    If she presses against the plate glass,

she might see the ocean. Almost, she thinks,
  the panic cascading, almost made it.

ERIC RAWSON *lives in Pasadena and teaches at the University of Southern California. He is a former Teaching-Writing Fellow at the Iowa Writers' Workshop and the author of* Banana Republic *and* The Hummingbird Hour. *His work has appeared in numerous periodicals, including* Slate, American Poetry Review, Ploughshares, Iowa Review, *and* Commonweal.

TIM MARKATOS

'The Solitary Anarchist'

The Greek filmmaker Nikos Papatakis tried to make his audience as uncomfortable as possible—and usually succeeded.

When a niche director is rescued from the dustbin of film history, it's fair to ask: Did they end up there for good reason? The late filmmaker Nikos Papatakis is one such long-forgotten artist, his five films difficult to track down in English until they were restored in 2018 for a brief theatrical run in New York City. This year they entered the streaming market for the first time, landing on the Criterion Channel as a presumptive first stop en route to an eventual home-video release. In a featurette shot for the Criterion retrospective, Greek filmmaker Athina Rachel Tsangari recalls some foreboding advice Papatakis passed down to her at the start of her career: "Don't try to imitate life. You're a descendant of Euripides and Aeschylus—it's all about creating this archetypal violence. Make the audience uncomfortable!"

Les Abysses (1963), Papatakis's first film, wastes no time in fulfilling the latter part of that maxim. The movie opens with a swift camera pan to a woman clinging to a staircase as she unleashes a scream, by no means the movie's only, or even most bloodcurdling, one. Papatakis then cuts to a sizzle reel of sorts, a series of decontextualized shots of two bedraggled women making mischief—hammering a cement wall to smithereens, peeling wallpaper like an orange—that are void of dialogue (though their mouths move) and scored by atonal orchestration. If you were to pause the film two minutes into it, just before the title card appears, you would have no way of knowing whether or not the entire film was this stylistically alienating.

Nikos Papatakis was the son of Greek and Abyssinian parents, born in Ethiopia in 1918, where he fought against Mussolini during the Italian invasion in 1935. Defeat at the hands of the fascists drove Papatakis from Ethiopia and into exile across multiple continents. He eventually landed in Paris and met Jean Genet, who became one of his closest friends while they were both living in poverty. Genet developed strong feelings for the heterosexual Papatakis, and he would go on to preface his poem "The Galley" with a dedication to "Nico, the Greco-Ethiopian God."

While Genet was making his name as a writer, Papatakis struck gold as the owner of the nightclub La Rose Rouge, which became a popular hangout for artists and intellectuals, Sartre and de Beauvoir among them. When Genet wanted to make a film, *Un chant d'amour*, Papatakis put up the money for it and rented out the restaurant above the club for Genet to film it in. The film was censored internationally for its explicit homosexual content, but Papatakis made money from it for years by selling contraband copies to gays with deep pockets.

Genet wasn't the only celebrity to enter Papatakis's orbit. He was married to the actress Anouk Aimée for three years. He hung out with John Cassavetes and gave him money, too, for his disastrous debut film, *Shadows* (1959). Like Genet and other gay artists, the German photographer Herbert Tobias fell in love with Papatakis and nicknamed the model Christa Päffgen after him, calling her "Nico." Papatakis would meet Päffgen near the start of the 1960s, during a stint living in New York City (where he had decamped in disgust over French atrocities in Algeria). On a lark he asked her if she had ever considered a career as a musician, and so it happened that Papatakis ended up enrolling Nico in her first singing lessons.

When he returned to Paris after the Algerian War, Papatakis decided to try his own hand at filmmaking with *Les Abysses*, an adaptation of Genet's 1947 play, *The Maids*. Both *The Maids* and *Les Abysses* dramatize the lurid story of the Papin sisters, servants who murdered their employers in the 1930s. Claude Chabrol drew from the same well for 1995's *La Cérémonie*, though its recognizable lead actresses (Isabelle Huppert and Sandrine Bonnaire) take the edge off the tale; gruesome class warfare is repackaged as middlebrow thriller, a crime Papatakis could never be convicted of.

Colette Bergé in *Les Abysses*

LENOX FILMS/ALBUM/ALAMY

Following its abrasive pre-credits sequence, *Les Abysses* alternates between passages of murderous calm and frenzied mess-making. It would be unfair to call the film tedious, but it commits the cardinal sin of Papatakis's filmography: didacticism that undercuts his electric filmmaking choices. Papatakis was not short on political opinions and *Les Abysses* is a showcase for the ideas that would preoccupy his whole career: the hypocrisy of the bourgeoisie (and especially leftist intelligentsia), the oppression of the working class, and the struggle of Algerians (and sometimes Greeks or Palestinians) against their oppressors. He usually tries, with mixed results, to implicate the viewer in the travesties he wanted to criticize. *Les Abysses* ends with a row of wealthy characters looking up from the scene of the maids' crime to stare directly at the camera. Just in case we didn't get the point, Papatakis tacks on a few intertitles with historical context, ending on a line from the transcript of the Papin case's actual jury archives: "Who is really guilty here?"

Like any self-respecting Paris-based filmmaker, Papatakis submitted *Les Abysses* to the Cannes Film Festival. The selection committee boycotted it, but after Sartre and de Beauvoir lobbied on his behalf the festival eventually screened the film to uproarious scandal. Undeterred, or perhaps even motivated, by this reception, Papatakis returned to filmmaking a few years later in Greece with *Thanos and Despina* (1967), also known as *Shepherds of Calamity* or *The Shepherds*. Shot in striking black and white, *Thanos and Despina* is clearly a more refined film than *Les Abysses* in nearly every regard, the manic energy of that freshman film still intact but doled out in smaller doses. Papatakis made the film the same year the Greek military overthrew the government, though you'd be forgiven for assuming this tale of creeping authoritarianism must have been shot after the fact.

Thanos and Despina begins with an exploding goat and a woman determined to marry off her only son. Katina (Elli Xanthaki), a cranky old peasant, tells her son, Thanos (George Dialegmenos), of her intention to wed him to Despina (Olga Karlatos), the daughter of the wealthy landowner whose pastures Thanos works on. Boldly making

the request on Holy Saturday, she lifts her skirts to her son's boss when he rejects Thanos in favor of the wealthier Yankos (Lambros Tsangas), and becomes the talk of the town for the rest of the night.

It is rare to find a movie that engages with Eastern Orthodoxy as directly as *Thanos and Despina* does, and rarer still to find one set entirely between Holy Saturday and Pascha, the holiest forty-eight hours in the Orthodox liturgical year. The bourgeoisie in *Thanos and Despina* are consistently shown worshipping with aesthetics imported from Western Europe, while the shepherds worship with liturgical aesthetics endemic to Christianity under the Byzantine Empire. (At first I thought it was an error when a Catholic-style image of the Virgin Mary appeared on a wall in Despina's room, until a Byzantine-style icon of a saint showed up in Katina's hut.) At the midpoint of the film, the characters file off to their respective churches for the midnight Paschal services. The wealthy parish is full of western iconography and white plaster pillars, and the service seems to end after the candlelight processional around the building and reading of the Gospel (complete with fireworks to accompany the Paschal troparion). Meanwhile the peasants attend what looks like a subterranean chapel, adorned with peeling Byzantine icons, where Papatakis emphasizes not the theatrics of the celebration but the peasants receiving the Eucharist (traditionally the final stage of the three- or four-hour cycle of nighttime Paschal services). Somewhere in the midst of all this, Yankos, clad in his military uniform, performs a salute with a long, white Easter candle.

After Christ rises from the dead, everything else goes to hell. Thanos and Despina collide, for the first time in the film, on their walk home from church. Despina condescends to him by offering him jewelry (you can just tell she thinks she's doing a good deed), but Thanos flings it back at her and proceeds to take her captive by tripping her with his cane and stealing her shoes. When Papatakis cuts to Easter Sunday morning, Thanos and Despina have somehow made their way to the mountains, with slight modifications to their church attire. This final third of the film is full of satire of church, state, and culture alike, but unlike so many of his other films Papatakis doesn't overindulge his instinct to hammer home his message. Katina rushes to the church on Easter Sunday morning to beseech the Archbishop—"in the name of He whom you pretend to represent"—to save her son from the military forces that Despina's father has called after him. The archbishop silences her and pleads his political powerlessness. "I'll pray for you. I'll prostrate myself.… As for the rest, call the police!" In another biting scene, a procession of shepherds carry their lambs-on-a-spit up the mountain for a picnic as they sing *Σαμιώτισσα*, one of the most beloved melodies in the Greek songbook, but with the original lyrics swapped for parodic ones mocking the landowning characters. In the closing moments of the film, a radio broadcast announces the overthrow of the government; Papatakis had been editing the film as those events happened in real time, so he slipped an authentic recording right in.

Around the time he was finishing the film, Papatakis and Olga Karlatos wed. Almost a decade later, he cast her as the lead in *Gloria Mundi* (1976), also known, in line with his distaste for subtlety, as *In Hell*. Like *Les Abysses*, *Gloria Mundi* opens with a scream. Galai (Karlatos), an actress, is shown in close up as she listens to a recording of herself rehearsing for the part of a terrorist in an upcoming movie. In between her cries on the cassette tape, her director, a never-seen rebel named Hamdias (voiced by Papatakis himself), interrupts her, dissatisfied with the performance. Papatakis pulls back in a startling cut to Karlatos, sitting naked in a bathtub in a dilapidated room, a half-dozen cigarette burns peppered across her chest. To closer approach the essence of the torture victim she will be playing, she hooks up her genitals to a machine and electrocutes herself.

The rest of *Gloria Mundi* is a parade of physical and psychological harm inflicted on Karlatos' body, only some of it at the behest of Hamdias. In one set piece, Galai rehearses a scene from her film where she is supposed to plant a bomb in a café. In order to wring a truthful performance out of her, Hamdias has left her instructions to use a real explosive. The combination of Karlatos's breathy line delivery as she talks herself through the trial, a soundtrack of jittery mechanical noise, and Papatakis's chronology-scrambling editing as Galai sets and resets the timer on the bomb make for some of the most harrowing minutes in Papatakis's entire œuvre.

Gloria Mundi builds to a scene of Galai attending a dinner party of fashionable lefties where the rough cut of her film is screened. Papatakis lets the film-within-a-film play out at length, first with a mind-numbingly long scene where Galai aids a French soldier in a bizarre and emasculating fetish in the presence of a crying baby followed by another prolonged scene where the soldier, now on the clock, tortures her with the same implements from their ritual the night before. When the screening concludes, the spectators rise from their comfy seats only somewhat perplexed. The host clears the atmosphere by suggesting they head to the next room for snacks. "On to more serious matters!" one of the guests says with glee. For all of Papatakis's vigor in designing gruesome and violent scenarios for Karlatos (and his viewers) to suffer through, you would think he could have produced a more creatively insulting punchline than this groaner.

Gloria Mundi isn't the most unwatchable movie I've ever sat through, but I can think of few other superlatives that suit it better. So thoroughly and disgustingly does it disdain the viewer that I had trouble finding the will to press on to any of Papatakis's remaining movies. Papatakis is at his most enraged here, and Karlatos delivers a performance of rare ferocity to match. (That they were

married at the time has long raised questions about how Karlatos was treated on set, including rumors of actual, physical injuries being inflicted on her.) The emotional intensity of the film may be commensurate with the heinousness of France's actions in Algeria and the impotence of Leftist opposition to it, but you are left wondering whose eyes Papatakis expected the film to ever reach and what exactly he hoped it would accomplish. Unsurprisingly, the movie was censored in France for thirty years.

Having gotten all that out of his system (and having divorced Karlatos in 1982), Papatakis would return to the situation in Greece for his next film, *The Photograph* (1986). The prettiest of Papatakis's films, *The Photograph* opens in Castoria, Greece, in 1971, four years into the junta's rule. Lowly Elias (Christos Tsagas) has just arrived home after a harrowing period in the military, where he was tormented for being the son of a communist. Unable to find employment in Greece because of his family's political affiliations, he heads to France to see if his distant and allegedly well-off relative Gerasimos Tzivas (Aris Retsos), who has been living in Paris in exile, has any leads for him. As a good luck token for his trip, Elias pockets a mass-produced photo of a beautiful pop star found on the side of the road.

Gerasimos, a bit of a shut-in who lives in a house of mansion-like proportions compared with the one-room hut Elias and his mother share, initially takes Elias for a liar and thief but caves to his more hospitable instincts and invites him in for a meal. He also spots Elias's pocket-sized pop star and inquires about her identity. In the spur of the moment Elias tells him it's his unmarried sister Joy. Desperate for love and not up with pop culture, Gerasimos asks Elias to help arrange their marriage in exchange for taking Elias on as an apprentice. In tandem with the web of lies that Elias starts to spin, his family's capitalist nemeses in Castoria begin to spread slander about him through their international whisper network in the Greek diaspora, hoping to prevent Elias from ever gaining a work permit.

As the fantasies spin further out of control, Papatakis slackens his tight control on the realism of the film and taps back into some of the destructive chaos of his earlier work. Throughout the descent into madness, Elias keeps repeating a saying his mother tells him at the beginning: everywhere's a lion's den, but it's better to be in a den with a well-fed lion than a hungry one. In an epilogue set in August 1974, mere months before the junta's collapse, Elias and Gerasimos return to Greece and Papatakis returns to his old didacticism. Elias ultimately takes a rock to his cousin's head before Gerasimos can be crushed by the truth about Joy. "I hope my action will be heeded by those who leave their country for a destiny which is not theirs," Elias recites in a final voice over with a freeze frame of his face, "and which, like Gerasimos and I, they endlessly pursue without ever attaining."

For his final film Papatakis would circle back to his beginnings and pay homage to his old friend Genet. *Walking a Tightrope* (1991) stars Michel Piccoli as the fictional poet Marcel Spadice (transparently a version of Genet). Spadice is frumpy and washed up and smitten by Franz-Ali (Lilah Dadi), a German-Algerian circus hand who cleans up after the elephants but dreams of becoming a trapeze artist. Franz isn't gay, so Spadice sublimates his desire for him by sponsoring his tightrope apprenticeship, choosing his costumes, giving him reading recommendations, and taking him on tours of the great cathedrals ("Only a queer would be capable of immaculate conception," he quips before a statue of the Virgin Mary). Unfortunately Franz turns out to be a dud athlete, accruing multiple embarrassing and near-fatal falls that send Spadice chasing after a different stud.

In the context of Papatakis's filmography, if not his life, *Walking the Tightrope* is an unexpectedly queer film. It opens with a dream sequence of comely young men in circus attire pulling the curtain back from an enormous phallus and gets an extra boost of camp from supporting performances by Polly Walker as Spadice's headhunter and later Franz's lover, and Doris Kunstmann as Franz's ex-wrestler mother (cheekily named Christa Paffgen). *Walking the Tightrope* is also Papatakis's subtlest film by far, not even undercut by an explosive finale scored to Fauré's *Pavane*, Op. 50 (this would not have been the case if he had gone with *Swan Lake*).

Neither a monumental innovator nor the creator of any agreed-upon masterpieces (though *Thanos and Despina* strikes me as a major work), Papatakis nevertheless intrigues as a marginal figure, and his deviations from the prevailing artistic and political trends of his day make for an interesting, colorful footnote in the history of film. In Greece, he's a decidedly more important name, at least as an influence on the Greek "Weird Wave" of directors who have come to prominence in the twenty-first century, namely Tsangari and Yorgos Lanthimos. Neither of these directors lived through the Greek junta as adults—Tsangari was born one year before its start and Lanthimos one year before its dissolution—so their films are unsurprisingly more concerned with bourgeois, psychosexual themes. Though transgressive by Hollywood standards, the sexual deviance of their early films like *Dogtooth* and *Attenberg* have an alluring, even exotic appeal; *Dogtooth* evidently wasn't so aberrant that it couldn't get an Oscar nomination for Best Foreign Language Film.

Papatakis would never enjoy such success in his lifetime, but it was never his intention as a filmmaker to look for it. Despite his proximity to wealth and celebrity, Papatakis's firsthand experiences of fascism, war, poverty, and exile seem to have kept him from ever turning his desire to unsettle the audience into a brand or a means of securing funding for his next project. Tsangari says that Papatakis used to call himself a solitary anarchist. Eleven years after his death, that title stays unchallenged.

TIM MARKATOS *is a designer and film critic who lives in Washington D.C.*

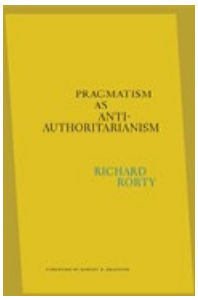
Should Philosophy Retire?

GEORGE SCIALABBA

Richard Rorty (1931–2007) was the philosopher's anti-philosopher. His professional credentials were impeccable: an influential anthology (*The Linguistic Turn*, 1967); a game-changing book (*Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, 1979); another, only slightly less original book (*Consequences of Pragmatism*, 1982); a best-selling (for a philosopher) collection of literary/philosophical/political lectures and essays (*Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity,* 1989); four volumes of *Collected Papers* from the venerable Cambridge University Press; president of the Eastern Division of the American Philosophical Association (1979). He seemed to be speaking at every humanities conference in the 1980s and 1990s, about postmodernism, critical theory, deconstruction, and the past, present, and future (if any) of philosophy.

All the same, it began to be whispered among his colleagues that in mid-career Rorty had become disillusioned with being a philosopher and turned into something else: a culture critic, an untethered public intellectual, a French fellow traveler. And the chief whisperer, it turned out, was Rorty himself. After leaving Princeton's philosophy department in 1981, he never held another appointment as a philosopher—by choice. He thought philosophy's days were numbered and spent the second half of his career (and much of the first) explaining why.

But how can philosophy end? Surely the quest for Truth is eternal? Surely the hunger for Wisdom is part of human nature? Surely questions about the Good will never cease to exercise us?



PRAGMATISM AS ANTI-AUTHORITARIANISM

RICHARD RORTY
ED. BY EDUARDO MENDIETA
Belknap Press
$27.95 | 272 pp.

Well, yes and no. Certainly Rorty was not proposing that we simply give up on all the big questions. We will always mull over "how things, in the largest sense of that word, hang together, in the largest sense of that word," a phrase he quoted often from one of his favorite philosophers, Wilfrid Sellars. But he thought that philosophy's perennial abstractions, distinctions, and problems—including Truth, human nature, and the Good—though they were once very much alive, had by now led Western thought into a dead end and should be retired.

Truth, for example, has meant many things since Plato: a knowledge of the Forms; a subsistent Essence, in virtue of which all true things are true; a correspondence between sentences and states of affairs. Likewise the Good: fulfillment of one's telos, or natural end; participation in the Divine Essence; the greatest happiness of the greatest number. Each of these definitions has its partisans, but to each of them most other philosophers are quite deaf. Schools wax and wane but, unlike scientific theories, none steadily gains adherents as it achieves generally recognized solutions to common problems, while its competitors fade away. Philosophy makes no progress.

Rorty was hardly the first to make this observation and draw the conclusion that something else was necessary and inevitable. Hume's mordant aphorism gives the gist of much later criticism: "If we take in our hand any volume, of divinity or school metaphysics, for instance, let us ask: Does it contain any abstract reasoning concerning quantity or number? No. Does it contain any experimental reasoning concerning matter of fact and existence? No. Commit it then to the flames, for it can contain nothing but sophistry and illusion." John Stuart Mill dispensed with most of traditional philosophy, though he was the greatest political and moral philosopher of his day. William James did grapple with many of the traditional problems and gave the new orientation a name ("pragmatism") and some pithy formulations: "The true is the good in the way of belief." "A difference that makes no difference is no difference at all." And perhaps the best-known and most misunderstood: "Grant an idea or belief to be true…what concrete difference will its being true make in anyone's actual life?… What experiences will be different from those which would obtain if the belief were false? What, in short, is the truth's *cash-value* in experiential terms?" The face of twentieth-century pragmatism and Rorty's main influence was John Dewey, a penetrating and prolific writer who unfortunately never spoke or wrote a memorable sentence.

In the introduction to *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, Rorty attributed to Dewey, Wittgenstein, and Heidegger the view that he himself had adopted. It is one of innumerable passages in which Rorty advocated the euthanasia of philosophy:

> Wittgenstein, Heidegger, and Dewey are in agreement that the notion of knowledge as accurate representation, made possible by special mental processes, and intelligible through a general theory of representation, needs to be abandoned. For all three, the notions of "foundations of

STEVE PYKE/GETTY

Richard Rorty

knowledge" and of philosophy as revolving around the Cartesian attempt to answer the epistemological skeptic are set aside. Further, they set aside the notion of "the mind" common to Descartes, Locke, and Kant—as a special object of study, located in inner space, containing elements or processes which make knowledge possible. This is not to say that they have *alternative* "theories of knowledge" or "philosophies of mind." They set aside epistemology and metaphysics as possible disciplines…. [They] glimpse the possibility of a form of intellectual life in which the vocabulary of philosophical reflection inherited from the seventeenth century would seem as pointless as the thirteenth-century philosophical vocabulary had seemed to the Enlightenment.

"Setting aside epistemology and metaphysics" is as good a short definition of pragmatism's purpose as one may hope for.

Pragmatism as Anti-Authoritarianism consists of ten lectures, the prestigious Mora Lectures delivered at the University of Girona in Catalonia in 1996. A few of them were subsequently published in English, but this is the first time they've appeared together. Rorty was normally the most fluid and graceful of stylists, but these lectures are earnest and businesslike rather than brooding and essayistic, no doubt because he is addressing his fellow professional philosophers, not his fellow world-weary, postmodern intellectuals. They show an impressive command of both analytic and continental philosophy, but instead of the glancingly allusive, almost absent-minded style of most of his other books, his writing here is workmanlike and focused. Perhaps he was just trying out this style and felt a little dissatisfied with the results, which may explain why he never got around to publishing them. Or maybe he was just too busy attending conferences and giving lectures.

The preface, however, is vintage Rorty: intellectually provocative, rhetorically audacious, leaping nimbly across the millennia from Plato to Habermas and back. The "anti-authoritarianism" of the title is meant in a peculiar sense. It is the authority of "the unconditioned"—the Real, the Ideal, the infinite, the absolute, the transcendent, the sublime—that pragmatism rejects. Instead, it embraces the conditioned, the contingent, the finite.

This rejection alone does not constitute pragmatism. Not all anti-foundationalists are pragmatists—e.g., Nietzsche. Rorty conceives of the twentieth century as "a struggle between secularists who follow Nietzsche in hankering for a kind of greatness which cannot be viewed as a means to a larger end, and secularists who are pragmatic and finitistic in the manner of Dewey." Of course Nietzsche had all the best lines in this argument (most famously, "the last man"). But Dewey was right, Rorty argues:

> Nietzsche feared that human greatness would be impossible if we all became happy citizens of a democratic utopia. Dewey was not interested in greatness except as a means to the greater happiness of the greatest number. For him, great human beings…were finite means to further finite ends. They helped make new, richer, more complex, and more joyful forms of human life available to the rest of us.

Rorty was the grandson of Walter Rauschenbusch, one of the founders of the Social Gospel movement in early twentieth-century America, and he always felt free to take coloration from liberal Christianity. *Pragmatism as Anti-Authoritarianism* devotes a chapter to establishing the ethos of pragmatism, which he does by means of James's "The Will to Believe." All the pragmatists, even Mill, he writes, "took for granted…the Christian ideal of universal human fraternity," which he identifies with the democratic utopia of pragmatists. Even Christian belief is unobjectionable, pace aggressive rationalists (represented in James's essay by W. K. Clifford and in our time by multitudes), as long as it is a matter of edification and aesthetic contemplation, "the work of strong poets" rather than philosophical grounding for legislation or jurisprudence. A little idiosyncratically, Rorty baptizes pragmatism as "Romantic Polytheism." "Romantic" refers to the belief of the Romantic poets and their champions such as Arnold and Mill that poetry should take over the functions once performed by religion. "Polytheism" is the belief that "there is no actual or possible object of knowledge which would permit you to commensurate and rank all human needs." It's a definition that takes in most modern secular thinkers, many of whom would be surprised to learn that they are pragmatists (let alone romantic polytheists).

From one point of view, the history of modern philosophy is the steady application of Occam's Razor. Descartes's clear and distinct ideas; Locke's primary and secondary qualities; Kant's categories; Hegel's World Spirit; the logical empiricism of Russell and the logical positivists: all these have bitten the dust, or at least fallen into desuetude. Pragmatists played their part: Charles Sanders Peirce wrote a famous critique of Descartes. But James and Dewey were not given to hand-to-hand philosophical polemics. Neither was Rorty in his other books, but here he wades in, though his targets are generally not classical philosophers (except for Kant, the book's evil genius) but his contemporaries. Jürgen Habermas and Hilary Putnam, for example, would at times declare themselves pragmatists and anti-representationalists but then backslide, making wistful noises about "context-free validity" (Habermas) and "convergence" (Putnam). Thomas Nagel and John Searle are metaphysical realists, who believe in all the distinctions and abstractions—mind, consciousness, qualia—that pragmatists reject. Some of the book's most interesting pages deal with Rawls's *Theory of Justice* and *Political Liberalism*: Rorty argues that Rawls did not, as many of his interpreters think, make use of a universalist conception of justice or obligation. (Rawls apparently agreed with Rorty.)

Traditional philosophers thought of their activity as getting at the truth, approaching the intrinsic nature of things, abstracting from the purposes and prejudices of the inquirer. Pragmatists, by contrast, define truth in relation to the purpose of the inquiry and are content to call it the stable consensus of the competent; they see objects as nodes in a network of relations, describable in infinitely many

ways, and without an intrinsic nature ("There is nothing to be known about an object except what sentences are true of it"); and they see philosophical inquiry as a conversation aiming at deep or shallow but not final agreement, because countless conversations are to follow. The great advantage of pragmatism, Rorty writes only half tongue-in-cheek, is that "adopting it makes it impossible to formulate a lot of the traditional philosophical problems, and harder to incite the sort of culture wars in which philosophers like to take part."

Pragmatism as Anti-Authoritarianism speaks to and for those who, living in a post-positivist, Wittgensteinian world, would never ask themselves questions like: "Do objects really have the properties they seem to, or are they only appearances? How can we know?" "What is the essence of a human being? Soul? Personality? Genetic code?" "Is mind material or immaterial?" "Are some actions intrinsically right or wrong, regardless of all consequences (or none) to all parties concerned, anywhere in the universe, *in saecula saeculorum*?" "Can an act be both caused and free?" "Can something be objectively good even if no one anywhere thinks it so?" "Can a proposition be true if no one exists?"

Rorty's response to such questions was a shrug. The point of pragmatism is that a philosophical problem or distinction is only real to the extent that it has consequences—and those consequences are, in fact, the meaning of the problem or distinction. Dissolving those questions, casting doubt on the existence of any such consequences, was a frequent move by James and Dewey and a favorite move of Rorty's.

And what if they're right? What are the moral and political consequences of pragmatism? As Rorty regularly explained, there are none. Pragmatism does not entail or enjoin; it is, he acknowledged, "neutral between Hitler and Jefferson." Its only consequences are philosophical, and those are purely negative. It helps us see through abstract and absolutist justifications—the glory of God, the divine right of kings, even freedom and democracy—for war and authoritarianism.

The point of pragmatism is that a philosophical problem or distinction is only real to the extent that it has consequences—and those consequences are, in fact, the meaning of the problem.

Can pragmatism, conditional and provisional as it is, ground democracy, as Rawls, Dworkin, Habermas, and many other political philosophers have hoped? No, Rorty replies, philosophy cannot anchor politics. There is not a universal human faculty called "rationality" that, once it is awakened, gently (or firmly) nudges every person toward cooperative and tolerant behavior. Rationality is simply the ability to use language, and so to form beliefs and desires, which are the basis of community. "I do not much care," he writes, "whether democratic politics are an expression of something deep, or whether they express nothing better than some hopes which popped from nowhere into the brains of a few remarkable people (Socrates, Christ, Jefferson, etc.) and which, for unknown reasons, became popular."

Such offhand iconoclasm was a trademark of Rorty's. Perhaps his most outrageous pronouncement (at any rate in this book) has to do with an issue just as pressing now as twenty-five years ago. "The fundamentalist parents of our fundamentalist students think that the entire 'liberal Establishment' is engaged in a conspiracy." Any liberal professor could have written that sentence, then or now. But not many would have written Rorty's next sentence: "These parents have a point." And I doubt anyone else (except perhaps Stanley Fish) could have offered this clincher:

> The racist or fundamentalist parents of our students say that in a truly democratic society the students should not be forced to read books by black people, Jewish people, homosexual people. They will protest that these books are being jammed down their children's throats. I cannot see how to reply to this charge without saying something like: "There are credentials for admission to our democratic society, credentials which we liberals have been making steadily more stringent by doing our best to excommunicate racists, male chauvinists, homophobes, and the like. You have to be *educated* to be a citizen of our society, a participant in our conversation, someone with whom we can envision merging our horizons. So we are going to go right on trying to discredit you in the eyes of your children, trying to strip your fundamentalist religious community of dignity, trying to make your views seem silly rather than discussable. We are not so inclusivist as to tolerate intolerance such as yours."

Of course, I suspect the university's human resources department wouldn't let a present-day Rorty anywhere near a parent, fundamentalist or (probably) any other kind.

Pragmatism as Anti-Authoritarianism is probably not the first of Rorty's books you'll want to read. If you're hooked on philosophy, you should start with *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* and then go on to the *Collected Papers*. If you're a freelance intellectual, try *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* and then *Achieving Our Country* (1998) (in which Rorty famously foresaw and deplored wokeness). *Consequences of Pragmatism* (1982) and *Philosophy and Social Hope* (1999) are excellent miscellanies. *Take Care of Freedom and Truth Will Take Care of Itself* (2006), a book of interviews, is worth owning just for the title. All of them will give the reader some idea of why Rorty was so widely revered.

So will his conclusion to the preface to these lectures:

> We pragmatists must be content to offer suggestions about how to patch things up, how to adjust things to each other, how to rearrange them into slightly more useful patterns. That is what I hope to have done in these lectures. I see myself as having shifted a few pieces around on the philosophical chessboard, rather than having answered any deep questions or produced any elevating thoughts.

Others may see it differently.

GEORGE SCIALABBA *'s selected essays will be published by Verso in 2023.*

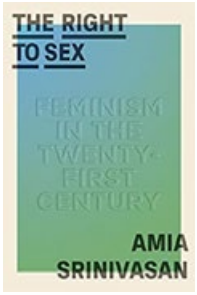
Clearing the Field

B. D. MCCLAY

The Catholic Church's approach to sex, practically speaking, is simple: don't. If you must have it, then have it within the context of holy matrimony, though various rules still apply, some acts are proscribed, and preventing pregnancy is not allowed. If for whatever reason holy matrimony is unavailable to you, then refer back to the first principle (don't). For most of the contemporary world, on the other hand, there's one very clear rule—no sex without consent—and then a much murkier field of what constitutes a moral obligation or harm once the first condition has been satisfied.

Chastity is Christianity's most infamous and unpopular virtue. Its gaudy symbols—purity rings, virginity pledges, the uniforms of Catholic schoolgirls, the habits of nuns—are objects of curiosity and sometimes of fetishes. Progressive Christians don't want much to do with it. Traditional Christians will look at the apparent lack of clarity around contemporary sexual mores and feel smug. Every few years, somebody (usually but not always a young woman) will publish a book with a title like *Save It: The Case for the Chaste* or *Covering Up: Why Modest Is Hottest*. None of this really changes the central reality: that Christianity has a very publicized set of historical rules around sex, and these rules resist being revived in a culturally significant way, but also resist being discarded.

I say all this not because I have an interest in arguing against the rules, at least where I'm concerned. I signed up for them, after all, when I became a Catholic. As with any virtue, I try my best, and go to confession when that's not enough. But part of what makes chastity a particularly difficult virtue is that it can feel as if it runs counter to other virtues we're meant to practice, such as generosity, humility, and self-gift. Counsels of abstinence are reinforced through fear: of being used, of disease or pregnancy, of losing something important about oneself, and, of course, of hell. Why is this particular sphere, and only this particular sphere, the one where Christians are counseled not to give freely, not to cast out fear, but rather to restrain, refuse, deny?



THE RIGHT TO SEX
Feminism in the Twenty-First Century

AMIA SRINIVASAN
Farrar, Straus and Giroux
$28 | 304 pp.

Amia Srinivasan

NINA SUBIN

The fruits of the spirit, as Paul tells us in Galatians, are "love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control." Self-control is easy enough to see here. But what about the rest? "The acts of the flesh are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like," Paul also says in the same passage. It is hard to argue with him; but perfectly chaste people are certainly prone to fits of rage and selfish ambition, something Paul himself, a prickly man, would probably be the first to admit. And here, I think, is the question that applies to both traditional Christian approaches and contemporary ones alike: Is it possible to talk about the moral aspect of sex in a way that does not put sexual harm at the center of the subject? Is any form of sexual morality, ultimately, about fear?

The Right to Sex, Amia Srinivasan's debut book, is not about chastity, an ideal she firmly rejects in a brief passage responding to the *New York Times* columnist Ross Douthat. "Monogamous marriage," she writes, "the heteronormative family and norms of chastity are…parts of a patriarchal infrastructure designed to secure men's access to women's bodies and minds." Rather, Srinivasan, a professor of philosophy at Oxford University, seeks to document insufficiencies in current feminist approaches to sex—specifically, sex between men and women, which is the only case the book really concerns itself with. She does this in six essays, each focusing on sexual culture and its consequences: #MeToo, pornography, involuntary celibacy and the "incel" movement, professors having sex with students, and carceral feminism.

Srinivasan's essays are unexpectedly generous to sometimes unlovable subjects. In the title essay—originally published in 2018 by the *London Review of Books*—and a coda responding to its critics, Srinivasan considers the angry, misogynist, and often racist world of men who consider themselves incurably unattractive to women and doomed to a celibate life. Reflecting on Eliot Rodger, the incel spree-killer who murdered six people in the spring of 2014, Srinivasan points out that there was more to the resentments Rodger expressed than misogyny, though that was present. "The most common feminist take was that Rodger was the embodiment of misogynistic entitlement," she comments. But though Rodger's "claims to having been sexually and romantically marginalized on the basis of his race, introversion and lack of stereotypical masculinity" were certainly, to her mind, both "mistaken" and "self-serving," "the kind of diagnosis Rodger offered, in which racism and the norms of hetero-masculinity placed him beyond desirability, need not in principle be wrong." In other words, Rodger was correct to think that the kind of women he wanted to have sex with probably did not want to have sex with him.

Reading any essay in *The Right to Sex* is thrilling; Srinivasan is precise, clear, and insightful, posing sharply worded questions that uncover hidden assumptions in how we discuss sex and morality. Reading all the essays together, however, has a slightly different effect. Those sharply worded questions seem less powerful when you realize they bear almost all the weight of Srinivasan's arguments. In the essay titled "On Not Sleeping With Your Students," there are runs of paragraphs that not only rely heavily on rhetorical questions but conclude with them. In the opening essay, "The Conspiracy Against Men," there is a paragraph composed almost entirely of such questions, with just one statement mixed in among them:

> How many men are truly unable to distinguish between wanted and unwanted sex, between welcome and "gross" behavior, between decency and degradation? Was Cogan himself unable to draw this distinction? He admitted to the court that Leak's wife had sobbed and tried to turn away from him when he was on top of her. Did he think to ask, either before or during the sexual encounter, if this was really what she wanted? Was there nothing in his history, his life, his conscience, that spoke to him in that moment, that told him the cries of the scared woman on the bed were real and called for a response? Did Louis C. K. have no reason to think that the women in front of whom he masturbated were unhappy about it? Why, then, when he asked another woman if he could masturbate in front of her and she refused, did he flush red and feel compelled to explain to her that he "had issues"?

The statements these questions imply—about the false presumption that the men in these cases could not have been expected to know better—are both true and necessary. Yet the proper form for a statement is a statement. Questions to which one already knows the answer may have their place. But none of the questions Srinivasan asks here would lose force by becoming straightforward claims, and indeed might gain something.

This is a question not only of style, but also of Srinivasan's relationship to her readers. Using questions to guide somebody's train of thought without offering one's own conclusion may be a good way for a teacher to talk to her students, but the reader of this book is Srinivasan's interlocutor, not her student. That means the reader deserves an argument that works its way toward, if not a conclusion, then at least a definite claim that can be assessed and challenged. To a critic of the title essay who called her observations "as banal as it gets," Srinivasan responds: "Is it 'as banal as it gets' to observe that what is ugliest about our social realities—racism, classism, ableism, heteronormativity—shapes whom we do and do not desire and love, and who does and does not desire and love us?" If the criticism is worth answering, Srinivasan's rhetorical question does not really rate as a serious response; it simply restates what she takes her subject to be. If, on the other hand, the criticism isn't worth responding to—if it deserves no more than a shrug and a raised eyebrow—why reproduce it in this book? In any case, accusations of banality don't really admit of refutation; you might as well try to prove to somebody that a subject isn't boring.

What I do want is an exploration of what makes sex special, of the distinctive morality that applies to desire and pleasure.

To deflect a criticism, even a silly criticism, by means of a question is a move that might be permissible once or twice, but not over and over. At some point an argument should be presented. But Srinivasan appears to be content with clearing the field and clarifying the terms of the arguments. When the field itself is such a mess, it feels churlish to want more. But I do. If, as seems implicit in many of Srinivasan's essays, we are looking at an ugly reality that it's unclear how to improve, then even that would be worth stating directly. Much as consent is a necessary guardrail but not an entire ethic, simply saying that there is no right to sex is true but insufficient. Saying that pornography should not be criminalized is true but insufficient. Saying that rape is not taken seriously enough by the law is true but insufficient. And so on. But as it is, after reading through these carefully composed essays, I am left essentially with the online quip: *Much to consider*. Well, yes.

What *The Right to Sex* does make clear, however, is that we rarely talk about sex when we talk about sex. We talk about rape, we talk about pornography, we talk (perhaps) about desirability, about entitlements and obligations, but sex itself is not under discussion. It is, itself, completely absent. The essay that demonstrates this best is the one on having sex with students, which is also the one that comes closest to approaching sex head-on as a subject. "Imagine a professor who happily accepts the infatuated attentions of his student," Srinivasan writes,

> takes her out on dates, has sex with her, makes her his girlfriend, perhaps as he has done with many students before. The student has consented, and not out of fear. Are we really prepared to say that there is nothing troubling here? But if there is something troubling, and the problem isn't a lack of consent, then what is it?
>
> Is it too sterile, too boring to suggest that instead of sleeping with his student, this professor should have been—*teaching* her?

Now, as it happens, I agree with Srinivasan here, as I do through most of the book, though I also think that it would be fine if this suggestion *were* sterile and boring, even banal or (to use another term Srinivasan dislikes) moralizing. The larger argument in Srinivasan's essay is that a sexual relationship between a teacher and a student forecloses possibilities in a way that makes teaching itself impossible. Again, I agree, but this means that sex itself is not a closed subject, and that there is a substance to it that admits of discussion and of morality. "I remember once reading on an anonymous philosophy blog," Srinivasan notes later, "a comment by a philosopher—I can't imagine it was a woman—who asked why there should be any difference between a professor asking to have sex with a student and asking to play tennis with her. Why, indeed?"

But is this question so very stupid? And if it is, why? The comments section of an anonymous blog may not offer the best formulation of it, but the question is what makes sex, in particular, special—if it is special. And the answer cannot entirely consist of the claim, however true it might be, that sex is a site of gendered inequality and harm. (It is also not really hard to imagine a situation in which a professor could use tennis invitations as a weapon, but that's beside the point.) It shouldn't be impossible here to think through the thing itself, but, as with the traditional Christian approach to sex, something prevents people from doing this. It's special—that's all.

Again, I don't disagree. And I don't think professors should sleep with their students. As a Catholic who does her best to stick to the Church's rules, I am committed to a sexual ethic about a thousand times more boring and moralizing than anything suggested by Srinivasan's various questions; and I take it that the rules are the rules because there is some kind of truth to the claim that sex is special and not like a game of tennis. But what I do want is an exploration of what makes it special, of the distinctive morality that applies to desire and pleasure, some positive account of sexuality that does not foreground harm, or treat it as the only question about sex worth raising.

An account of food that talked only of gluttony would not be worthless. Nor would an account of parental love that discussed only how to avoid child abuse, or an account of sport exclusively about injuries. But in all these cases something crucial about the subject would be gone. In our interactions with others, we do not care *only* about minimizing harm; we eat food, love our children, and play sports because of the things themselves, not simply because we know how to do it without damaging ourselves or others. And even if, in the case of food, for instance, we turn toward something like vegetarianism, we adopt an attitude toward food that is not simply about avoiding harm to animals, but replete with richnesses and pleasures of its own.

If this seems like too much to ask of a book, maybe it is. Maybe there isn't any way to *explain* what makes sex special, any more than there's a way to explain why a joke is funny or a subject isn't banal. In his insightful lecture "The Body's Grace," the former Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams notes that centuries of sticking to enunciating the rules have left Christians, heterosexual ones in particular, unable to think about the subject in a deeper or more satisfying way. One hope, on my part anyway, is that non-Christian writers, less bound in advance to reach certain conclusions, might make use of their freedom in a way that enlightens the rest of us. But for all its thoughtfulness and writerly skill, *The Right to Sex* is not that book.

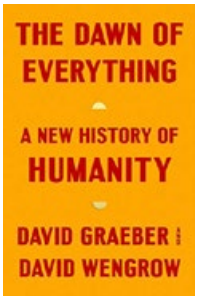
B. D. McClay *is a contributing writer for* Commonweal.

Making Room for Happenstance

PHIL CHRISTMAN

If you learned the same story about the origins of civilization that I did, what you learned went something like this. Once upon a time, we hunted and gathered in small, egalitarian, insular bands, probably family groups. (Not quite! Hunter-gatherers traveled great distances, and contemporary hunter-gatherer bands, at least, are not that closely related.) These groups couldn't undertake large-scale wars, but raiding and feuding were constant, and members who couldn't hunt were out of luck. (Never mind the archeological evidence that some disabled people in prehistory led long lives.) They traveled light and kept their social organization flat and simple. (Well, except for the complex burial sites that we're finding more and more of, and that massive complex at Göbekli Tepe.) At some undisclosed point in time—perhaps in response to environmental pressures during the Younger Dryas—a few of these groups switched to sedentary farming and domestication. (Actually, the birth of farming happened in a number of times and places, and the practice was often a seasonal sideline that didn't involve permanent settlement.) This process led to the creation of agricultural surplus, and the need to decide who controlled this surplus led in turn to patriarchy, priestcraft, cities, and kings; to class division; to states with their eternal wars. But it also led to art, thought, writing, penicillin: to the possibility of social complexity. Pick your poison.

David Wengrow, an archeologist, and his co-writer, the late David Graeber, an anthropologist, do not tell this story in *The Dawn of Everything*, their sweeping survey of human prehistory. They are dissatisfied with the idea that we have either fallen from a Rousseauian paradise or fought our way up from a Hobbesian nightmare. They discern in this idea a secularized version of the myth of the Fall, and, more to the point, it doesn't fit the archaeological evidence. They do not begin with, say, the birth of agriculture or the story of Gilgamesh. They begin with the Enlightenment, with Hobbes and Rousseau and—perhaps more interesting than either—

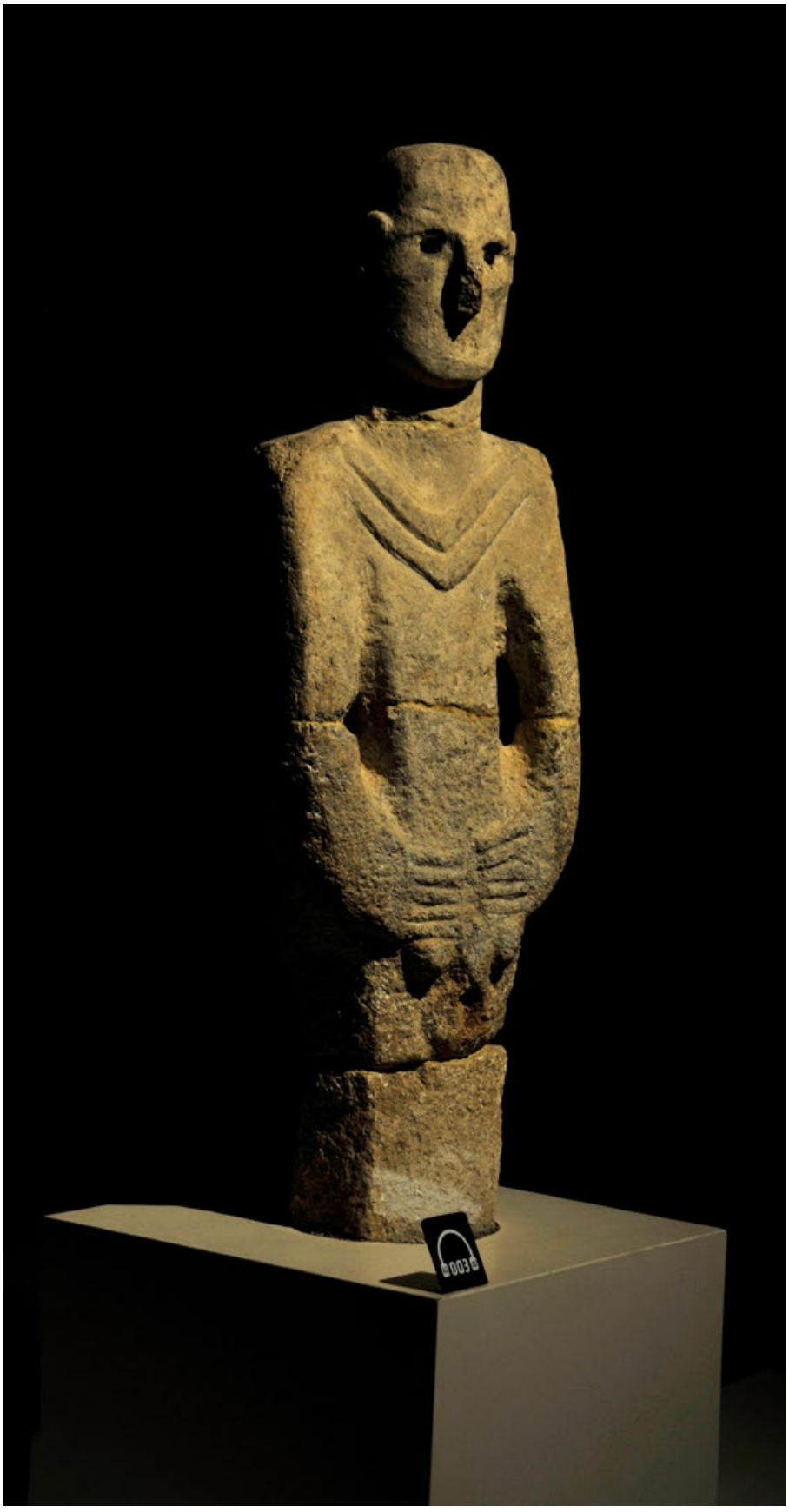


THE DAWN OF EVERYTHING
A New History of Humanity

DAVID GRAEBER AND DAVID WENGROW
Farrar, Straus and Giroux
$35 | 704 pp.

the Huron-Wendat diplomat and intellectual Kondiaronk. It's a canny move, one that acknowledges that, with prehistory, our ideas are rooted more in modern speculation than in the ancient evidence, some of which is only now coming to light, and most of which never will.

Kondiaronk was, in his own way, a man of the Enlightenment. Born in 1649, the same year an attack by the Haudenosaunee (Iroquois) forced his people to move to the place now known as Mackinac Island, he spent his adult life working to keep the French at war with the Haudenosaunee, and then, having headed them off, to pursue a larger settlement. These efforts bore fruit in 1701 with the Great Peace of Montreal, which, in a bit of neat historical symmetry, was also the year of his death. Two years after that, the Baron de Lahontan, a French soldier and diplomat, used Kondiaronk as the basis for a character in a book of dialogues—a Native intellectual who challenges the political ideas of his French interlocutor. Until recently, scholars tended to treat this character as a mere mouthpiece for the Enlightenment philosophe Lahontan, but Graeber and Wengrow propose something much more interesting: What if Enlightenment philosophes were themselves, in part, the creation of indigenous American intellectuals? The eighteenth century's preoccupation



Ancient carving of a standing figure from Göbekli Tepe

ROBERT LANDAU/ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

with the origins of inequality, the process by which we came to be divided into castes and ruled by kings, doesn't seem to grow naturally out of the political thought of the period immediately before it. (The giants of the Renaissance and Reformation were generally fine with social stratification, even if they challenged particular cases of it.) "In fact," our authors write, "the terms 'equality' and 'inequality' only began to enter common currency in the early seventeenth century, under the influence of natural law theory. And natural law theory, in turn, arose largely in the course of debates about the moral and legal implications of Europe's discoveries in the New World." During the European ravaging of America, the subaltern did speak, and what he said was that European social arrangements were stupid. He said so in the hearing of Frenchmen and Spaniards who went on to write books. Wengrow and Graeber quote Lahontan, speaking through his supposed Huron mouthpiece:

> I have spent six years reflecting on the state of European society and I still can't think of a single way they act that's not inhuman, and I genuinely think this can only be the case, as long as you stick to your distinctions of "mine" and "thine." I affirm that what you call money is the devil of devils; the tyrant of the French, the source of all evils; the bane of souls and the slaughterhouse of the living. To imagine one can live in the country of money and preserve one's soul is like imagining one could preserve one's life at the bottom of a lake.

This is, indeed, a funny thing for a French baron to argue without at least a bit of prodding from outside. It's giving Lahontan too much credit to think that this passage speaks strictly for him, and not for Kondiaronk. Native Americans thus "opened a conceptual door" that European thinkers went through, in Graeber and Wengrow's telling. Lahontan's fictionalization of Kondiaronk is only one example of this process, but it's an example that was read by Montesquieu, Voltaire, and Diderot. It indirectly inspired the conservative Turgot's argument that egalitarianism

Graeber and Wengrow's main argument may seem to disappear amid side quests, but every idea ultimately matters. You'll want to keep good notes, but to the extent that the book is difficult, it is the difficulty that is inseparable from richness.

was a stage that belonged to the earliest phases in humanity's development. When Rousseau wrote his *Discourse on Inequality*, which Graeber and Wengrow call "the founding document of the left as an intellectual project," he combined ideas of egalitarianism originally traceable to Native intellectuals like Kondiaronk with the conservative idea of a series of inevitable civilizational stages.

Are you dizzy yet? I hope not, because I have summarized here just the book's opening chapters, ignoring as I go several important strands. The authors respond to Steven Pinker, Yuval Noah Harari, Francis Fukuyama; they question whether it's worthwhile to debate the "origins of inequality" at all (the term "inequality" means too many things); they drop a number of funny and thought-provoking aphorisms. ("All real progress in social science has been rooted in the courage to say things that are, in the final analysis, slightly ridiculous.") They give you a quick history of the concept of the "noble savage," which doesn't mean quite what you think it means. The pace and scope of *The Dawn of Everything* will be familiar to those who have read, for example, Graeber's *Debt: The First 5000 Years* (2011), a book that served as a sort of intellectual charter for Occupy Wall Street. The main argument may seem to disappear amid side quests, but every idea ultimately matters. You'll want to keep good notes, but to the extent that the book is difficult, it is the difficulty that is inseparable from richness. Sentence by sentence, it is clear and forceful and funny, memorable in the manner of a lecture by the kind of professor whose students know they are lucky. From one end to the other, *The Dawn of Everything* entertains even more than it challenges. The writers know more than I ever will about everything, but they speak to the reader as Kondiaronk might have spoken to Lahontan: one rational creature to another, asking *Why must things be this way?*

Such intercourse between equals may have been a much more prominent feature of the deep human past than a person reared on fantasies of club-wielding cavemen and Conan-like warriors might assume. Thus far, Graeber and Wengrow agree with the now-familiar idea of hunter-gatherers as "the original affluent society," to quote an influential essay by Graeber's old dissertation advisor Marshall Sahlins. But archeological discoveries in the two generations since Sahlins complicate his vision of Spartan simplicity yielding to Athenian complexity. The authors' main claim, anyway, is not that early human beings were simply "more equal" or, as in the opposing myth, "more stupid and violent." It's that they were more *everything*. For starters, our species was not even the only "human" species kicking around for most of our history—we interbred with the Neanderthals and Denisovans, moving through "a world inhabited by hobbits, giants and elves," a world that dwindled down to *Homo sapiens* over tens of thousands of years. We have no real reason to think that this dwindling was inevitable. And anthropological, historical, and archeological evidence alike suggest the possibility that many other seemingly inevitable parts of human history originated, too, from happenstance: as play, as ritual, as simple human dinking around. (Ancient Mesoamericans figured out how wheels worked, then gave them to their children as toys, rather than using them to conquer the world.) As ancient peoples experimented with a variety of social arrangements we can only begin to guess at, often varying their lifeways with the season, they were encouraged in various directions by "schismogenesis," the anthropologist's term for the tendency of human groups to define themselves against each other. (This concept, of which Graeber and Wengrow give many examples, was a useful one to encounter at a moment when many adults in this country have suddenly decided that getting your shots is a practice best left to citified decadents.) It isn't a story of civilization created by grain surplus resulting from the scaling up of small, newly settled groups. It's a story in which seasonal hobby farming led to settled farming and "play kingdoms"—ritual experiments in hierarchy, such as you may see during seasonal festivals ("the May queen," etc.)—led to real kingdoms.

Over many teeming chapters, Graeber and Wengrow converge on an argument that they helpfully "recap" late in the book as follows:

> Neolithic farming began in Southwest Asia as a series of local specializations in crop-raising and animal herding, scattered across various parts of the region, with no epicentre. These local strategies were pursued, it seems, in order to sustain access to trade partnerships and optimal locations for hunting and gathering, which continued unabated alongside cultivation.... This trade might well have had more to do with sociability, romance or adventure than material advantage as we'd normally conceive it. Still, whatever the reasons, over thousands of years such local innovations—everything

> from non-shattering wheat to docile sheep—were exchanged between villages, producing a degree of uniformity among a coalition of societies across the Middle East. A standard "package" of mixed farming emerged, from the Iranian Zagros to the eastern shores of the Mediterranean, and then spread beyond it...with very mixed success.... Much of this Neolithic lifestyle developed alongside an alternative cultural pattern in the steppe and upland zones of the Fertile Crescent, most clearly distinguished by the building of grand monuments in stone, and by a symbolism of male virility and predation that largely excluded female concerns.

If that last bit sounds faintly essentialist, it's not the only such case. One of the minor themes in this symphony of an argument is the idea that the concept of "prehistoric matriarchy" deserves reappraisal. A late, vividly written passage, for example, eulogizes the apparently woman-centered Minoan Cretan civilization, which "unfolds to the undulating rhythms of the sea." I am all for the idea that misogyny is not some human default, or an automatic outgrowth of civilizational complexity, but the very human changeability that this book argues so powerfully for also suggests that our gender binary, with its associated symbolism, might also be too provincial and particular to impose on ancient peoples. (Might not one imagine some ancient Cretan who thinks that undulating is rather boyish? Or some lost Denisovan tribe who think that the sea is beyond the genders—all six of them?) This isn't some major flaw in their argument. It's just a moment of glibness in a book so long and ambitious that the occasional stumble would be hard for the authors to avoid, and so generally excellent that it's hard for the reader not to notice.

There are a few other moments like this, and the most irritating ones are frontloaded within the book. Right on the first page, where the authors do the reader the favor of spelling out the moral conclusion that they want us to draw from prehistory—that the world has been many ways, and neither history nor the future are set in stone (true!)—they make the same claim about morality. They say that it is something humans "made up." "Moral claims are all made up, so we should come up with some new ones" is, of course, an argument that unsays itself even as it is being said. The authors obviously don't want us to take this idea too much to heart, because it would undermine the book's considerable moral force. Similarly, the writers' irritation with the narrative of the Fall, and apparently with the entire book of Genesis—at one point they call it a "charter for the hatred of women," which will come as news to at least some of the feminist exegetes working in the traditions it inspired—means that they fail to take seriously one of its most important implications: Eden is irrecoverable. It's an unfindable, unmappable world separated from us by a metaphysical barrier, a sword that turneth every which way. We're not supposed to think of our loss of it as a historical moment that we could undo. There is no direction to go from it but outward.

These are ultimately quibbles about a great book. The authors have organized a profusion of ideas, details, and explanatory paradigms into a vast but comprehensible design, while never ceasing to delight and instruct. Most of all, the book's moral argument—which, again, the authors make quite openly, even if they feint at the kind of relativism that would invalidate the whole enterprise—could hardly be more pertinent. So many people feel caught up in some inevitable, terminal historical logic or other: decline, decadence, the surveillance state, the capitalist death drive. We all feel the ecological screws tightening upon us—tightened, in a roundabout way, *by* us, or by some of us. But humanity has lived more lives than anyone has written down. We need to end the burning of carbon for profit, and we need to prepare for a hotter, more crowded planet. But we also need to remember that we can and will surprise ourselves.

PHIL CHRISTMAN *is a lecturer at the University of Michigan. He is the author of* Midwest Futures *and* How to Be Normal: Essays.

Holding Them to Their Word

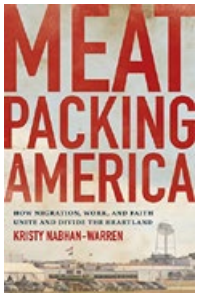
MAIA SILBER

Jurgis Rudkus, the protagonist of Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle*, attends church, but not often or enthusiastically. Christianity does not move him, and he worries that the stink and vermin that cling to his clothes after the days he spends toiling in a Chicago meatpacking factory will offend the sensibilities of his fellow congregants. The saloons and the gambling halls seem to offer a more welcoming atmosphere for a working man, but only the union inspires faith, a "new religion—one that did touch him, that took hold of every fiber of him."

Yet many of Chicago's real turn-of-the-century meatpacking workers—Lithuanians like Rudkus, as well as Italians, Poles, Jews, and Black Americans—may have felt differently. Churches and synagogues were the centers of communal life in the city's "packingtowns," the immigrant neighborhoods surrounding the Union Stockyards. Before the industrial labor movement and New Deal legislation secured the high wages and job security characteristic of the meatpacking industry at midcentury, religious organizations were often workers' primary source of financial and other support.

If the union was Rudkus's church, then churches were the closest thing that many other workers had to a functioning union. As Kristy Nabhan-Warren shows in her fascinating new book, *Meatpacking America: How Migration, Work, and Faith Unite and Divide the Heartland,* churches are once again the institutions on which many of the industry's workers rely most.

Beginning in the 1980s, meatpacking companies fled big cities for small towns in rural states such as Iowa, where right-to-work laws impede the growth of unions. Since then, real wages have plummeted. Long hours and mandatory overtime have become more common, and injuries more frequent. A new immigrant workforce has replaced the old, and its undocumented members lack access to federal benefits and are vulnerable to deportation.



MEATPACKING AMERICA
How Migration, Work, and Faith Unite and Divide the Heartland

KRISTY NABHAN-WARREN
The University of North Carolina Press
$19.95 | 280 pp.

Against this background, Nabhan-Warren argues that faith enables midwestern meatpacking workers of diverse backgrounds to survive the day-to-day horrors of their jobs and seek better lives for their children. She describes how church leaders provide crucial material and spiritual aid for their congregations, and how they try to unite religious communities divided by race, immigration status, and language.

Whether churches can serve the functions unions once did—whether they can foster solidarity as well as tolerance, and empower workers as well as aid them—remains to be seen. Regardless, in a region and industry defined by faith, they will continue to play a key role in workers' lives.

Today's meatpacking workers enter an industry whose power dynamics employers have already established in religious terms. Companies such as Tyson Foods have embraced a corporate faith movement that aims to turn Christian values to the ends of profit and worker control.

For most of the twentieth century, the midwestern meatpacking industry was dominated by "the Big Four": Armour, Cudahy, Swift, and Wilson. Together, these companies modernized and mechanized meat-production methods, and employed hundreds of thousands of migrants from Europe and the American South to slaughter animals at previously unimaginable speeds. Workers experienced injury, disease, and death at appalling rates.

But after the National Labor Relations Act guaranteed industrial workers collective bargaining rights in 1935, the meatpacking employers faced a formidable enemy in the form of the United Packinghouse Workers of America (UPWA). As the historian Roger Horowitz has shown, the CIO-affiliate was extraordinarily successful in securing higher pay and improved benefits for its members: in the 1960s, meatpacking workers' wages exceeded those of other manufacturing workers by about 15 percent. It also fought against racial and sexual workplace discrimination, a rarity at a time when many CIO unions were exclusively white and male.

But not long after the UPWA reached its zenith, the meatpacking industry began to change form as new firms challenged the Big Four's dominance. These upstarts embraced

a new business model: they automated more of their production processes, relocated to rural areas, and fiercely fought unions. Workers, isolated from the communities that had traditionally supported unions and lacking many of the federal and state protections they once enjoyed, lost power.

Today the midwestern meatpacking industry is dominated by yet another set of firms: among them Tyson, Smithfield, and JBS USA. As Nabhan-Warren shows, the contemporary industry is defined as much by oligopolistic market control and anti-union advocacy as by its public embrace of religious values. Current Tyson chairman John H. Tyson took over in 1998 after his father pled guilty on behalf of the company to providing former Agriculture Secretary Mike Espy with $12,000 in illegal gratuities. A devout Evangelical, John Tyson sought to clean up the company's image by branding it as "faith-friendly."

The company famously employs 115 chaplains. These corporate chaplains occupy a role that straddles the boundary between pastor and foreman, offering practical and spiritual counsel to workers but also urging them to treat their tasks in the plant as religious duties. Nabhan-Warren interviews a Tyson chaplain named Joe Blay. Born in Ghana and ordained by the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church, Blay previously served as an army chaplain. He explains that he joined the plant because it reminded him of the military, with its "focus on order and discipline." He clearly cares for Tyson's workers, and in addition to praying with and for them helps them obtain their driver's licenses, file their taxes, and make doctors' appointments. But the main purpose of his role for the company is clear. In emails that quote Scripture, he reminds workers not to be "lazy" and to meet daily and weekly production goals.

According to Nabhan-Warren, many Tyson employees appreciate corporate faith rhetoric that affirms their own values. They take pride in work that requires skill and fortitude, and in the ability it gives them to support their families. They are drawn to the company because of its wages and benefits, which, while still inferior to those of the industry's unionized era, compare favorably to those of other employers in the region. But despite the best efforts of their employers, they do not experience their work itself as sacred. Meatpacking workers at Tyson and elsewhere show Nabhan-Warren their aching backs, stiff necks, and swollen hands. Many tell her that they work on the assembly line so that their children will not have to.

Faith is a resource that workers draw on to survive long and difficult days of labor. At IPB Beef, Nabhan-Warren witnesses two Somali Muslim women unfold prayer rugs in a corner of the women's locker room and wash the grease from their hands and arms before they pray. Shielded by dark blue drapes, the makeshift prayer room at IPB is a small and carefully preserved space of sanctity within a workplace defined by death and danger.

Nabhan-Warren initially focused her research on white and Latino Catholics, groups that are both well-represented in the Corn Belt region and the meatpacking industry. But she soon began to expand her research, interviewing the many meatpacking workers who hail from central and southern Africa, southeast Asia, and Central America, and who identify as Muslims, Jehovah's Witnesses, Buddhists, and adherents of indigenous religions.

The meatpacking industry began employing this new immigrant workforce in the 1980s, when a farm and debt crisis began to deplete the white population of the rural Midwest. Meatpacking companies recruited Mexican immigrants, documented and undocumented, as a bulwark against the resulting labor shortage and unionization efforts among native white and Black workers. More recently, the industry has sought out refugees fleeing violence and economic deprivation from all over the world. U.S. immigration agents have periodically raided meatpacking plants over the past thirty years, but those raids have devastated immigrant communities without hindering companies' ability to find new supplies of vulnerable workers.

In Sinclair's day, prejudice in its various forms often inhibited the devel-

Workers trim beef at the Tyson Fresh Meats plant in Dakota City, Nebraska, 2012.

TRIBUNE CONTENT AGENCY LLC/ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

opment of solidarity among an equally diverse immigrant workforce. As the historian Lizabeth Cohen has shown, employers successfully pitted workers of different backgrounds against one another in order to defeat the massive strike wave of 1919. Immigrant communities and their places of worship were often ethnically homogenous, and Catholic immigrants remained stubbornly resistant to the Archdiocese of Chicago's efforts to centralize and Americanize the city's churches. In Cohen's account, only secular institutions—the CIO and the Democratic Party—were able to bridge identitarian divides among the city's immigrant workforce.

Nabhan-Warren wonders whether racism and xenophobia create similarly impenetrable walls among meatpacking workers today. But her research suggests that the Catholic Church may play a different role in the early twenty-first century than it did in the early twentieth. As the farm crisis created a labor shortage, it also created a worshipper shortage, and parishes in shrinking towns were forced to close or consolidate. So local priests, too, have sought out immigrants, and many have done so with the awareness that "Americanization" efforts won't suffice. Fr. Joseph Sia, himself a Filipino immigrant, is one of several local priests who offers both Spanish and English Masses. After U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) raided a nearby meatpacking plant, deporting four hundred workers, Sia worked with Baptist, Methodist, Pentecostal, and Lutheran church leaders to distribute aid to the workers and families who remained.

Yet Fr. Sia describes his parish as "shared," not "integrated": white, Latino, and Burmese parishioners seem to tolerate one another, but they do not really mix. Many of Nabhan-Warren's non-white interviewees describe being harassed and insulted by white Iowans. Racial dynamics often—though not always—map onto class dynamics: many of the white locals prosperous enough to remain in Iowa after the farm crisis either repurposed their farms as commodity suppliers for agribusiness companies or joined the ranks of middle management at those companies. So, the white parishioners that Latinos encounter in bilingual churches are often their employers, not their fellow workers. Nabhan-Warren devotes less attention to relationships among brown and Black coreligionists of different nationalities, which may now be even more important for the formation of workers' solidarity than the relationships between whites and non-whites.

What workers of various races and nationalities do share, according to Nabhan-Warren, is a common language that affirms the importance of work and faith in their lives. By introducing religious expressions into the workplace, employers may have inadvertently helped workers of diverse backgrounds identify the values they share not with their companies, but with one another.

As of September 2, over 59,000 meatpacking workers have contracted COVID-19, and 298 have died. A single Tyson plant in Waterloo, Iowa, has accounted for 1,500 of those infections. The company claims that it implemented safety measures after the first outbreaks in March 2020. But workers continue to work shoulder to shoulder on the processing line, and many continue to do so while ill because they lack paid sick leave. One lawsuit filed by a deceased worker's family alleges that the Waterloo plant's managers placed bets on how many workers would contract the virus.

Faith, personal and communal, undoubtedly remains crucial for the meatpacking workers whose jobs have become more dangerous than ever. If religion enables meatpacking workers to survive the horrifying conditions of their employment, can it also help them change those conditions? Nabhan-Warren does not devote much attention to workers' informal or organized resistance, perhaps in part because interviewees were reluctant to criticize their employers during her heavily supervised trips to meatpacking plants.

Yet her research contains hints that faith may become a crucial resource for a revitalized labor movement in the meatpacking industry. Tyson deploys religious language with the aim of disciplining its workers by equating what it considers poor job performance with spiritual and moral failing. Yet for workers who share Tyson's stated values but see meatpacking work as merely necessary rather than sacred, this same language may offer a way to contest the company's actions on its own terms. Workers, divided by race, ethnicity, nationality, and language, may join under the banner of their shared commitment to faith and demand more from an industry that claims to share that commitment.

Recent events suggest what such activism might look like. Nabhan-Warren reports in her epilogue that two-thirds of Tyson's Columbus Junction workers refused to come into work last spring for fear of COVID-19 exposure, forcing the plant to shut down for two weeks. Then, this past summer, faith groups, workers, immigration advocates, and other community organizers formed the Iowa Council for Worker Safety to protest Tyson's failure to provide its workers with adequate protection from the virus. The group launched a petition demanding that the company provide paid leave to workers infected with, or exposed to, COVID-19. On September 3, the United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW), the largest union representing today's meatpacking workers, announced that it reached an agreement with Tyson to provide workers with up to twenty hours of paid sick leave as part of the company's vaccine-mandate policy. This was the first nationwide agreement to provide paid sick leave to meatpacking workers.

A union is not a church, and a church is not a union. But in a region and industry defined by faith, these institutions might unite to hold companies accountable to the values they profess to hold.

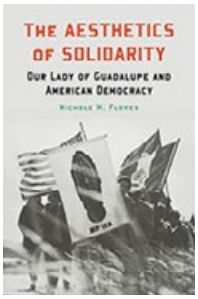
MAIA SILBER *is a PhD candidate in American history at Princeton University.*

Encounters Between Equals

TIMOTHY MATOVINA

Our Lady of Guadalupe has been a contested tradition for centuries. In colonial times indigenous peoples looked to her for strength, while Church and civic authorities contended she was a sanctifier of their stratified society. After Mexican independence, government officials lauded her as the emblem of the new nation, while many Catholic clergy asserted she was calling the nation to repentance and a renewed commitment to the ways of Christ. Today devotees link Guadalupe to an even broader range of concerns. Native American groups engage her as a source of indigenous spirituality. Supporters of the pro-life movement revere her as the patroness of the unborn. Chicana feminists contend that her purpose is to liberate women and all the oppressed. Church leaders proclaim her as a force for evangelization.

As competing parties vie for a hermeneutical edge in channeling Guadalupe's potency, their divergent and at times conflicting emphases underscore just how influential a phenomenon Guadalupe has become. Shrines are dedicated to her as far south as the Basilica of Our Lady of Guadalupe in Santa Fe, Argentina, and as far north as Johnstown, Cape Breton, Nova Scotia. Her presence among Catholics is now a global phenomenon, as evidenced in worship spaces like an altar dedicated to her at the Cathedral of Notre Dame de Paris, a chapel next to the tomb of St. Peter at St. Peter's Basilica in the Vatican, and a Guadalupe parish church in Puchong, Malaysia. The influence of Guadalupe extends even beyond the bounds of official religion, especially in Mexico and the United States. She regularly appears in scenes of telenovelas, films, murals, art, poetry, tattoos, T-shirts, and refrigerator magnets. Today the increasing number of perspectives on Guadalupe presents what could be deemed the postmodern challenge to understanding her: when the presence and meanings of traditions such as Guadalupe expand, their power to unite people around a common vision or cause can diminish.



THE AESTHETICS OF SOLIDARITY
Our Lady of Guadalupe and American Democracy

NICHOLE M. FLORES
Georgetown University Press
$49.95 | 184 pp.

Some scholars have responded to Guadalupe's interpretive malleability with the bold claim that, in the words of the late Stafford Poole, absent a documented "objective historical basis" for the Guadalupe-apparition tradition, "the symbolism [of Guadalupe] loses any objectivity it may have had and is at the mercy of propagandists and special interests." In this view, unless there is evidence to verify the historical origins of the Guadalupe tradition, theological and other analyses of its messages are prone to co-optation. Of course, such pitfalls loom whenever a religious tradition has a wide-ranging sphere of impact, regardless of the extant textual evidence underlying its historical origins. The primary factor that leads to manipulative interpretations, in other words, is a religious tradition's sway over the hearts and minds of believers, not its lack of historical substantiation.

Nichole Flores addresses the historicity question at the outset of *The Aesthetics of Solidarity: Our Lady of Guadalupe and American Democracy*. She acknowledges the need for continued investigations into the historical context out of which the Guadalupe tradition emerged. At the same time, drawing on the works of other contemporary scholars (including those of this reviewer), she articulates insights such as Hans-Georg Gadamer's concept of the history of effect, underscoring that for religious symbols such as Guadalupe we need to study both the history of their origins and the history of their evolving influence. Thus while the precise details of the tradition's sixteenth-century origins are debated, "what *is* historically

The Virgin of Guadalupe framed by flowers

BRIAN OVERCAST/ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

demonstrable is that the Guadalupe devotional tradition has been a potent religious and political narrative for people and communities in Mexico, in the United States, and throughout the Americas and the rest of the world." Far from inducing theologians to abandon the field of Guadalupan interpretation, Flores concludes that the potential for manipulation makes critical theological assessment all the more urgent.

Flores's own assessment contributes substantially to this urgent need. She echoes the insistence of Roberto Goizueta and other contemporary theologians that Guadalupe should not be examined in isolation, but in her encounters and relation with the indigenous neophyte Juan Diego, whom Pope John Paul II canonized in 2002. Thus Flores examines both ongoing theological and other interpretations of the Guadalupe tradition, as well as aesthetic performances like the drama *The Miracle at Tepeyac*, which the Chicano community-theater group Su Teatro developed in Denver beginning in the 1970s. Her volume proposes a political theology for U.S. democracy "predicated on a relational anthropology in which the encounter between equals within the context of oppression is offered as the narrative's interpretive key." The Guadalupe–Juan Diego encounter, in other words, is not merely a historical tradition but a lens through which to meet and learn from the poor and abandoned of today's world. Juan Diego models the poor as protagonists for a robust and transformative solidarity. Foregrounding the relation between Juan Diego and Guadalupe underscores the ethical dimensions of the Guadalupe tradition and provides an antidote for temptations to co-opt and manipulate it.

The latest volume in Georgetown University Press's distinguished *Moral Traditions* series, *The Aesthetics of Solidarity* draws on the work of a number of scholars, especially John Rawls, Martha Nussbaum, and Alejandro García-Rivera. First, Flores assesses Rawls's political philosophy, which underscores justice as fairness. He envisions a society whose members share basic rights and collaborate within an egalitarian economic system that conditionally allows economic and social disparities, but only to the extent that they leave the least-advantaged better off than they would have been under conditions of equality. Flores's critique of Rawls centers on the implications of his work for aesthetics. Rawls presents a vision of political stability amidst diverse social groups, but Flores argues that he fails to adequately consider the struggles of the marginalized. The forms of expression among marginalized peoples include religious ones such as their Guadalupan devotion, which Rawls fears are too group-specific to meet the standards of public reason that overshadow religious, racial, class, and other differences within a pluralistic society. Yet in limiting religious expressions to the private realm, Flores concludes, Rawls presents a set of allegedly impartial and predominantly rational standards in public discourse that tend to privilege the perspectives of dominant communities. The result is the undervaluing of the potential of faith and its aesthetic expressions to empower the political participation of marginal groups.

Martha Nussbaum builds on Rawls's work with her theory of political emo-

tions, that is, emotions that take the nation as their object. While she embraces many elements of Rawls's thought, she adopts a more positive view toward the role of emotions in public life. She contends that narrative-based aesthetic forms such as literature, theater, and film focus societal members on pressing issues that need to be addressed, even if those artistic expressions do not provide a consensus viewpoint on how to address them. Thus the aesthetic, which can be a divisive source of tribal passions or even violence, can also motivate vigilance and action to confront social ills. It can accentuate the essential human elements of complex social problems, and motivate political participation among the varying groups in a pluralistic society. Nonetheless, Flores echoes other critics in noting that Nussbaum's notion of political emotions emphasizes civic virtues such as justice and equality, which stabilize society by inculcating respect for our fellow citizens and for extant political norms. But Nussbaum's theory is less sympathetic to political emotions such as anger at racism and other forms of injustice. Thus she does not account adequately for the particular aesthetic expressions of racialized communities such as those of the Denver Su Teatro community theater group. Flores highlights how Su Teatro interwove the traditional Guadalupe apparitions narrative with the local community's advocacy on behalf of immigrants and its protest of the decision of archdiocesan officials to close their parish church. The anger and lament manifested in this drama are important political emotions that must be addressed in any attempt to systematize the pursuit of justice in a pluralistic society.

Alejandro García-Rivera, along with other Latinx theologians, provides a vision that more fully encompasses marginalized groups, the common good, and individual rights. García-Rivera articulates the communitarian theological anthropology in Latinx theologies, a view of the human that is fundamentally relational. Like Juan Diego in his encounter with Guadalupe, these theologians show that Latinas and Latinos do not tend to see themselves as autonomous individuals, but as communal beings formed by the relationships that constitute who they are. At the same time, García-Rivera joins various colleagues in asserting that this pervasive relational view can gloss over individual differences. It can even silence marginal or abused members of Latinx families and communities under the pretext of a false sense of family honor or group solidarity. To combat such tendencies, García-Rivera calls for the advancement of the "community of the beautiful," one in which both the relational and individual elements of our humanity are respected. Without losing sight of the whole, such a community foregrounds particular experiences and persons, particularly the most vulnerable. Aesthetic practices such as Guadalupan devotion, which encompass both universal messages as well as the concrete encounter with the poor one, Juan Diego, enable this process of foregrounding. Thus aesthetic encounters can focus attention on marginalized persons, build bridges across the differences between peoples, and forge communities through a common act of interpretation and commitment to social purpose. Aesthetic experiences guide us to go beyond a quest for the uniformity of an imposed and superficial "oneness" to the wholeness of a deeper unity that does not erase difference.

Flores concludes that the Guadalupe tradition illuminates a paradigm of aesthetic solidarity that is necessary for democratic politics. The beauty of flowers, song, and the tenderness in Juan Diego's encounters with Guadalupe have decidedly political dimensions: they are expressions of her solidarity with him and sources of his re-humanization after the debilitating effects of the Spanish conquest. Aesthetic experience also enables Juan Diego to grasp both the relational and individual elements of his humanity. He is drawn into relation with Guadalupe, but he also questions and even contests her directives. She in turn does not relegate him to the status of a passive subject, but respects his active partnership with her in their common mission. This enables Juan Diego to confront the colonial authorities in the person of the bishop. Juan Diego demands not just that the bishop fulfill Guadalupe's wishes and build her a temple, but that the colonial authorities and societal structures respect the voice and humanity of indigenous peoples. The Guadalupe–Juan Diego encounter is an aesthetic experience that foregrounds the suffering and humanity of the downtrodden, deepens their appreciation of their full humanity, and enables them to be agents of personal and social transformation.

Flores insists that everyday religious practices should be examined as an instance of aesthetic expression, but she largely limits herself to analyses of the interpersonal dynamics in accounts of the Guadalupe–Juan Diego encounter, as well as theatrical productions and a few public processions with explicitly political overtones. Inclusion of the most prevalent of Guadalupan devotions—rosaries, *mañanitas*, flower offerings, parish feast-day celebrations, and the like—would be a welcome addition to her analysis. Nonetheless, theologians, other scholars, pastoral leaders, artists, and activists would do well to emulate Flores's deft engagement of the Guadalupe tradition as an ethical tradition centered on the encounter between Juan Diego and Guadalupe. *The Aesthetics of Solidarity* models how to honor the Guadalupe tradition while consciously seeking to not co-opt it for one's own purposes. Grounded in superb exposition of contemporary political philosophy and Latinx theologies, this volume also provides a constructive dialogue between those schools of thought and the religious traditions of the marginalized. Flores's study offers significant insights for understanding the importance of marginalized groups, their struggles for justice, and their religious expressions within the political landscape of a pluralistic society.

TIMOTHY MATOVINA *is the author of* Theologies of Guadalupe: From the Era of Conquest to Pope Francis.

That Teenage Feeling

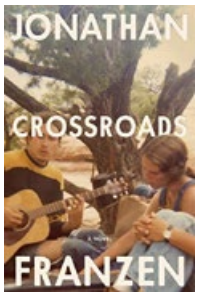
ADAM FLEMING PETTY

Jonathan Franzen, as they say online, is Good, Actually. Long a contentious figure, these days Franzen finds the reading public surprisingly amenable to his outlook. His new novel, *Crossroads*, is getting positive reviews. His long-held skepticism when it comes to social media now makes him look less like a curmudgeon and more like a prophet, what with Facebook sowing misinformation across the globe and destabilizing elections. Praised for qualities that made him reviled in the past, he has become the Guy Fieri of American fiction, and *Crossroads* offers a twist on a familiar recipe.

Franzen made his name writing long, engrossing novels that delve into the inner workings of the white, middle-class American family. His early novels overindulged in the heady postmodernism rampant in the 1990s, but *The Corrections* (2001) got the balance just right. Bringing the detail of the systems novel to bear on family dynamics, *The Corrections* demonstrated that a family saga, one of the oldest, most traditional novelistic forms, could capture the culture of the moment—and reach a vast readership for good measure. In *Freedom* (2010), he followed yet another family, this one during the Bush Era, to somewhat lesser but still potent effect. *Purity* (2015) reads like an ill-advised twist on his early novels, mostly ignoring families in favor of international intrigue. But *Crossroads* sees Franzen return to all-consuming domestic themes. The result is not just his best novel since *The Corrections*. It is his best novel, period.

JANET FINE

Jonathan Franzen



CROSSROADS
A Novel

JONATHAN FRANZEN
Farrar, Straus and Giroux
$30 | 592 pp.

Crossroads does add some new ingredients to Franzen's menu. To start, it's a historical novel that takes place in the early 1970s—living memory for Franzen, who was an adolescent at the time. More unusually, it's a religious novel, or at the very least a novel that trains its powers of attention upon deeply religious characters. Following a youthful brush with Christianity, Franzen left behind faith for literature. But that early exposure to religion must have stuck with him, for he writes about the inner life of faith, its joy as well as its despair, with remarkable fluency. It is this quality that makes *Crossroads* unusually prescient: by honing in on a religious community fifty years in the past, the novel manages to convey, perhaps without meaning to, the emotional tenor of social media in the present day.

But I'll get to that in a moment. *Crossroads* portrays the Hildebrandt family, who live in New Prospect, Illinois, a fictional

suburb of Chicago. Russ Hildebrandt is the associate pastor at First Reformed church, but the congregation's affluence is an odd fit for him after growing up in an austere Mennonite farming community. His sober-minded, service-oriented Protestantism makes him more comfortable aiding inner-city faith communities or constructing school buildings in the Arizona desert. Marion, his wife, is there to help him navigate the social landmines of suburbia, remembering the names of every parishioner and whipping up pies for bake sales. They have four children: Clem, an iconoclastic college freshman; Becky, a preternaturally popular teenager; Perry, brilliant yet unstable; and Judson, the youngest, who mostly remains at the periphery of the story while his family members capsize their lives in one way or another.

The catalyst for the Hildebrandts' troubles is Crossroads, the youth ministry attached to First Reformed. Rick Ambrose, the youth pastor running it, is a charismatic figure who attracts teenagers in droves. Remember: this is the early '70s, when the unruly energies of the counterculture were sluicing their way into the square suburbs. Ambrose directs those energies expertly, and he makes Crossroads a place where teens of all sorts, religious and otherwise, come to see what's going on. Its structure, such as it exists, is fundamentally relational. In highly emotional exchanges facilitated by Ambrose, the teens talk, laugh, and, especially, cry.

Russ's rationalistic son, Perry, quickly catches on to what he calls "the fundamental economy of Crossroads: public display of emotion purchased overwhelming approval." His daughter Becky, skeptical of Crossroads at first, comes to see its appeal when a boy named Tanner invites her:

> Crossroads didn't look religious—there was nary a Bible in sight, and whole evenings went by without reference to Jesus—but here again Tanner had been right: simply by trying to speak honestly, surrendering to emotion, supporting other people in their honesty and emotion, she experienced her first glimmerings of spirituality.

For his part, Russ can't stand Crossroads. Ambrose is everything he is not. Vindictive and bitter, Russ begins lashing out at Crossroads, at times not even fully aware he's doing so. He starts to neglect his wife, makes the Crossroads girls uncomfortable, and desperately tries to have an affair.

That's right: Jonathan Franzen has written the Great American Youth Group novel.

Reading *Crossroads* transported me back to my own youth-group experiences. There are differences, certainly. The youth group I attended in the late 1990s was conservative and Evangelical, whereas Crossroads is mainline and generally liberal. But the affective world of Crossroads is still intimately, painfully recognizable. Adolescence is a time when your emotions are so volatile, so abundant, that it feels like they could overflow at any moment. The Christian youth group, as an institution, has found great success through channeling those teenage feelings in the general direction of the divine. I can't tell you how many Wednesday evenings I spent trying to keep those emotions at arm's length, only to break down and raise my hands during the praise chorus.

The hyper-emotionalism of my youth group experience embarrasses me today. There were times when I had to read *Crossroads* through my fingers, cringing at the religious sincerity of it all. It's a testament to Franzen's commitment to his subject matter that he recreates those emotions without condescending to them. But as I kept reading, I wasn't just transported back to my adolescence; I also picked up on a way the novel's youth-group emotionalism resonates with the present, one Franzen may not even have had in mind. *Crossroads*, seen from a certain angle, looks like a creation myth for social media as we experience it today.

The displays of emotion at Crossroads, as Perry accurately perceives, function as a kind of currency. The more you show, the more attention you receive. Making yourself vulnerable, anathema in the halls of high school, becomes, at Crossroads, the mechanism by which you can raise your social standing. Sound familiar? Log on to the social media platform of your choice and you will find teens, as well as adults acting like the teens they once were, baring their souls for the sake of "engagement" and clicks. I've noticed this phenomenon for years, watching social media posts hit the exact same emotional beats I heard during youth group when my peers "gave their testimony," to use the Evangelical term for constructing a public narrative out of one's personal experience with God. With its descriptions of the prototypical emergence of emotional currency within a religious marketplace, *Crossroads* affirmed this perceived affinity, at least for me. God, like Facebook, makes teenagers of us all.

The characters in *Crossroads* really do act like teenagers, especially the adults. Russ sulks and mopes his way through the novel, angry at his church and bored with his wife. His fumbling attempts to initiate an affair with Frances, the mother of Perry's friend, are pathetic and hilarious in equal measure. He dons his old sheepskin coat and tries to impress Frances with his knowledge of old blues records, every inch the knowledgeable yet inexperienced youth. When he gives in to grooviness and smokes a joint with her, he inevitably freaks out.

If Russ is an earnest square, then his wife Marion is downright goth. In her youth, she became pregnant after an affair with a married man. She terminated the pregnancy, but another man, who procured the abortion for her, abused her in the process. Wracked with guilt, she drifted toward the church. But it was not the grace of God that drew her; it was his wrath. Marion feels she deserves every bad thing that has happened to her, up to and including Russ's attempts at infidelity, and she gives praise to God for meting out the punishment she believes is rightfully hers. A different kind of novel might have depicted Marion's longing for punishment as a pathology, with religion enabling her worst impulses. But *Crossroads* takes her motivations seriously without necessarily condoning

Jonathan Franzen has written the Great American Youth Group novel.

her actions. The cautious reconciliation she and Russ eventually achieve is the result not of setting aside her longing, but of seeing it through.

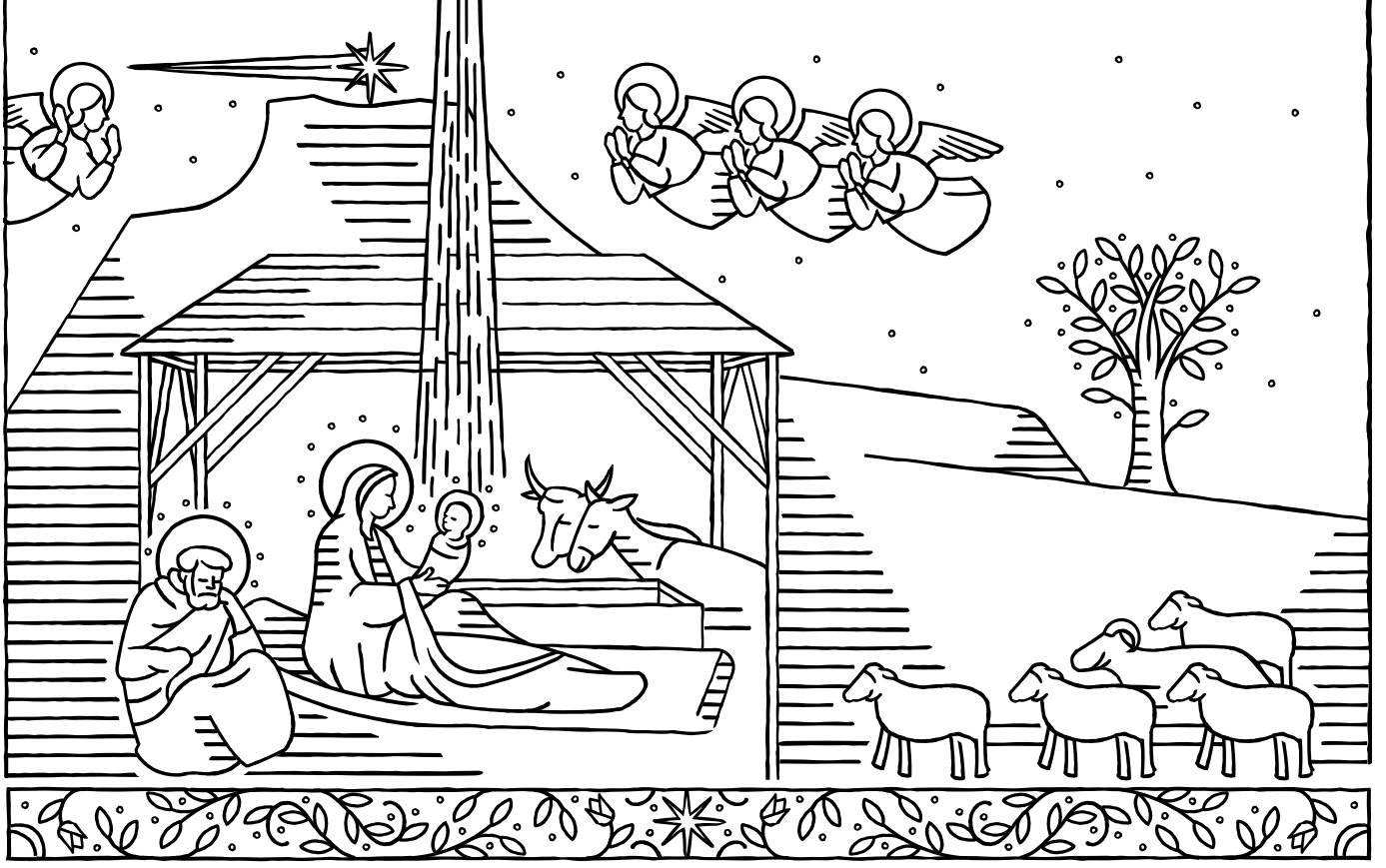
The actual teenagers in the story come off as more principled than their adult counterparts, if not any more mature. Clem becomes convinced that staying in college to evade the draft, as pacifist Russ wishes, is an immoral position. Those shipped over to Vietnam are the under-privileged, after all, including Black and brown Americans several rungs down the ladder from the suburban Hildebrandts. Clem drops out of school and sends a letter to the draft board, letting them know he is available. Predictably, Russ is infuriated. But even Clem's attempt at principled rebellion fails to lift off when his draft number doesn't get called. Directionless, he runs off first to New Orleans, then to the Andes in Peru, fleeing his privilege at every turn.

Becky, desirous of safety and stability, throws herself into Crossroads, finding God in the very place Russ spurned. Her burgeoning relationship with Tanner, the guitar-strumming golden boy of Crossroads, nails the dynamics of teenage romance in such a pious setting. Like an influencer checking her follower numbers, Becky pays perhaps even more attention to how their relationship appears to the larger community than she does to Tanner himself. She repeatedly envisions them walking into First Reformed on Sunday morning, arm in arm, proving to the community that their relationship is more than a fling, that it's something with depth and longevity. The approval of a community is a powerful motivator, as anyone who's ever posted a selfie can attest.

Perry proves himself to be that supreme product of '70s suburbia: the stoner kid too smart for his own good. Self-actualization isn't the only countercultural product making its way into New Prospect. Quaaludes and marijuana are newly available to the local youth, and Perry is an avid consumer; an attempted drug deal gone wrong and the explosion of a long-simmering mental instability leaves him in ruins. Russ and Marion find new purpose in caring for their needy son, while Becky, ever the principled, practical one, sees her parents' newfound stability as nothing more than a façade. The novel closes with Becky distancing herself from the rest of her family in an attempt to create a domestic sphere of her own, one where the household members are honest with each other, rather than dishonest like her parents. It remains to be seen how that will turn out.

Franzen has said that *Crossroads* is the first volume of a planned trilogy called *A Key to All Mythologies*. The subsequent volumes presumably will follow the ensuing generations of the Hildebrandt clan into the present day. It would be fascinating if Franzen were to continue focusing on Christianity as it plays out in his chosen milieu of the Midwest. Such communities are frequent topics of discussion nowadays. Reporters parachute into small-town diners to take the pulse of Middle America, but it's far less common to see such communities dramatized with the kind of attention Franzen brings to his subjects. Maybe, in the concluding volume, a later member of the Hildebrandt clan will log onto Facebook for real, and find it familiar in a way they never would have imagined.

ADAM FLEMING PETTY *is the author of the novella* Followers. *His essays have appeared in the* Paris Review Daily, Electric Literature, Vulture, *and other outlets. He lives in Grand Rapids, Michigan.*



Illustrations by David Sankey

Christmas Critics

CLAUDIA AVILA COSNAHAN

The Feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe, together with its novena, has been an important part of Advent throughout my life, with the vigil celebrations a staple of my upbringing. The rhythmic, rattling sound of the *coyoleras* on the pounding feet of the *danzantes* is a prayer, a religious experience, and an important symbol of my personal identity. In adulthood, Advent and the celebration of Our Lady of Guadalupe have also become occasions for deeper reflection on my relationship to the Church, the need for the presence of Latinas in leadership, and whether Latinas will have an equal voice in helping guide the Church's future. Recall how the Guadalupan narrative tells of the appearance of the Virgin Mary as a young mestiza woman. She communicates not with Church leaders but with a poor indigenous man, Juan Diego, whose attempt to communicate her divine message is rejected by the local bishop. Yet Diego of course is eventually vindicated: liberated by the fact that Our Lady bears the physical features of his people, he becomes a prophetic messenger of God. A fellow parishioner once expressed to me how incredible it is that on the feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe we celebrate, among many things, that a bishop was wrong and an indigenous person was right.

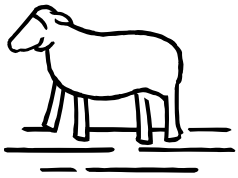
Narratives like these have revelatory power, something theologian Natalia Imperatori-Lee reminds us of in ***Cuéntame: Narrative in the Ecclesial Present*** **(Orbis Books, 192 pp., $35)**. Drawing on examples from fiction and popular religion, ritual and art, and everyday lived experience, Imperatori-Lee expands our notions of theological reflection, while also advancing an inductive ecclesiology centered on the experience of Latina women—whose work in the Church is so often minimized and marginalized through the patriarchal characterization of it as a "feminine" contribution. Consider, for instance, the stereotype of the *abuelita* regularly summoned to speak about Latina women's contributions to the Church. Without necessarily rejecting this image of the harmless, devoted grandmother figure who passes on the faith to younger generations, Imperatori-Lee also introduces the mature Latina who has the power to change the trajectory of culture and theology—throwing off the patriarchal narrative to engage those stories that haven't been given sufficient telling.

Regular exposure to institutional racism and sexism can have a numbing effect the longer it goes unaddressed. Fortunately, artists working in the horror genre are capable of deliver-

ing some necessary shocks to the system. Consider Silvia Moreno-Garcia's ***Mexican Gothic*** **(Del Rey, 352 pp., $27)**, set in 1950s Mexico. Noemí Taboada, a modern young feminist, strikes a deal with her father: in return for visiting her physically and mentally ill cousin in the countryside, she'll get to go to university to study anthropology. The eerie mansion in which Noemí's cousin is cloistered proves to be a source of horror, but not the only one. The English family into which she has married is also quite scary. After essentially colonizing a small mining town, they've embraced eugenic theories to convince themselves that their Mexican workers belong to an inferior race. For good measure, the family patriarch also makes clear his belief that a woman's only true purpose is to bear children. The toxic brew of racism, colorism, and sexism illustrates just how dangerous actual life can be for objectified Mexican women, and as a Mexican-American woman, I often found myself more terrified by the English family than many of this novel's other considerable horrors.

Here at the end of 2021, I still think of 2020 as a year of spinning in circles, a time in which we were caught up in a whirlwind of issues that made it impossible to focus on just one thing. This year has felt more like the moment right after you've stopped spinning: still dizzy, struggling to grab ahold of something so that you don't fall. That's probably why I reached for a book by David A. Sánchez that I first read eight years ago, ***From Patmos to the Barrio: Subverting Imperial Myths*** **(Fortress Press, 222 pp., $21)**. Sánchez analyzes how John of Patmos, a follower of Christ in exile and author of the Book of Revelations, subverts Roman imperial mythology in Revelations 12. Sánchez compares this subversive action to the indigenous appropriation of Spanish symbolism from the same chapter in Revelations, the chapter from which the image of Guadalupe derives. He explores how this image continues to serve as a subversive symbol for Latinx people in East Los Angeles—a unifying flag that communicates both presence and reconquest. I know that each year I celebrate Our Lady of Guadalupe, she becomes something new for me. Our relationship changes in new and freeing ways. In this new liturgical year, I'll take her up as my personal flag, one representing not only my presence, but also my reconquest of the space given to me through baptism in the Church.

CLAUDIA AVILA COSNAHAN *is the Mission & Partnerships Director for* Commonweal *and an instructor and consultant for the Archdiocese of Los Angeles.*



ISABELLA SIMON

I wish I could believe that everything will be all right, but I know that's not likely to be the case. We're continuously passing tipping points in the climate crisis, and our attempts to legislate our way to a greener world are halting at best. I know the grim projections well; I know about the corporations and patterns of consumption that have led us here. This year, though, I sought a different kind of knowledge: not despair-inducing facts about all that's going wrong, but an understanding of how we can and should live in this changing world.

In Elizabeth Kolbert's ***Under a White Sky: The Nature of the Future*** **(Crown Publishing, 256 pp., $28)**, I found a fascinating account of the technology we're developing and deploying in an effort to counter the havoc we've invited by damaging various ecosystems. From levee and dam infrastructure in Louisiana designed to protect residents from flooding—systems that, unfortunately, compound the factors leading to floods—to a gene-editing project that could eradicate invasive cane toads in Australia, Kolbert unravels and explains the "recursive logic" of our Anthropocene era. Our attempts to maintain control of our environment inevitably press us to exert ever greater effort, blurring or even dissolving the lines between the laboratory and the wild. Our solutions often spawn new problems—sometimes literally, as in the case of Asian carp in the United States, which were originally imported to clean up treatment ponds, but then escaped. As we look to the water, land, and sky of the future, our choice, Kolbert writes, "is not between what was and what is, but between what is and what will be, which, often enough, is nothing." Thus our attempts at developing strains of hardy coral capable of surviving in warmer and more acidic oceans may leave us with "a kind of Okay Barrier Reef," but even a diminished reef is better than none. Yes, humans are capable of great innovation, but it's unfortunately much easier "to ruin an ecosystem than to run one."

In writing about carbon-capture technologies, Kolbert explains that "cutting emissions is at once absolutely essential and insufficient." This tension is further explored by author and organizer Daniel Sherrell in ***Warmth: Coming of Age at the End of Our World*** **(Penguin Books, 272 pp., $17)**. The book is written as a letter from Sherrell to his unborn son, a meditation on our responsibility to others and ourselves in light of "the Problem." From the first chapter, I recognized myself in this book. Sherrell understands—more, even, than I do, given his role as an activist—what it's like to try to hold such an incomprehensibly massive "slow-motion emergency" in our hearts and minds every day; the feelings that can veer from grief to despair to rage before often slipping into a kind of numbness

or detachment as we continue to wake up and carry on with our lives. He is not interested in sugarcoating or fatalism: "It is not: we had the answer and here it is. It is more like: we didn't, either, and kept trying." Instead, he is interested in "the arts of noticing," of paying attention to the world around us as a means of staying grounded, remaining open to the unexpected and never resigned to "something as narrow as fate."

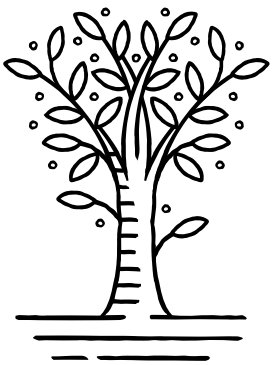
According to Sherrell, we grieve *and* we organize, despite the many frustrating failures of legislators, regulators, or institutional leaders to address the real scope of "the Problem" ("good does not equal adequate"). We must join the ranks of the people who refuse to give up, pursuing both material and spiritual ends that give us "the ability to discern, amid the many endings, some trace of a beginning."

In no other book was the trace of a beginning clearer to me than in Robin Wall Kimmerer's ***Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants*** **(Milkweed, 456 pp., $35)**. Kimmerer begins the book by asking us to consider what a positive relationship with the earth would look like—not just how we can better care for the planet, but how we can in turn accept its care for us. She spends the rest of it showing us this mutual care from her particular perspective as a botanist, a mother, and a member of the Citizen Potawatomi tribe.

It may seem naïve to believe in a world in which we reframe our relationship with nature so completely, viewing it as a gift rather than a commodity. But reading *Braiding Sweetgrass* makes such a world feel tangible. Still, conceptualizing our environment in this way, while freeing and reassuring, also comes with its own set of responsibilities. Kimmerer explains that "the essence of the gift is that it creates a set of relationships. The currency of a gift economy is, at its root, reciprocity." Chapters on black ash and the titular sweetgrass demonstrate how human cultivation, rather than distance, can actually help certain wild species thrive. Other chapters explore the precepts of an honorable harvest, the biology of both old-growth and agricultural ecosystems, and the environmental and psychological dangers of our current society's "systematic policy of sanctioned greed": capitalism.

It can be hard to fully enact Kimmerer's vision of reciprocity from a Manhattan apartment that receives little direct sunlight, but her words nonetheless resonate with me—while on the rock-climbing trips I take, at the farmer's market where I can express gratitude directly to the people who have cultivated the food I purchase, and especially when I visit my parents and enjoy the abundance their lovingly tended garden produces each year. (Kimmerer calls a garden a "nursery for nurturing connection, the soil for cultivation of practical reverence.") I may have room for only a small basil plant on my windowsill, but I am comforted by Kimmerer's reminder that writing and paying attention can also serve as actions of reciprocity with the land. I cannot know how "the Problem" will play out, but as I struggle with its impacts and implications, I can notice and share countless moments of connection with the earth. This kind of connection is a gift of grace: it comes "free, having moved toward you without your beckoning," unearned, yet always open to being found.

ISABELLA SIMON *is the assistant managing editor of* Commonweal.



PAUL ELIE

Jonathan Franzen's second novel, 1992's *Strong Motion*, deals with big topics—the environment, feminism, chapter-and-verse religion—and the strong emotions they call forth. I touted it in a Christmas Critics piece that year, noting it was what Saul Bellow called a "large-audience novel" but that it hadn't found a large audience. I then mailed the piece to the author in care of his publisher, and was surprised to get a letter back in which Franzen set out his notion (later developed in *Harper's*) that the future of the novel rested with writers determined to bring "renewed, quasi-religious dedication to the old ideas of truth and mimesis."

Thirty years later, Franzen has found so many readers that his novels can be said to define the term "large-audience novel" for the present. And he has deepened his scrutiny of religion: in his extraordinary new novel, *Crossroads* (reviewed in this issue); in essays; and in a spirited conversation he and I had during Georgetown's Faith & Culture conversations series in 2018.

The same process of author mail brought a package to me a couple of years ago: a card thanking me for suggesting "the possible parallels between the creative and religious vocations" in my book *The Life You Save May Be Your Own*, tucked inside the sender's own book, ***The Crossway*** **(Picador, 400 pp., $22.67)**, a paperback with a photograph of a man on a mountain, arms spread, beholding a valley before him.

Then the pandemic struck, and reading *The Crossway* for a part of an hour each night became a mode of travel in a period of confinement. The author, Guy Stagg, is a Briton born in 1988. In 2013, he walked from Canterbury to Jerusalem (about 3,400 miles) along the old pilgrim roads. The book—I've been reading it ever since—is an account of that walk; of the interior drama that occasioned it; of the peripheries of Europe and the Mediterranean today; and of the effects of Christianity on those who are resistant to faith, or so they say.

In his early twenties, Stagg—educated, ambitious, working in "the largest open-plan office in London"—was overwhelmed by depression. He spent weeks pacing his bedroom, afraid to go out, dreaming vivid dreams of self-harm. Seized by the idea of pilgrimage, he walked, alone, from London to Canterbury, and felt the depression subside; and then he decided that the next year, beginning on New Year's Day, he'd walk from Canterbury to Jerusalem. "I began to believe that, if I made it to Jerusalem, then I would be well. This was the wager driving me through the winter. I could not turn round, or even slow down, for I feared returning to that room and those wrecking daydreams. I could only push on, push on, push on—until I walked free from the past. Yet I carried those memories with me, like the rucksack on my shoulders, the burden on my back. And the farther I hiked from home, the heavier they weighed me down."

Reader, he did it. He walked to the shrine of Benoît-Joseph Labre in the north of France; over the Alps in the winter; to Rome for Holy Week, where he "slept almost twenty hours—a plunging sleep so deep that I woke with no memory of where I was, but stepped from my bed feeling reborn"; to Albania, Macedonia, and Turkey, along the route St. Paul traveled; to Istanbul; to Greece and Cyprus, and then to Lebanon. Most nights, he slept in rectories and pilgrim houses, and so the story of the walk is interwoven with stories of the saints celebrated along the route and of the present-day religious who would open their doors to a weary stranger when he knocked on the door at dusk. "At the start of my journey, I thought I was walking into the wreckage of Christianity," Stagg reflects at the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem:

> My impression now was how much remained, holding tight to its decayed inheritance. Despite the decline of religion in Europe, it was still possible to cross the continent like a medieval pilgrim: travelling on foot, stopping at shrines, and supported by charity. Still possible to find comfort in pilgrim rites, even if the belief was gone. So maybe the decline was evidence of endurance, and loss the price we pay for surviving.
>
> Sitting in the basilica that night, I wondered if this was true for my own life too.

The Crossway is so rich that it's best read a few pages at a time, the pace of reading approximating the pace of the journey. Its insights, when they come, are road-tested, weather-proofed; they have the broken-in feel of real religious wisdom.

Michael O'Loughlin is a contemporary of Stagg's, and his pilgrimage, too, has led him back into obscurely understood episodes of the Christian past—namely, the Church's encounters with people with AIDS in the 1980s. His first book, just published, is ***Hidden Mercy: AIDS, Catholics, and the Untold Stories of Compassion in the Face of Fear*** **(Broadleaf Books, 281 pp., $28.99)**. Drawing on over a hundred interviews (many of them for his *America* podcast, *Plague*), O'Loughlin brings out the disturbing double aspect of the Church's approach to gay people, with strong measures of charity and condemnation alike. He tells the story of Srs. Carol and Mary Ellen (as he calls them), who in 1984 opened a hospice for people with AIDS in Belleville, Illinois, inspired by Good Samaritan House in Kansas City; of Fr. William Hart McNichols, who, as a Jesuit priest, created posters, flyers, and other works of art that called attention to the plight of people with AIDS and sparked activism among Catholics; of the ouster of Dignity's thousand-member-strong New York chapter from the Church of St. Francis Xavier in 1987 on the orders of the archbishop of New York, Cardinal John J. O'Connor; of Sr. Patrice Murphy and Dr. Ramon Torres, who took leadership roles in the AIDS ward at St. Vincent's Hospital in Greenwich Village; and of the development of the U.S. bishops' 1987 pastoral letter "The Many Faces of AIDS." That letter, O'Loughlin records—I'd forgotten—was "condemned" by Cardinal Bernard Law of Boston and Archbishop Theodore McCarrick of Newark, who claimed it was insufficiently firm in its prohibition of condom use. The facile scrupulosity of those men, and many of their counterparts, is now clear to us all.

Hidden Mercy is vital, necessary, timely, and pointed at a broad Catholic readership: the door O'Loughlin opens is one we can all walk through. So strong is he on the bright side of things that he underplays (it seems to me) how ignorant most of us American Catholics were about gay life, how nasty parishioners and pastors could be in scorning gay people, and how vociferously clerics urged gay people in the laity to live chastely even as they themselves were suppressing or dismissing vast evidence of priestly pedophilia and ephebophilia—objective disorders, yes; crimes, yes; but also grave failures of chastity.

So I was relieved to find another aspect of the story in an unexpected place. Midway through Vikram Seth's giant 1993 novel, *A Suitable Boy*, I turned to his slim 1986 novel-in-verse, ***The Golden Gate*** **(Vintage, 320 pp., $13.46)**. And there, in its gallery of young professionals in San Francisco in the '80s, prior to AIDS, is a portrait of a gay Catholic struggling to be faithful to the Church's teachings about what the Vatican, in a notorious 1986 document, called "the homosexual condition." In bed, prior to the commission of any act, his would-be lover tells him: "I don't quite / Get why religion makes you grateful. / I would say, Ed, that it's a hateful, / A pretty odious trick / To make you as you are, then stick / The pin of infinite damnation into you." But the other insists, and resists: "Ed withdraws his hold / And pulls back from the swiftening vortex / In desperate strokes, till he's on shore / Trembling, but steadier than before." It's a sad scene, all the more so because it can't be said to belong to the past or the imagination.

PAUL ELIE, *a senior fellow at Georgetown's Berkley Center for Religion, Peace, and World Affairs, is the author of* The Life You Save May Be Your Own *and* Reinventing Bach. *A third book,* Controversy, *is forthcoming.*

REST

Magda Andrews-Hoke

Swiveling in our Sabbath-rest,
we are impressed
by the slow,
winkless kindness that glows
slightly when we still.
No thrill,
no sudden
unrelated frill, no madman
trumpet-blast.
One silver cast
of calm,
bracing us with the flavorless balm
of god.
It's odd.
The only brightness,
it took this long to notice.

MAGDA ANDREWS-HOKE *is a Philadelphia-born poet currently living in St. Andrews, Scotland, where she is pursuing an MLitt in Theology and the Arts. She was a 2019 recipient of the Frederick Mortimer Clapp Fellowship.*

John Frederick Kensett, *Eaton's Neck, Long Island*, 1872

GIFT OF THOMAS KENSETT, 1874/METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART

Love Means Answering the Mail

JAMES M. LANG

In the fall of 1943, in a world that seemed to have gone mad with war and division, Dorothy Day decided to take a year-long retreat from her duties at the Catholic Worker to reflect, pray, and write. For nearly a decade she had been working continuously to build up the fledgling Catholic Worker movement—publishing the newspaper, funding houses of hospitality, living in community with the destitute and the difficult, traveling and speaking—not to mention raising a daughter as a single parent. Everyone seemed to want or need something from her.

The calls for help from every quarter of her life had come to feel like distractions that were interfering with what she viewed as her primary vocation: writing. Although we revere Day now for her commitment to social justice, she identified herself first as a writer. Jim Forest, Day's biographer who worked and lived with her wrote, "Dorothy was a writer. There was always a notebook in her bag. She seemed endlessly to be taking notes and writing. Note-taking and journaling were as much a part of Dorothy as breathing." Her output included not only spiritual masterpieces like *The Long Loneliness*, but also a massive catalog of diary entries and letters, published selections of which each run to six hundred pages or more. She produced her monthly column for the *Catholic Worker* newspaper, "On Pilgrimage," for many decades.

But Day wasn't satisfied. She yearned for more time to write and for the activities that fueled her writing: prayer, reading, and reflection. Her obligations gave her precious little time for such spiritual work. Residents and visitors came and went endlessly in the Catholic Worker houses and farms, and with them came conflict and stress. Day's growing reputation as a champion of the poor put her in frequent demand for speaking invitations. Even the squalid conditions in which she lived weighed on her mind. "In this groaning of spirit," she wrote in a diary entry in the late 1930s, "everything is irksome to me. The dirt, the garbage heaped in the gutters, the flies, the hopelessness of the human beings around me, all oppress me." She dreamed of space, light, and freedom from these endless distractions.

Finally, in November 1943 she made her dream a reality by moving into a Dominican convent on Long Island, near

Day reminds us that our primary vocation in life is to love one another—and that we are most frequently called to that love by our distractions.

a school that her daughter Tamar was attending. She sought to immerse herself in the rhythms of religious life: daily Masses, meditative prayer and reading, recitation of the rosary, writing and study. She took long walks and tried to rest in the afternoons. She was almost always alone. She had created the conditions in which she could free her mind to write and pray to her soul's content.

And she hated it.

Instead of peace, she discovered what all of us find when we make a concerted effort to still the mind and settle into quiet prayer or contemplation: that we don't like doing it. "My mind like an idiot wanders," she wrote in her retreat diary, "converses, debates, argues, flounders. If I get in 15 minutes of honest to God praying I'm doing well." Day's description of her active, busy brain echoes biologists who tell us how those complex organs in our skulls love novelty and stimulation. Without these things, the brain jumps into action on its own, swirling in constant motion.

"I have made up my mind," she wrote to a correspondent only a month into her retreat, "that... such a year should be spent in hard work in a hospital, say, not off in a convent, on one's own." Day needed the external stimulation that she found in the Catholic Worker movement, even while she longed to escape from its many distractions. She cut the retreat short and returned to the Catholic Worker community six months into her planned year-long stay.

The retreat wasn't entirely a disaster. She "labored at watering the garden of my soul," she wrote in a *Catholic Worker* column after she returned, and that garden produced some spiritual fruit. But her descriptions of her retreat experience make it sound as though she was awfully glad to be finished with it: "Sometimes I prayed with joy and delight. Other times each bead of my rosary was heavy as lead. My steps dragged, my lips were numb. I felt a dead weight. I could do nothing but make an act of will and sit or kneel, and sigh in an agony of boredom." It didn't take Day long to realize that she was not well suited to a life without distractions. She would never attempt such a long retreat again, although she did continue to take shorter ones, which she found more to her liking. She learned and grew much from those retreats, and for many years she worked in fits and starts on a planned book about retreats, tentatively entitled *All Is Grace*. But in perhaps another demonstration of her rocky relationship with retreats, she never completed the book.

Day's struggles with retreats contain a lesson for all of us who see the distractions of this world as our enemy, and who long for peace and quiet to pursue our work, whatever it might be, with single-minded devotion. The distractions of the last year and a half, after all, have been particularly intense ones. We struggle to manage life under a pandemic, worrying about both our individual health and the health of the country. Our children need help in their remote schooling, our parents are ill, our homes and offices need sanitizing. Who among us hasn't longed for a respite from such distractions?

But love "calls us to the things of this world," as the poet Richard Wilbur wrote. In the decades following her failed retreat, Day turned the Catholic Worker movement into a force for good throughout the world, sought and obtained funds to support its work, bought and sold multiple properties, and personally touched the lives of countless individuals through advocacy and speaking engagements. She was arrested and released on multiple occasions, traveled the world, helped her adult daughter raise her children, and nursed friends and companions through terminal illnesses. Every one of these activities represented a distraction from the vocation of writing, and yet these are the works for which we revere Dorothy Day to this day. Her distractions called her to the works of mercy and love, and she never stopped heeding that call.

"Love means answering the mail that comes in," Day wrote in another diary entry, "and there is a fearful amount of it. That person in the hospital, that person suffering a breakdown of nerves, the person lonely; far-off, watching for the mailman each day. It means loving attention to those around us, the youngest and the oldest (drunk and sober)." Day reminds us that our primary vocation in life is to love one another—and that we are most frequently called to that love by our distractions.

JAMES M. LANG *is the author of six books, the most recent of which is* Distracted: Why Students Can't Focus and What You Can Do About It *(Basic Books). He can be found online at jamesmlang.com or on Twitter at @LangOnCourse.*

Thank You!

2021 has brought more than its fair share of good news, and we couldn't have done it without you. Whether you renewed a subscription or subscribed for the first time, attended one of our virtual events, listened to our podcast, donated for "Commonweal Friday" or as a Commonweal Associate, or simply kept up with us digitally—you've helped empower our independent, lay voice.

Print circulation has hit historic levels

Podcast downloads are higher than ever before

Associates support and membership is record-breaking, in both total dollars and individual gifts

More than 8,000 registrations for virtual Commonweal Conversations and events

Thank you for your support!

"We can't thank you enough. Without your help, it's impossible to do the things we do."

—DOMINIC PREZIOSI, EDITOR

Commonweal CONVERSATIONS

Charism & Community in an Age of Discernment

Monday, December 6, 2021 at 3:30PM ET/12:30PM PT

Expanding on our November special issue, "The Varieties of Religious Communities Today," this webinar, grounded en lo Cotidiano, seeks to examine how the charisms of the Church dialogue with our everyday experiences and what it means to build sustainable Christian communities.

Drawing on the expertise of a sociologist, theologian, and a novice, we hope this conversation may be a dynamic entry point for identifying the practices that will help us flexibly adapt to these transformative times.

For further details & to RSVP, visit **cwlmag.org/events**

PANELISTS

Neomi De Anda
Theologian and lay Marianist

November special issue:
Marianist Lay Communities

Ann Killian
Novice with the
Dominican Sisters of Peace

November special issue:
The Dominican Sisters of Peace

Gustavo Morello, SJ
Jesuit priest and sociologist studying transformations of lived religiosity

Author of
Lived Religion in Latin America

Moderated by
Claudia Avila Cosnahan