Religion, Politics, Culture

Commonweal

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CHRISTMAS CRITICS

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LETTERS

American intervention in Ukraine and theology in hip-hop

A BRIGHT CANDLE

Paul J. Griffiths's "A dissent" (September) seems more like an assent—to the end of Ukraine as a sovereign nation of free people. The Ukrainians, he proposes, should have submitted to the Russian invasion of their country and the dissolution of their democracy since "slaughtering people…in the service or defense of democracy, sovereignty, or temporary strategic geopolitical interests, is a game never worth the candle." He is particularly upset that the United States has supplied the weapons to perpetrate this "slaughter," reasoning that without them the war "would very likely be over already." Very likely, indeed—and the Ukrainians would now be living under the boot-heel of a brutal dictator. Instead of sending arms, Griffiths argues, the United States should be sending more humanitarian aid, including a magnanimous invitation to come live in America.

Well, here's the thing: The "people" being "slaughtered" are in fact Russian *soldiers* bombing schools, hospitals, churches, apartment buildings, and other civilian targets, while committing thousands of documented war crimes. When Griffiths speaks of slaughter, he might redirect his gaze to Izium and the 440 unmarked graves holding Ukrainian corpses, many showing signs of torture. He might consider that the possibility of "hasten[ing]… the end of the Ukrainian state as an independent entity" is more than a "regrettable outcome." Much more. He should know that people who love their country enough to die for it have no desire for "resettlement" in America or anywhere else. And I hope he will rethink the notion that a free, independent people fighting to defend their country, their children, their freedom, their dignity, their right to live as they choose—is "never worth the candle." The courage, strength, resilience, and character of the Ukrainian people *is* a candle, a bright one, and it would be a sad day indeed to see it go out.

John Cadley
Fayetteville, N.Y.

A WORLD OUT OF JOINT

In an age disfigured by palpable division and groupthink, the urge for moral certainty is understandable. Yet as Paul J. Griffiths bravely suggests, unexamined support for Ukraine's resistance to Russian domination is itself fraught—in large part because no nation, including the United States, should ever assume its geopolitical history and present motivations make involvement in modern war, however compelling, above reproach.

This is a hard truth, especially as Putin appears the classic villain, unrestrained and dangerously unpredictable, while Ukraine's Volodymyr Zelensky seems noble and patriotic. But even if these standard Western assessments are accurate, Griffiths challenges us to remember war is inherently costly and its aims and outcomes terribly uncertain.

Perhaps the writer's essay underscores the nagging Christian quest for meaning: a task made harder when, as Hamlet said, "The world is out of joint!" At such times, dissent is often discouraged. Consider, just before his execution by the Nazis, Fr. Alfred Delp wrote, "One who is completely satisfied with things as they are and has no desire to rise above his limitations is spiritually mediocre and self-centered." Even when we're sure our deeds are righteous, we must still pause.

R. Jay Allain
Orleans, Mass.

A GOD OF LIFE

Paul J. Griffiths's article is brutally truthful. What is not emphasized is that we cannot rely upon our government to reform itself. As American Catholics, we should lead and begin the necessary repentance and metanoia. It doesn't seem possible, but all things are possible for the God of life. We should also help Ukrainians to resist nonviolently. They already have shown the ability to do this with great creativity. Yes, it is dangerous

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LETTERS

to do this, especially as so many people have been killed on both sides, but it is the course of action most likely to succeed. There is a strong history of effective nonviolent resistance to evil. And of course, Scripture recommends this: "But rather, love your enemies and do good to them, and lend expecting nothing back; then your reward will be great and you will be children of the Most High, for he himself is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked." Our ways have not worked nor are they likely to. Who are we to pretend God's way won't bear astonishing fruit?

John O'Neill
Cedar, Mich.

TUSSLING WITH GOD

I read Alejandro Nava's article on the theology of hip-hop ("Counter-Spells," May) and was happy that *Commonweal* published a piece about the expression of spirituality from some of my favorite artists. Underneath the rhymes, I hear Church and the struggle of the sinner. Like Nava, I hear the instinctive chords of liberation theology and the invocation for God to see the failures that are already known and being confessed.

In addition to feeling the spirituality in hip-hop, I note the role of the woman and mother in this music. In Kanye's "Jesus Walks," it is his mother's voice that creates the refrain and reminds him of his folly. Lauryn Hill is the prophetic woman who is speaking directly to the listener, her peers, and convicting them of their idolatry.

I agree with most critics of hip-hop and rap that it is easy to miss the spirit among the explicit lyrics, but Nava is right that once the listener pays close attention, it is obvious "how rappers tussled with God, how they turned seemingly profane verses into sanctified oratory." Even the blasphemous Jay-Z eventually turns to his grandfather's god to acknowledge what he couldn't grasp in his youth in "Legacy" and shows the fruit of true forgiveness in his latest album with Beyoncé, *EVERYTHING IS LOVE*.

Today I picked up the dog-eared and pencil-marked copy of the article and made a playlist from the cited albums. Thanks for putting these tracks together for me.

Alycia Silman
Winston-Salem, N.C.

IN MEMORIAM
DORIS GRUMBACH
1918–2022

We mourn the death of Doris Grumbach, who wrote about books for *Commonweal* for thirty years. May she rest in peace.

Inflation & Profits

Just two days after the midterm elections, in which they fared much better than anticipated, the Democrats received another welcome surprise. The latest Consumer Price Index report showed that after more than a year and a half of record inflation, the worst since the early 1980s, prices had at last begun to fall. Investors hailed the news, but it's still too early to know whether October's drop—from 8.2 to 7.7 percent—marks a true turning point. Jerome Powell, chairman of the Federal Reserve, has remained circumspect, saying that the fight against inflation is far from over and signaling that the central bank is on track to raise interest rates by another 0.5 percent in December. And despite modest easing in markets for some goods, like used cars and airline tickets, consumers remain squeezed by steep hikes in necessities such as housing, fuel, and food—the cost of groceries, for example, is up 12.4 percent from last year.

All of this, Republicans have argued, is the Democrats' fault—the foreseeable result of pumping trillions of dollars into the U.S. economy for pandemic relief, infrastructure expansion, and entitlement programs like Social Security, Medicare, and Medicaid. On this point, Republicans seem to have poor memories: pandemic relief actually began under former President Trump, and every round except the last was bipartisan. But their "plan" for combating inflation is even worse than their explanation for it: they would repeal recent tax increases on corporations, extend the 2017 Trump tax cuts for high earners, "defund" the IRS, and block Biden's action on student-debt relief. As Democrats have pointed out and even some conservative economists concede, some of these policies would likely *exacerbate* inflation.

The real causes of inflation are complex. Most economists have pointed to the initial pandemic stimulus, subsequent supply-chain disruptions, labor shortages and higher wages, and the oil and grain shocks following Vladimir Putin's invasion of Ukraine as among the chief culprits. Though it's received less attention, there's another major cause hiding in plain sight: corporate profits have risen rapidly since the beginning of the pandemic, with margins (the difference between revenue and expenditures) reaching their highest levels since the 1950s.

This isn't just another familiar assertion from the progressive wing of the Democratic Party—it's true that Bernie Sanders, Elizabeth Warren, Katie Porter, and John Fetterman were among the first to sound the alarm—but a reality backed by hard data. Corporate executives have proudly touted their ballooning profit margins in business pages and earnings calls. Their logic, as observers like Lindsay Owens, Robert Reich, and Steven Greenhouse have pointed out, is as simple as it is galling: using general inflation as cover, major corporations in essential sectors (including energy and food giants like Exxon, Chevron, Conagra, J.M. Smucker, PepsiCo, and Hormel) have artificially raised prices well above their own cost increases. The result is that consumers must either "stay resilient"—Coca-Cola Chief Executive James Quincey's euphemism—or simply learn to do without.

What makes such profiteering possible? Conventional microeconomic theory holds that price is the most efficient way of calibrating supply and demand and matching money to goods: if a single firm charges too much for a commodity, other firms will step in with lower prices, thus rendering government action unnecessary. But that assumes perfect competition—something that has been disappearing in U.S. markets at an alarming rate. As corporations consolidate, it's become harder for smaller competitors to reach consumers with lower prices.

The Biden administration has been quietly fighting this dynamic for more than a year. It has fostered greater competition in industries like meat and shipping, and taken major steps toward more aggressive antitrust enforcement by appointing people like Tim Wu, Lina Khan, and Jonathan Kanter to key advisory and regulatory positions at the White House, Federal Trade Commission, and Justice Department. A few important victories, like blocking the merger between publishing giants Penguin Random House and Simon & Schuster, have already materialized; others, like stopping the consolidation of the Kroger and Albertsons supermarket chains, as well as pending lawsuits against Big Tech firms Meta and Amazon, are on the horizon.

But the Biden administration needn't and shouldn't stop there, especially with Republicans poised to assume control over the House, and in light of lingering inflation and new fears of recession. To start, it should ask the lame-duck Congress to lock in a windfall tax on corporate profits, and consider limited price controls in sectors like food, energy, and housing. That would provide much needed immediate relief. But there is also another, larger consideration raised by the current expansion of corporate profiteering. Commenting on the results of the midterms, Elizabeth Warren has argued that "Americans understand that the economic well-being of families is inextricably linked to democracy and to individual rights, even if too many cable news gurus do not." She's right. But economic populism is more than just a winning campaign message for Democrats. Even if inflation abates in the coming year, corporate consolidation—and the destabilizing threat that concentrated corporate power poses to democracy—will almost certainly continue. Unless we want to make permanent the inequality and misery of our "new gilded age," we need to take decisive action against firms that have become too big to compete with.

The COP27 Climate Conference

Like previous climate conferences, November's COP27 has inspired both enthusiasm and frustration. For two weeks every year, the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change gathers leaders and representatives from 196 countries who meet alongside grassroots activists, major environmental groups, and delegates from the fossil-fuel industry to discuss climate change. This year, the gathering was held in the Egyptian resort town of Sharm el-Sheikh. It has been called the "African COP," and it has given special attention to addressing the inequality between the developed nations that emit the most and the developing nations that are most vulnerable to climate change's effects.

Funding to redress this inequality has traditionally been allocated to two different strategies: mitigation (preventing future emissions) and adaptation (building natural and engineered infrastructure to increase resilience), with heavy emphasis on the former. However, this year a third strategy has moved to the fore: "loss and damages." Such funding recognizes that, in much of the world, the damaging effects of climate change—floods, droughts, destruction of homes and farms, significant losses to national economies—have already arrived.

Unsurprisingly, developed nations have not followed through on their previous non-binding pledges to provide $100 billion a year—a woefully inadequate sum—toward climate compensation. (The U.S. contribution has been particularly meager in view of our nation's wealth and disproportionate responsibility for global emissions.) The leaders of two of the four largest global emitters, China and India, are not attending COP27, and both continue to classify their countries as emerging economies so as to be excused from contributing to any of these funds. Where they are available, the compensation funds are often offered as loans rather than reparations, adding to the crushing debt many of the recipients already hold. The need for such compensation is only going to increase. The countries that signed on to the 2015 Paris Agreement, including the United States, have failed to meet the benchmarks that would limit global warming to 1.5°C above preindustrial levels. Such failures can make every climate conference seem hollow, a series of empty gestures belied by the world's inability to prioritize long-term sustainability over short-term growth.

It doesn't help that there are more than six hundred fossil-fuel representatives at the conference, or that it is sponsored by Coca-Cola, the world's largest plastic polluter. Despite their greenwashing efforts, these corporations and industries have little interest in the real changes required to address the crisis. Egypt, the host country, has also used greenwashing to hide its appalling civil-rights abuses, which include throwing climate activists in jail, preventing protests, and censoring environmental research. Egyptian groups touting the progress of domestic renewable-energy projects are welcome, but critics of Egypt's authoritarian President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi can face life in prison or the death penalty. Foreign delegates have done little to express solidarity with political prisoners or exert pressure on the Egyptian government to ensure basic standards of human rights.

Despite this, COP27 is still important. Each day of the two-week agenda follows a particular theme, from agriculture to water to decarbonization, all of which are crucial in developing a sustainable future. And the conference provides a major platform for those seeking climate justice around the world. Island nations overwhelmed by hurricanes and rising sea levels can call for a fossil-fuel nonproliferation treaty. Amazonian Indigenous groups can demand protection from deforestation. Representatives from South Africa's Wild Coast can draw attention to their fight to prevent mining on their land. For countries like the United States, which has taken a step in the right direction by passing major climate legislation this year, the conference is a reminder of what we owe to the rest of the world, and an opportunity to start paying up.

—Isabella Simon

Peace in Tigray?

On November 2, good news emerged from a peacemaking summit in Pretoria, South Africa. Nearly two years after a civil war began in Ethiopia, leaders from the Ethiopian government and Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) announced a ceasefire. The war has left hundreds of thousands of people dead, including many civilians. It has displaced millions more from the Tigray region, many of whom have fled to Sudan. Those who remain behind have faced dire shortages of food and medical care, especially after the Ethiopian government cut off supply lines to the region. International bodies have accused the government of using starvation as a weapon to cow residents into submission.

The conflict began on November 3, 2020, when Tigray special forces attacked an Ethiopian National Defense Force (ENDF) base in the Tigrayan capital, Mekelle, after months of tension. Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed ordered ENDF troops to capture the city. He also collaborated with Eritrean forces—which have their own historic animosity toward Tigrayans because of their role in the Ethiopian-Eritrean War of 1998–2000—as they attacked the TPLF from the north. Since then, however, the TPLF has recaptured Mekelle, advanced into the neighboring regions of Amhara and Afar, and almost marched on the Ethiopian capital, Addis Ababa.

Early in the conflict, Abiy ordered a media blackout; telecommunications networks were shut down and journalists were prohibited from covering the war. This has made it difficult for international bodies or the media to know exactly

what has occurred in Tigray during the past two years. It is still not fully clear, for example, whether Tigray militias were the victims or the perpetrators of the horrific Mai Kadra massacre, in which upwards of a thousand people died.

The ceasefire is a welcome development after so much suffering. In the agreement overseen by the African Union, the TPLF pledged to disarm in exchange for the reopening of supply lines to Tigray, where there is urgent need of humanitarian aid. The Tigrayan regional government will be reincorporated into the national government, which will regain control of all federal facilities in Tigray and, in return, has vowed to rebuild damaged infrastructure in the region.

But some worry the agreement is destined to fail. Abiy has bragged that he received "100 percent" of his demands in the agreement. The timeline for Tigrayan disarmament is only thirty days—arguably far too short a period. Eritrea was not party to the peace process, and is not mentioned in the agreement. It is not even clear whether Eritrean forces will leave Tigray. As Mohamed Kheir Omer wrote in *African Arguments*, "It is difficult to imagine how Tigray soldiers will feel confident laying down their arms when Eritrean soldiers, who intervened in support of [the] federal government, are still believed to be present in the region."

If the world wants to see a lasting peace in Ethiopia, it must keep pressure on Abiy to hold up his end of the deal. The United States, which attempted to facilitate a peace process months ago, holds some power here. Abiy is looking for IMF and World Bank loans to finance his legacy domestic projects; President Biden ought to make it clear that the United States will not support the extension of credit unless humanitarian aid arrives in Tigray on schedule. As Olusegun Obasanjo, the former Nigerian president and current head of the African Union, insisted, the peace deal "is not the end of the peace process, but the beginning of it."

—Regina Munch

Qatar & the World Cup

In 2010, when Qatar won the rights to host this year's World Cup, Sepp Blatter, then president of football's governing body (FIFA), proudly proclaimed: "We go to new lands." In the twelve years since, FIFA's first steps into the country have been largely defined by a frontier-like disregard for basic customs and conventions.

In bringing the World Cup to Qatar, FIFA officials—amidst credible accusations of bribery and backroom malfeasance—willfully ignored a number of concerns that would ordinarily have disqualified a nation from consideration. At the time of the vote, for instance, Qatar did not yet have a viable public transportation system. Nor did it have suitable accommodations to house athletes, media, and visiting fans. More conspicuously, the country didn't have a single football stadium. There was also the issue of climate. Usually played in the summer, the World Cup had to be rescheduled for late fall, when desert temperatures drop low enough for ninety-minute matches to be held safely.

All of these were unprecedented concessions—although not entirely unreasonable: just like the beautiful game, diplomacy requires a deft touch. If there was any opportunity to sound the alarm about Qatar's fitness to host the world's most prestigious sporting event, it passed more than a decade ago.

However, as the World Cup unfolds, a number of other issues remain in play—including the Qatari government's decidedly intolerant treatment of its LGBTQ citizens. Homosexuality is illegal in Qatar, and same-sex and other queer relationships can be punishable by death. Human Rights Watch recently noted that LGBTQ people in Qatar are arbitrarily detained, and that as a requirement for their release they must attend conversion therapy sessions at a government-sponsored behavioral health-care center. Qatari authorities also criminalize consensual sexual relations outside of marriage, regardless of sexual preference or gender presentation.

Of no less importance is the country's exploitation and well-documented abuse of migrant workers, thousands of whom were shipped in to build the stadiums and infrastructure necessary for hosting the World Cup. According to a report last year in the *Guardian*, more than 6,500 workers have died in Qatar since the country won its bid. (The Qatari government maintains that only thirty-seven laborers died at stadium construction sites between 2014 and 2020, and that only three of these deaths were work-related.)

Amid such criticism, Qatar has publicly stated it welcomes LGBTQ visitors and will allow fans to display pride flags at matches. But, as Human Rights Watch pointed out, these exceptions for international visitors only underscore how Qatari officials do not believe that LGBTQ citizens deserve basic rights. At the same time, FIFA says it has worked behind the scenes with its partners in Qatar to compensate workers harmed during preparations for the tournament, including the families of migrant workers killed during tournament preparations. However, as the World Cup kicked off, neither FIFA nor Qatar had established such a fund.

FIFA acted decisively in banning Russia—which hosted the 2018 World Cup—from competing in this year's tournament following its invasion of Ukraine. It should be just as forceful in keeping the pressure on Qatar, no matter that the games are already underway, making clear that future participation and partnerships are contingent on certain standards of behavior. Of course, it would help if FIFA held itself to higher standards, too. In selling out fair play and basic rights for lucrative opportunities in new lands, it has already robbed fans of the typical World Cup experience, causing us to question just what there is to root for.

—Miles Doyle

RITA FERRONE

From Lived History to Living Legacy

Vatican II at sixty

Speaking at Santa Clara University in 2015, historian John W. O'Malley, SJ, author of the book *What Happened at Vatican II*, made the following observation:

> In 2008 I published a book on the Second Vatican Council, and I received a lot of invitations to lecture on it and was very happy to do that, but when I finished the lectures I would think to myself, "I'm really talking about something dead in the water. It's an interesting thing that happened, but it's gone." And then beginning in 2012, with the anniversaries of the council, more invitations came and I felt the same way. However, I don't feel that way today. I don't feel that way at all. I think the council, with Pope Francis, is almost as alive as it was in 1965.

On the sixtieth anniversary of Vatican II, we stand at an inflection point in the history of the council's reception. Francis, the first pope since the council who was not himself a participant in it, has shown us what it means to treasure Vatican II not as lived history but as a living legacy, and this has become our challenge. Can we do this too?

What O'Malley observed—the role of Pope Francis in changing the narrative about Vatican II—comes at a moment in history when the last of the fathers of Vatican II are passing away. To put it bluntly, the gifts of the council will either flourish in new hands or pass away along with them. The Church is living in a time that Canadian theologian Gilles Routhier identifies as "the era of the heirs." The Second Vatican Council is not something we ourselves created. It's something we've inherited. What we do with that inheritance *now* is the challenge. At the sixtieth anniversary, this truth is even more evident. It's not enough to run the highlight reel of what happened in 1962. We are called on here and now to be canny managers of the riches the council left us in order to make that legacy flourish.

Routhier points out that while there are some advantages to being an heir, there are also pitfalls. One might turn one's back on an inheritance, refusing it as too burdensome, or try to keep it intact by taking no chances with it, by preserving it under glass. Siblings may fight over an inheritance, cutting it into pieces so that only shreds remain, or they may place so little value on it that it simply gets frittered away. But just as the good servant in Matthew's parable of the talents takes what he has been entrusted with and invests it wisely, returning ever greater profit to his master, there is another, better way.

Francis has been giving us examples of this kind of stewardship. I see it especially in his initiatives concerning the liturgy. He has returned oversight of liturgical translations to bishops' conferences, established the Sunday of the Word of God, expanded the instituted ministries to include women, created a new instituted ministry of catechist, and encouraged the crafting of an Amazonian rite. All of these actions find their warrant in Vatican II. But they do not merely repeat what was said in the council documents. The opening of instituted ministries to women is brand new. So is the Sunday of the Word of God. The willingness to sponsor a deeply inculturated liturgy—as foreseen by Vatican II—was last permitted in 1988, in Congo. To encourage this development in the Amazon now, after such a long hiatus, is a stunning development. Admittedly, the policy change regarding

oversight of liturgical translations was, in the main, a restoration of a specific conciliar directive. But even there, Francis took prophetic insights from the post-conciliar guiding document on translation *Comme le prévoit*—such as the claim that vernacular languages are in the process of becoming liturgical languages—and raised them to new awareness, changing the landscape of our imagination concerning the dignity of vernacular languages in the liturgy. Suddenly, we are seeing expanding horizons again.

Perhaps most significant is the pope's two-pronged liturgical and ecclesial

Pope Francis blesses people after celebrating Mass to mark the sixtieth anniversary of the opening of the Second Vatican Council, October 2022.

CNS PHOTO/VATICAN MEDIA

initiative in, first, restricting the use of the older rites (*Traditionis custodes*) and, second, promoting liturgical formation rooted in the reformed liturgy (*Desiderio desideravi*). As the Italian liturgical theologian Andrea Grillo has pointed out, Francis has brought the Church full circle, returning us to the fundamental thrust of the liturgical movement of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries: formation. Reform of the liturgy was the necessary condition of making progress on "the liturgical question." But it is not—and never was—sufficient for the achievement of that movement's noble goal: renewal of the Church in faith through full, conscious, and active celebration of her liturgical rites.

The liturgical reform is critical to the council's legacy. But it is not the only aspect of Vatican II that has shown signs of new life under Pope Francis's leadership. Synodal processes that prize dialogue and discernment also continue the trajectory of the council. To stand in solidarity with all humanity as a beacon of hope is likewise to deliver on the council's promise. Who could deny that *Laudato si'* and *Fratelli tutti* are precisely oriented toward realizing the hopes of the council voiced in the *Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*? There are more examples, but these suffice to make the point. As in the arena of liturgy, to treat the council as a living legacy does not mean stepping back into the past or simply parroting the council documents. It means being deeply informed by the council's way of thinking as a key to both creative *and* faithful responses in new situations. It means carrying the council within ourselves as we walk into the future together.

RITA FERRONE *is the author of several books about liturgy, including* Liturgy: Sacrosanctum Concilium *(Paulist Press). She is a contributing writer to* Commonweal.

SUSAN BIGELOW REYNOLDS

Are We Protagonists Yet?

Examining the place of women in the synod's working document

Sr. Nathalie Becquart, undersecretary of the Synod of Bishops, arrives for a news conference at the Vatican to present an update on the synod process, August 2022.

CNS PHOTO/PAUL HARING

Whenever I read a Vatican statement on the role of women, I conduct a thought experiment. I imagine that I know nothing whatsoever about the Roman Catholic Church or its faithful. *If this document were my only source of information*, I ask from behind my ecclesial veil of ignorance, *what basic conclusions might I draw about women in the Church?* I've done this mental exercise with dozens of texts over the years, and one conclusion surfaces over and over: women are all exactly the same.

It's a rather astounding conclusion to draw about a tradition populated all the way down by women who lived and died in wild and unique ways—shaving heads, chronicling visions, leading armies, renouncing fortunes, forswearing marriage, and birthing God, to name a few highlights. Yet there is little in Church teaching on women that does not appear to proceed from a fundamental illusion that women—the billions of us—constitute some sort of monolithic, quasi-theoretical body with an articulable essence, singular vocation, and narrow set of essentialized gifts. A sociologist attempting to devise a typology of women in the Church based on magisterial writing would, in the end, not find much to differentiate in the single category of "women." This is the governing imagination behind Pope John Paul II's notion of the "feminine genius." But it also shapes, if less obdurately, Pope Francis's comments on women, though one can trace real evolution since his early pontificate. In any case, the result is exaltation through condescension. Even the most well-intentioned statements on women in the Church bear the unmistakable hint of the male CEO who calls his female secretary "the real boss" and sincerely believes it's a compliment.

On October 27, the Vatican issued the Working Document for the Continental Stage (DCS) of the ongoing Synod on Synodality. Prepared over two weeks by an international group of laypeople, religious, and clergy under the direction of the general secretariat of the synod, the document synthesizes hundreds of reports from the synod's consultative phase—local reports from nearly every bishops' conference as well as lay associations, religious superiors, dicasteries, online communities, and individuals and groups throughout the world. The DCS is not a declaration of conclusions but a sort of working snapshot of the polyvocal *sensus fidei*, meant to be used as a source for the synod's next phase. Its release was met with fascination, even emotion, because it concretized what, until this point, has felt to some like a nebulous process. The document's tone is forthright, warm, and non-defensive. As I read it, I imagined the committee responsible for its creation offering it to the Church on open palms.

When I reached the subsection of the DCS titled "Rethinking women's participation," I conducted my usual thought experiment. And for the first time, I was surprised.

The synod is an exercise in ecclesial listening. Synodal listening is not, the document clarifies, merely an "instrumental action," a wildly complicated

multi-year public opinion survey. To listen is to emulate God's own fundamental disposition toward God's people. When it comes to the status of women in the Church, we will know that such listening has been genuine if its fruits, whatever they may be, shatter the intractable pattern of speaking about women as though what can be said of one can be said of all. For this reason, I found myself heartened by the DCS, both for the universality of its call to rethink women's participation in the Church and for the multiplicity of voices and perspectives represented therein. The section on women begins in a striking way: "The call for a conversion of the Church's culture, for the salvation of the world, is linked in concrete terms to the possibility of establishing a new culture, with new practices and structures. A critical and urgent area in this regard concerns the role of women and their vocation, rooted in our common baptismal dignity, to participate fully in the life of the Church." The document refers to the "vocation" of women in the singular. But here, the vocation in question is the call to full participation in the life of the Church, the fulfillment of our common baptism. By locating the need to reconsider women's roles within a deeper and broader call for ecclesial conversion, the document suggests a sense among the faithful that the status quo not only represents a problem for women but, fundamentally, for the mission of the Church.

Conversion begins in confession, and the DCS's paragraphs on women tell some uncomfortable truths. Among the most striking excerpts is one from the Holy Land report: "Those who were most committed to the synod process were women, who seem to have realized not only that they had more to gain, but also more to offer by being relegated to a prophetic edge, from which they observe what happens in the life of the Church." The line stunned me the first time I read it—not because it contained a new or radical sentiment, but because it was included in a document of this kind at all. It gives the lie to sentimental glorifications of the place that women occupy in the Church. Women don't offer unique insight because of our natural humility or our maternal capacity for caregiving, but because the "prophetic edges" are the only ground from which we can speak. The report from the Superiors of Institutes of Consecrated Life is even more stark in its assessment of the discrimination faced by women religious. Prevalent "sexism in decision-making and Church language" leads to the exclusion of women "from meaningful roles in the life of the Church," their report states. It indicts the treatment of women religious as "cheap labor," and decries the tendency to "entrust ecclesial functions to permanent deacons" rather than allowing women to share in responsibility for ecclesial communities. What will come of these risky acts of honesty is not clear. At this stage, however, there is an accountability to history that comes from committing these reports to print.

Crucially, the document reports, the call to rethink women's participation "is registered all over the world." Calls for women's leadership in the Church are frequently miscast as a myopic concern of the West. Not infrequently, the global nature of the Church is cited as reason enough to downplay the urgency of such discussions: *the role of women may be a concern to Catholics in the United States*, the line goes, *but this simply isn't what Catholics in Asia or South America are talking about*. As it turns out, the status of women is very much what Catholics in Asia and South America are talking about. "Almost all reports raise the issue of full and equal participation of women," the DCS states. Its six paragraphs on women weave together voices from three continents, the Union of Superiors General, and the International Union of Superiors General. Nothing would have been more suspicious than the impression of consensus, and the document wisely avoids attempts to reconcile or over-interpret contrasting views on issues like the ordination of women. It names these differences and allows them simply to stand, returning them to the People of God for the next phase of conversation.

Pope Francis recently announced the extension of the synod through October 2024, a year longer than initially planned. By giving the process more time, he hopes to welcome greater participation and allow the work of discernment to unfold at a more deliberate pace. Having reached the synod's halfway mark, it's worth looking to the past and future. Karl Rahner famously characterized the Second Vatican Council as representing the dawn of a new epoch in Church history, the Church's self-realization as a "world Church." The council was unprecedented in its global and ecumenical scope, and the conciliar process shattered the illusion that a European-looking, Latin-speaking Church could rightly call itself universal. In order to rediscover itself as a "world Church," the Church had to come to terms with how thoroughly its notions of sanctity and divinity had been conditioned by the normative status of European culture, aesthetics, language, music, art, and bodies.

Similarly, if the synodal process comes to represent the dawn of a new epoch for women in the Church, it will be because it marks an intervention in an ecclesial culture in which men are, to use the language of the synod, its normative "protagonists." "Women want the Church to be their ally," the document reports. We might proceed by posing the opposite question: Does the Church want women to be its ally? What would it mean for women to be recognized as protagonists in the Church, as full subjects, diverse in every respect, with the agency to respond in freedom and creativity to the call of the Gospel? As the next stage of synodal listening proceeds, this is the question I'll be asking.

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PAUL MOSES

Old Anti-Semitism, New Audience

Behind Fr. Coughlin, there was Fr. Fahey.

When the rabble-rousing Fr. Charles Coughlin began getting his comeuppance in 1938 for the anti-Semitism he preached to a huge audience on national radio, he was quick to invoke a respected Irish theologian as the source for his claims. More than eighty years later, the writings of Fr. Denis Fahey are back in print, and his claim that communism is a plot to create "a world-state in which the Jewish race will be supreme" and "have control of the wealth of the nations" is finding a new audience, this time on well-trafficked websites catering to conservative Catholics.

Coughlin introduced Fahey's writings to his vast American audience as he tried to explain away his own rationalizations for the Nazi Kristallnacht pogrom against German Jews on the night of November 9–10, 1938. "Nazism was conceived as a political defense mechanism against Communism," he contended in his weekly Sunday afternoon radio address on November 20, shocking many people by blaming the victims for the attack. Proceeding "in a scientific spirit" but twisting the facts, he falsely claimed that almost all the Communist inner circle in Russia consisted of "atheistic Jews." Thus, according to the radio priest, the solution to ending Nazi persecution of German Jews was for Jewish leaders in finance, synagogues, and the media to stand up to the "atheistic" Jews and to "attack the cause; attack forthright the errors and the spread of Communism together with their co-nationals who support it."

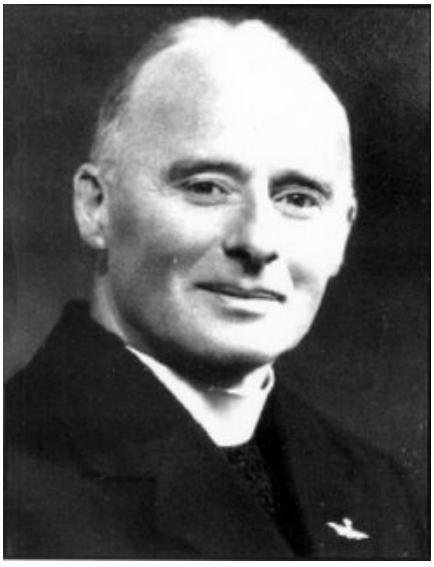
After an uproar led the New York radio station WMCA to insist on reviewing his scripts before broadcast, Coughlin announced the following Sunday that "since I am forced to defend myself, not for myself, but for the cause I uphold, let me introduce into court as my witness the scholarly Professor Denis Fahey." Coughlin declared that the Dublin priest had provided the detailed "proof" for his claims about Jews and communism in his 1935 book, *The Mystical Body of Christ in the Modern World*. In that book, Fahey claimed that Jews were

> opposed to the whole order of the world, built on the Divinity of Jesus, and their influence in every sphere, in Freemasonry and in Communist movements, in Finance, in the Press and the Film-world, will favour the naturalistic aims of Masonry and of revolutionary societies, while at the same time impelling them in the direction of a world-state in which the Jewish race will be supreme.

This book and thirteen other Fahey works have been published in recent years by a company with apparent ties to the Slaves of the Immaculate Heart of Mary of St. Benedict Center in Richmond, New Hampshire, a traditionalist group that Church authorities have determined should no longer be considered Catholic. Loreto Publications reissued the books—the one Coughlin quoted was republished in 2018—with the call, "Arm yourselves for battle!" Catholicism.org, the online journal of the Slaves of the Immaculate Heart of Mary at Saint Benedict Center, promotes the books, calling Fahey "such a great man." The site received 242,300 visits from May through July, according to Similarweb analytics.

Other sites, such as Fatima Crusader (379,000 visits during the same period) and Virgo Sacrata (254,800 visits) have helped spread Fahey's work. EWTN, the giant of Catholic media, maintained a reading list on its website that touted Fahey's anti-Semitic book *The Rulers of Russia*. VaticanCatholic.com (354,000 visits, June through August), the website of a breakaway monastery in upstate New York, adds to the discussion by arguing that Fahey wasn't harsh enough on Jews. And drawing from various extremist websites, the European-based Gloria.TV (10.2 million visits) has been used to promote Fahey's work.

Fahey's writings fused Catholic piety and conspiratorial falsehoods framed by fringe sources such as the notoriously anti-Semitic forgery *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*. Coughlin popularized Fahey's work in the United States, featuring *The Mystical Body of Christ in the Modern World* on the cover of the December 12, 1938 issue of his newspaper *Social Justice*. It



Fr. Denis Fahey, 1936

Fr. Charles Coughlin, 1933

called Fahey's book "the most significant contribution to Christian civilization in this year, if not this decade." Inside that issue were articles such as "The Talmud as a Cause of Persecution" and one in which Henry Ford "stated his belief that, substantially, there was no persecution of the Jews in Germany."

One of the most startling aspects of the anti-Semitism that bonded Fahey and Coughlin was their acceptance of the claims in *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*—even though both admitted that it may have been a forgery, rather than the purported work of a cabal of Jewish leaders who gathered near the end of the nineteenth century to plot a plan to take over the world. Both men claimed it didn't matter if the document was real—an "accidental consideration," in Fahey's words—because the plot it alleged, the joint effort of Jewish bankers and Communists to take over the world, was purportedly being fulfilled. Coughlin published the document in weekly installments in *Social Justice* during the summer of 1938.

The bogus origin of the *Protocols* was already well established at the time; a series of articles in the *Times of London* in 1921 showed how it was circulated as a propaganda tool of the tsar's forces in 1905. Both Fahey and Coughlin used their clerical status to legitimize the *Protocols* and other paranoid lies circulated through extremist circles, fueling resentment in a large, Depression-era audience searching for villains to blame for economic hardship and looming war. Fahey provided the cladding of academic respectability to the armor that political crusader Coughlin wore in the public square.

Fahey's writings have found a contemporary audience at venues that promote Christian nationalism, conspiracy theories involving the "Great Reset" and globalism, and the rejection of the Second Vatican Council, particularly its document on interreligious relations. As the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC) said in a 2007 report on radical traditionalist Catholic groups, this movement is "far from unified, with these groups engaging in seemingly endless infighting." (SPLC said "only a handful" of the many traditionalist Catholic groups advocated anti-Semitic views.)

"It's nothing new, and I think it's incumbent on us to recognize that this happened in the past, and sort of reckon with how we handled it then—because it's obviously insufficient," said Alon Milwicki, a historian and senior research analyst at SPLC. "It's happening again." What's new in comparison to Coughlin's era is the internet, which makes it possible to spread the message far and wide.

Gloria.TV, an online news-sharing platform and social-media network operating under the motto "the more Catholic, the better," is providing one of the larger stages for Fahey's anti-Semitic claims. It carried a five-part reading of Fahey's 1938 book, *The Rulers of Russia*, last April and May, posted by an outlet called Defeat Modernism, which has 42,300 YouTube subscribers and more than 6.6 million views since its founding a decade ago. (Gloria.TV and Defeat Modernism did not respond to emails requesting comment.)

The Rulers of Russia repeats much of what Fahey had written earlier in *The Mystical Body of Christ in the Modern World*, building on Fahey's gross exaggeration of the role of Russian Jews in the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution. Fahey used false information from extremist sources to claim that nearly the entire Bolshevik leadership was Jewish—or as Fahey put it, that "Bolshevism is really an instrument in the hands of the Jews for the establishment of the future Messianic kingdom." Bolshevism, according to Fahey, was simply "the most recent development in the age-long struggle waged by the Jewish Nation against the Supernatural Massias, our Lord Jesus Christ, and His Mystical Body, the Catholic Church."

The Rulers of Russia was listed twice on EWTN's website as part of the network's library of "enlightened reading" on Catholicism. It said of *The Rulers of Russia*: "This book exposes the *real* forces behind the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917, and shows that its ramifications extended far beyond the borders of Russia. This book is important reading to one who wishes to understand the *real* threat of Communism."

In response to questions from *Commonweal*, EWTN removed the listings. They "were part of a prolife encyclopedia of historical and other material acquired by EWTN from the American Life League in the 1990s in the early stages of developing our website and

WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS/WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

Fahey's writings have found a contemporary audience at venues that promote Christian nationalism, conspiracy theories involving the "Great Reset" and globalism, and the rejection of the Second Vatican Council.

online library," EWTN Communications Director Michelle Johnson said in an email. "The reference was never endorsed by EWTN." (American Life League, which describes itself as "the oldest grassroots Catholic pro-life education organization in the United States," didn't respond to a request for comment. Fahey's books do not appear in the library on its own website.)

Promoters of Fahey's work brush aside the notion that it is anti-Semitic, saying his challenge was to the Jewish religion and was not race-based. "These are the pathetic terms of opprobrium hurled with such energy by those enemies of Christ whose plans he has effectively opposed," Loreto Publications says on its website.

Loreto Publications' exact relationship to the St. Benedict Center isn't clear, but the two work on a parallel track, with Loreto offering books that support the community's unorthodox views (as well as many classic Catholic books). The president of the company, Douglas Bersaw, is reportedly active in St. Benedict's Center, as was a previous editor-in-chief.

In 2019, the local Roman Catholic Diocese of Manchester, New Hampshire, determined that the Slaves of the Immaculate Heart of Mary at St. Benedict's Center in Richmond is "not a Catholic organization." This separation results from St. Benedict Center's opposition since the 1940s to Catholic teachings that set out a possible route to salvation for non-Catholics, sometimes called a "baptism of desire."

Loreto Publications calls itself "a Catholic missionary apostolate specializing in the publication and distribution of Catholic books designed to aid Catholics in their efforts to convert America to the Catholic religion." Despite that Catholic-centric description, the company was unable to convince the New Hampshire Supreme Court that it was a part of the Roman Catholic Church after the Diocese of Manchester maintained it was not.

Bersaw declined to comment for this article. Brother André Marie Villarrubia, the prior of Saint Benedict Center, didn't return a message seeking comment. He has used his radio show Reconquest, Catholicism.org, and his substantial social-media presence to promote Fahey's work.

This remains a far cry from the mass-media promotion Coughlin gave Fahey through his multimedia empire: national radio, magazine, and book-publishing platforms. Within a month after Coughlin announced that Fahey's work was "proof" of his own claims about Jews and communism, the prominent Msgr. John A. Ryan published an article in a little magazine—*Commonweal*—that detailed the falsehoods in Fahey's work. For example, Fahey based some of his claims on a report in an anti-Semitic British periodical called the *Patriot*. It cited a French journal from 1920, which in turn claimed to have gotten information about the Bolshevik revolt from an "American Secret Service" report to French authorities. But the head of the federal agency said, after a careful search of records, that "it is quite certain that no such report was ever made by the United States Secret Service."

The archbishop of Detroit, Edward Mooney, ordered Coughlin to cease his activities in 1942 after learning that he faced possible federal sedition charges. The late historian Sr. Mary Christine Athans wrote in her 1991 book, *The Coughlin-Fahey Connection*, that Coughlin continued to correspond with the Irish theologian, at several points urging him to write a treatise on the "Mystical Body of Satan," the enemies of Christ. He implied in a private letter to Fahey that this included Jews: "Definitely, those who have rejected Christ beyond all doubt are those advocating the heresy of Judaism."

Fahey, a member of the Holy Ghost Congregation, didn't do that. But even after the Second World War and Holocaust made painfully clear the result of anti-Semitic hatred, he continued on the same path. In a book he published in 1953, a year before his death, he minimized the number of Jews murdered by the Nazis. He wrote that

> the disordered National-Socialist reaction against the corroding influence of Jewish Naturalism on German national life led not only to measures of repression against the Jews, with regrettable violations of their personal rights, but also to persecution of the Catholic Church. Comparatively little information ever reached the great newspaper-reading, cinema-going public, while hardly anyone could fail to be aware of what was done to the Jews.

By reviewing a cache of Fahey's correspondence, Athans documented how Fahey maintained contact with like-minded Americans. This included the demagogic preacher Gerald L. K. Smith, leader of the Christian Nationalist Crusade, and Jack B. Tenney, a California state senator who led the legislative Committee on Un-American Activities. As Athans wrote, "Fahey provided a substantial group of Americans, both Catholic and Protestant, with a theological rationale for their anti-Semitic orientations."

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NEW YEAR'S EVE

David Lehman

Champagne and a ribeye, that's the ticket,
Beethoven's string quartet in C# minor,
and good riddance to another plague year.
The mind can provide, provide,
and theories will continue to propose
themselves in politically incorrect seminars
in which ardent young men declare
the whole study of aesthetics may be
divided between Titian's "Venus of Urbino"
and the fashion industry. Nor is it just
a luxury, this taste for delicacies, this
indulgence in beauty for its own sake,
these academic escapades and linguistic
adventures that may eventuate in
a poem of delight, desired and deserved.

DAVID LEHMAN *is the editor of the* Oxford Book of American Poetry, *the general editor of the* Best American Poetry *anthology series, and the author of such recent books as* The Mysterious Romance of Murder: Crime, Detection, and the Spirit of Noir *and* The Morning Line, *a book of poems. He writes an occasional column on movies for* The American Scholar.

Protesters demonstrate outside the U.S. Supreme Court.

CNS PHOTO/JAMES LAWLER DUGGAN, REUTERS

Life after 'Dobbs'

Joseph Bottum

How the end of 'Roe' could improve the abortion debate.

Editor's Note: The September issue of Commonweal *featured a symposium titled "Abortion after Dobbs." The magazine has been publishing a series of articles and essays that continue the conversation begun in the symposium. This is the third in that series.*

The American pro-life movement was born in the wake of *Roe v. Wade*. And it may well die in the wake of *Dobbs v. Jackson*—die and yet possibly be reborn, break and be reforged. The fight against abortion is still dangerously fragile, even in the joy that followed the *Dobbs* decision this past June. The wish to protect vulnerable life may, if all goes poorly, fade into a glum and hopeless acceptance of political compromise, akin to Europe's, in which the social will to ban abortion and state-licensed euthanasia simply does not exist.

And yet, at its most promising, a post-*Dobbs* pro-life movement offers an opportunity to bridge America's horrendous current political divisions, building alliances that once seemed impossible. A new care for the weakest among us offers an opening for rethinking old arguments that had no purchase under the legal regime of *Roe*. And a revived will to welcome new life in the womb, and cherish life after birth, offers an occasion to develop a moral vocabulary that does not try to squeeze every ethical issue into the narrow mold of natural rights.

To understand the changes in America after the Supreme Court's *Dobbs v. Jackson* decision this summer, we have to remember exactly what *Roe v. Wade* did in 1973 (together with its essential affirmation in *Planned Parenthood v. Casey* in 1992). The justices declared abortion to be a constitutional right, a fundamental and inalienable moral element in human existence, of a weight equal to such other rights as freedom of speech and freedom of assembly.

However much abortion would seem a political issue over the next nearly fifty years, *Roe* actually lifted the reality of abortion out of the political realm. Back in the late 1990s, I spent a day with a pro-life Supreme Court justice who had agreed to discuss the topic with a small group of public intellectuals. And he was, all in all, quite phlegmatic about the pro-life cause, which in those days seemed close to its nadir. You lose a vote, he suggested, and you steel yourself to come back the next time to argue it all over again. That's the nature of such things in the public square. What he didn't seem to grasp is that he was speaking of a public square with only nine people in it. For the rest of America, the question of abortion was in the political realm only at several removes: electing senators and a president who would put pro-life justices on the court, amidst all the other policy issues that our two-party system crams into a single mark on a ballot.

Under these conditions, it's not surprising that the pro-life cause would eventually become identified primarily with a single party. In the first few years after *Roe*, there were prominent Democrats with national ambitions, from Jesse Jackson to Dick Gephardt, who loudly proclaimed their opposition to abortion. In the coming decades, however, the ledge for pro-life Democrats would narrow considerably. In 2004, Dennis Kucinich, the once–boy mayor of Cleveland, renounced his longtime liberal pro-life position, the only thing that had distinguished him from any other middle-of-the-pack Democratic candidate, in order to raise money for a presidential run. He was hardly alone. In 2000, I had a series of discussions with a young Democratic congressman from the Midwest who thought that perhaps opposition to cloning was a path to national prominence. But when I suggested that he would be hard pressed to make a simple soundbite-style argument against cloning that didn't implicate abortion, he abandoned the issue, telling me that abortion was the untouchable rail for Democrats seeking national office. In 2010, Bart Stupak, the congressman from Michigan's first district, led a small pro-life Democratic bloc in the House of Representatives that was at least sufficiently large that the Democratic leadership had to treat with him to pass Obamacare. By 2021, Henry Cuellar, from Texas's twenty-eighth district, was the only self-declared pro-life Democrat remaining in the House.

So too, in the first few years after *Roe*, there were prominent Republicans, from Nelson Rockefeller to Barry Goldwater, who were in favor of legalized abortion. In 1967, Ronald Reagan signed an act, as governor of California, that would allow legal abortions in the state to jump from a few hundred to over a hundred thousand. Even among the conservative religious, the identification with opposition to abortion had not yet formed. The Southern Baptist Convention adopted a 1971 resolution supporting the legalization of abortion, and after *Roe* was issued, praised the court for its decision. In the late 1960s, the then-radical (and then-Protestant) Richard John Neuhaus won a Catholic Press Award for a prescient article warning that the American political scene was increasingly planting the pro-life flag on the wrong side of the liberal/conservative divide. It ought to be those heartless country-club Republicans who were in favor of abortion to erase the poor—just as it ought to be the compassionate Democrats who wanted to expand the community of care to include the unborn. (In the end, the political reality of how to influence the abortion debate would be a major factor in Neuhuas's turn to conservatism. The time comes, as Midge Decter once quipped, when you have to join the side you're on.)

Through it all, there was plenty of hypocrisy, showboating, and crude political calculation on both sides. The sexual revolution (and the incalculable extent to which it relied on abortion) contributed a large share, as did the sense among anxious conservatives of a world come adrift. Like the gold standard in 1896, abortion in the 1990s had become a symbol and a synecdoche for far too much to be entirely intelligible as a single issue in American politics. The clearest way to understand the cloning and embryonic stem-cell debates of the late 1990s, an odd issue to be central in the 2000 presidential campaign, is as a stand-in for abortion.

The main reason abortion politics was so strange, however, was the *Roe* definition of abortion as a right, which precluded resolution or even much consequential compromise in the course of ordinary politics. The pro-life movement—to which I belonged, and for which I fought, over

Abortion in the 1990s had become a symbol and a synecdoche for far too much to be entirely intelligible as a single issue in American politics.

A serious pro-life movement will have to fight different fights, build with new kinds of incrementalism, and find new rhetoric with which to persuade.

the course of decades—operated under the *Roe* legal regime. In fact, *Roe* essentially created the American pro-life movement, and it survived and grew in the United States in ways that it did not in other countries precisely because it wasn't entirely political but an argument about moral fundamentals and interpretation of the Constitution.

From 1973 through to the fifteen-week limitation in the Mississippi law that led to *Dobbs* in 2022, commentators often pointed out that *Roe* and then *Casey* legalized abortion far later in pregnancy than nearly every other (non-Communist) country did. But the real radicalism of *Roe* was the definition of abortion as a right. Rights have a kind of gravitational weight toward which other rights must lean. In physics, teachers sometimes illustrate gravity by placing steel balls on a rubber sheet, warping the sheet into wells. In the same way, abortion weighed heavily on constitutional law. Abortion-clinic protection laws, for example, tugged at laws protecting free speech, protest, and assembly, limiting the expanded 1960s understandings of those rights.

In this setting, the pro-life movement became a strange amalgam of legal commentary, emotional fellow-feeling, and political action that gave us little more than support for Republicans in the sometimes-vain hope that they would seat pro-life Supreme Court justices who would not become pro-choice once they were on the bench. And so too, in the way of a warped mirror, the Democrats. Their last three presidents, Clinton, Obama, and Biden, all campaigned as triangulators, centrists, and healers of political divisions, but all three governed as absolutists on abortion.

And then came the 2016 election, in which the odd set of political issues symbolized by abortion overwhelmed the symbol and broke free. Trump vs. Clinton was, in some sense, the first election since 1976 that wasn't about abortion. Who could trust Trump on abortion—a man whose first response to a question about a Supreme Court nominee was to suggest his sister, a pro-abortion judge? A man who couldn't be bothered to learn the arguments and rhetoric that public-intellectual pro-lifers had spent four decades developing, speaking instead of jailing women and, in early primary debates, praising Planned Parenthood? "Forget walking the walk," I wrote at the time. "Donald Trump cannot even talk the talk." Hillary Clinton occasionally gestured toward abortion in 2016, but it was more by way of shoring up her base than really raising it as a campaign issue.

Then Trump won the presidency and nominated three pro-life justices to the Supreme Court. And so we got *Dobbs*, which said abortion was not a right and returned the procedure to where it had been before *Roe*: a state legislative issue on which various states might disagree. Eleven states immediately restored their pre-*Roe* bans on abortion or began applying "trigger laws" (post-*Roe* legislation passed to enact the banning of abortion, to be triggered by the overturning of *Roe*). Other states, notably California and New York, passed new legislation allowing abortions at any point in pregnancy, beyond even the permissive limits of pre-*Dobbs* jurisprudence. Soon, about ten states will probably have a total ban on abortion except in cases of rape, incest, and physical threat to the life of the mother (as with ectopic pregnancies); about ten other states will have nearly no restrictions on abortion; and the remaining thirty states will have restrictions somewhere in between.

So where do we go from here? If abortion had been an issue in normal legislative battles over the past forty-nine years, we would have ended up with some compromise that varied from state to state but essentially allowed legal abortion in the United States somewhere around twelve to fifteen weeks, with exceptions. And there would be no serious social will to re-legislate or re-debate the issue at this late point.

That may still be where America ends up after *Dobbs*. But we did have decades of *Roe*, and a serious pro-life movement may not disappear now that the battle has shifted. It's just that it will have to fight different fights, build with new kinds of incrementalism, and find new rhetoric with which to persuade.

For years, a standard type of pro-life essay was an evisceration of the constitutional reasoning in *Roe* and *Casey*. I would groan when I saw yet another essay on the topic from Hadley Arkes, yet another law-review article by Richard W. Garnett, yet another swipe from Mary Ann Glendon, and then more of the same from such younger legal analysts as Sherif Girgis. But I was wrong, and they were right. The cumulative effect of all that work over decades could be discerned during the oral arguments when *Dobbs* came to the Supreme Court. For older veterans of the pro-life cause, it was astonishing to see that neither of the lawyers opposed to revisiting abortion law—Julie Rikelman, representing the Jackson abortion clinic that had brought the case against Mississippi, and Elizabeth Prelogar, the solicitor general, appear-

ing for the Biden administration—took much time to defend the actual arguments of *Roe* or even *Casey* as constitutional law. Their arguments were nearly entirely about stare decisis, precedent, and Americans' reliance on long-settled law. *Roe* was sloppy constitutional reasoning, they seemed to agree, but legalized abortion was good policy, and it had been treated as a basic right for forty-nine years, with over two generations of women planning their reproductive future on the basis of that right.

In this sense, the law professors are the heroes of the *Dobbs* decision. They kept the pot bubbling, and they helped such entities as the Federalist Society keep the issue central to their recommendations of judges to Republican presidents. Constitutional reasoning, however, no longer occupies much space in the pro-life fight (unless you think, as I do, that *Roe* was doubly wrong: first in taking the issue away from the states, and then, if it must be taken from the states and declared a right, in not finding the right to be the right of the unborn to live). After *Dobbs*, the issue has become social and political, in the much more ordinary senses of those words.

Yes, the first reactions to *Dobbs* still came from the old *Roe* world. There was new violence, with such groups as Jane's Revenge vandalizing more than sixty crisis-pregnancy centers and pro-life offices around the country. There were despicable attacks on at least thirty-eight churches, including an abortion-supporting Methodist church near Washington D.C.—in a blind application of the idea that arguments against abortion are all religiously motivated and therefore all Christian churches are somehow to blame. And the sides remained identified with their dominant parties. Many serious Democratic strategists calculated that the abortion issue would outweigh voters' economic worries in the 2022 midterms, while several Republican analysts urged candidates to remind voters that their votes had led to *Dobbs*.

Once the dust settles, however, ending abortion becomes a matter of persuasion, state by state. This will require some long-term thinking, with incrementalism an acceptable tactic. Think, for example, of what Michigan pro-lifers might have done if they had perceived the post-*Dobbs* landscape more clearly. They could have passed a fifteen-week ban on abortion (which polls showed the state's voters generally approve of) and thereby forced the governor, a hardline supporter of abortion, to veto it—making clear where the radical supporters of abortion actually stand. But the pro-lifers refused to do this, in the name of abortion purity, and so Michigan has now passed a state-constitutional amendment that will legalize nearly all abortions.

We need to abandon the kind of purity that led Judie Brown of the American Life League, for example, to condemn any incrementalism among her fellow pro-lifers in the 1990s. We must take whatever partially persuaded people and fellow travelers we can, and we must use small gains to build larger gains in the political process. Pro-life allies need to come from both the Left and the Right—with neither party able to assume it has corralled pro-life voters, and both parties forced to make concessions to the cause.

Along the way, it will be worth revisiting rhetorical and intellectual strategies that were set aside during the years of *Roe*. The "seamless garment" of life issues, for example—Cardinal Bernardin's efforts to propose what he called a "consistent life ethic"—looked to many pro-lifers back in the 1980s and '90s like nothing more than a downplaying of abortion, as though its proponents were saying, "Oh, yes, sure, abortion. But first nuclear weapons, the death penalty, poverty programs, the environment, and dozens of other more important problems." With more than 50 million lives lost to abortion in America from 1973 to 2022, attempts to equate it with other issues appeared a disingenuous tactic of those who weren't actually much bothered by abortion.

Now, however, may be a time to revisit the seamless garment—since what is necessary is not training a new generation of pro-life lawyers but expanding the effectiveness of pro-life rhetoric. The radical edges of the cultural Left are probably not persuadable. And the radical edges of the Right don't have a coherent view on abortion, as far as I can tell. But the devices of speaking of life in general, of saying that care for the vulnerable begins in the womb and extends through to natural death, may bring along the sensible middle in these days after the demise of the *Roe* regime. Certainly, it's worth a try.

Most of all, we must refuse the language of "abortion rights," with its euphemisms "reproductive rights," "women's health rights," and all the rest. For fifty years, abortion forced on the nation a falsity of language from which we have not recovered. "Embryo," "blastocyst," and even—the coldest of terms—"product of conception" may have scientific uses, but they are all names given to what every human being is at that moment of development. And they were deployed in the *Roe* years as bait-and-switch gotchas: the developing entity at that stage, we were told, is properly called an embryo, and thus to call it an unborn baby isn't properly scientific. And that somehow meant it isn't an unborn baby.

Every ultrasound shows expectant parents that the unborn entity is human, with needs and vulnerabilities. The unborn child, in fact, is uniquely needy and uniquely vulnerable. The moral vocabulary we need for persuasion is not the language of rights. The supporters of legalized abortion tried that path for forty-nine years, and it ended up giving America the largest pro-life movement in the Western world. The language we need now is the language of love and care. We must teach our fellow citizens to love the weak and the fragile—and the weaker and more fragile they are, the more we must love them, welcome them into life, and care for them along the way.

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Nicaraguan President Daniel Ortega with his wife, Vice President Rosario Murillo, in Managua, Nicaragua, August 2018

AP PHOTO/ALFREDO ZUNIGA

Another North Korea?

Santiago Ramos

Ortega tightens his grip on Nicaragua.

Every time you open it, the instant messaging service called WhatsApp makes a promise: "Messages and calls are end-to-end encrypted. No one outside of this chat, not even WhatsApp, can read or listen to them." But while this app is popular throughout Latin America, in Nicaragua some people won't risk using it to talk politics. In one of the most policed and surveilled countries in the world, silence is always the safer bet. A Nicaraguan living in the United States describes conversations with family in the capital city of Managua: "We don't talk about anything that's happening via WhatsApp. Even though it's encrypted and a U.S.-run app, folks are concerned that the government hacks message data." Most are afraid to speak. One Nicaraguan living in the United States describes the lives of her parents back home: "They don't socialize anymore. They don't expose themselves to any kind of social contact in which they would be forced to disguise their views." An American source, recently arrived from Managua, tells me: "I would be happy to speak to you. I must maintain anonymity because I communicated with a number of religious orders when I was in Nicaragua and do not want to jeopardize their ministries." Another says: "People are afraid to even *think* differently."

During the past four years, the authoritarian duo of President Daniel Ortega and his wife and vice president, Rosario Murillo, has terrorized the Nicaraguan people. There is a popular debate as to which of them is really in charge. But regardless of who is pulling the levers, the regime's goals are easy to see: uproot democracy, silence dissent, render the citizens hopeless. Its tactics include dotting the neighborhoods of its cities with informants who roam public spaces, eavesdropping and taking notes. They include confiscating the land of farmers and Indigenous people for the enrichment of the privileged few. They include "cybercrime" laws against "misinformation" that have effectively made any form of independent journalism impossible. Most reliable news comes from brave anonymous sources, journalists exiled in countries like Costa Rica, Spain, or the United States, and foreign correspondents who sneak into the country.

The Ortega-Murillo dictatorship has also suppressed its political opponents. A group of six political parties exists as a puppet opposition—the so-called *satélites* or *zancudos* ("mosquitos"), which exist only to provide elections with a veneer of democracy. One priest described the *zancudos* to me as "politicians who don't want problems." In contrast, before the latest presidential elections held last November, when Ortega ran for a fourth consecutive term, a different group of politicians *did* run into trouble: seven opposing presidential candidates were arrested on dubious charges, along with various activists, journalists, and business leaders. Three political parties were shuttered. There is only one party with any power in Nicaragua, and that is the FSLN—the long-reigning Sandinista National Liberation Front, which triumphed over the right-wing dictatorship of Anastasio Somoza in the revolution of 1979. Today, the FSLN is a different beast: it has been retooled to serve the interests and whims of the Ortega regime, which deploys classic revolutionary slogans for violent ends. After the municipal elections of November 8, the FSLN claimed victory in every single one of Nicaragua's 153 municipalities—a farce of an election that Murillo called "an exemplary, marvelous, formidable day in which we confirm our calling for peace."

The Ortega-Murillo regime has shown no signs of having "a calling for peace." In recent years, state violence has reached a new level of intensity, as the regime focuses on its last viable foe: the Catholic Church. The vast majority of Nicaraguans are Christian, and at least half are Catholic. In early August, the regime placed Rolando Álvarez, bishop of the central city of Matagalpa, under house arrest. For years, Bishop Álvarez had been a public critic of the regime; now, he would walk up to the very edge of the episcopal palace grounds—as far as he was allowed to go—and preach the Word of God from there. The front row of his audience was always the same: police in riot gear. By Friday, August 19, the security forces had had enough of the bishop's provocations. They arrested Álvarez, along with five priests, two seminarians, and a photographer. The national police then released a public statement, an exemplary piece of police-state boilerplate written in the passive voice:

> This morning, in the installations of the Curial House of Matagalpa, an operation was realized that allowed the recuperation of normality for the citizens and families of Matagalpa.… For several days, a positive communication from the Diocese of Matagalpa was awaited with great patience, prudence, and a sense of responsibility, which never came to pass and which, as the destabilizing and provocative activities persisted, made the aforementioned operation necessary for [the maintenance of] public order.

Álvarez was taken to Managua where, as of this writing, he remains under house arrest. His friends were not so lucky: they were taken to a notorious prison nicknamed El Chipote (the name of a mountaintop important in Sandinista lore), where thirty-six leading members of the opposition are jailed.

Bishop Álvarez's arrest was only the latest episode of the Ortega regime's persecution of the Catholic Church in Nicaragua. In 2019, at a time when Ortega was regularly denouncing priests as evil traitors, Msgr. Silvio José Báez, auxiliary bishop of Managua and a vocal critic of the regime, received so many death threats that Pope Francis asked him to leave Nicaragua for his safety. Báez now lives in what he calls "forced exile" in Miami, and continues to publish his criticisms of the Nicaraguan government via Facebook. Later in 2019, police arrested several lay Catholics and a priest who had engaged in a hunger strike. In October 2020, two foreign priests serving in the northern city of Estelí—one from Colombia, the other from El Salvador—were expelled from the country for criticizing the regime. In March of this year, Archbishop Waldemar Stanisław Sommertag, the apostolic nuncio and advocate for the humane treatment of political prisoners, was deported. In July the regime outlawed the Missionaries of Charity—the religious order founded by Mother Teresa—and kicked all eighteen of its members out of Nicaragua, along with the NGO associated with the order. (The sisters' subversive activities included operating a nursery, a home for abused and abandoned girls, and a nursing home.) In August, just before Álvarez's arrest, seven Catholic radio stations, which aired views critical of the regime, were closed by the state telecommunications agency for failing to meet unspecified "technical requirements." In the past few weeks, priests who have offered Masses and prayers for Álvarez have been arrested. In the city of Masaya, police surrounded parishes to prevent the faithful from performing processions on the local saint's feast day. Ortega has called the Catholic Church a "perfect dictatorship" and the Nicaraguan bishops "murderers."

What we're seeing now in Nicaragua may turn out to be the dying embers of resistance. The last real mass revolt began on April 18, 2018: a wave of over two thousand protests that lasted for more than a year. Several factors contributed to that uprising. There was anger, especially among Indigenous communities, with the regime's plans to build a canal connecting the Caribbean with the Pacific—a project involving land grabs, backdoor

deals, and funding from Chinese business interests. There was government incompetence in dealing with forest fires that ripped through environmental reserves, threatening the homes of the Rama and Kriol peoples and various endangered species (and, coincidentally, clearing land needed for the canal project). Finally, there was a vibe shift: the public became fed up with the general brutality of the regime.

But the spark that set Nicaragua on fire had to do with abuses of the public purse. In 2017, the Nicaraguan social-security fund, which manages the pensions of millions of people, was running a deficit of around 50 percent. Responding to a formal appeal for help, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) warned Ortega that the country was running out of money. This was probably not news to the man who had been ruling Nicaragua for eleven years, but Ortega couldn't bring himself to implement the solution recommended by the IMF: raising the age of retirement. After negotiations between the government, organized labor, and the private sector, Ortega settled for a plan supported only by the labor unions allied with the FSLN. The Superior Council for Private Enterprise, the largest organization representing private business in Nicaragua, rejected the plan and filed a suit against Ortega, claiming abuse of executive power.

Ortega's plan to fix social security would have increased contributions from both employees and employers, but the most painful measure was a 5 percent tax on existing pensions. This meant that people in their sixties and older would see a significant cut in their monthly income. Evidently, Ortega believed it was to his political benefit to tax senior citizens—in Nicaragua a less organized, more vulnerable group—than the labor unions that provide his base of support. Moreover, as the business leaders pointed out in their lawsuit, only the legislature has the power to levy taxes. To them, this was yet another example of the Ortega government's disregard for the law.

The first protests featured elderly people marching peacefully in opposition to the proposed tax. On April 19, the second day of protests, rounds of live ammunition were fired into a crowd. Protests soon spread throughout several major cities, joined by groups motivated by all the aforementioned grievances. On April 25, the "April 19 University Movement" was founded by student protestors. (The government now designates this group as a terrorist organization). Wearing the white and blue of the Nicaraguan flag, protesters surrounded the statue of Augusto C. Sandino, a revered historical figure from whom the Sandinistas took their name. Opposition leaders called for Ortega's resignation. Among them was Francisca Ramírez, also known as "Doña Chica," a leader of the peasant movement and campaigner against the projected inter-oceanic canal. Standing next to her was Bianca Jagger, remembered by many in the United States as Mick Jagger's first wife but known to Nicaraguans as a respected activist (and devout Catholic). During the following weeks and months, many protestors were killed or arrested. Others simply disappeared. The government launched *Operación Limpieza* (Operation Cleanup) in July and declared the protests illegal in September. It was widely reported that there were about three hundred deaths, but that may be a conservative estimate.

The Nicaraguan bishops called for institutional reforms and an end to the violence. In early May, Cardinal Leopoldo Brenes, archbishop of Managua and primate of the Nicaraguan Church, presented a set of preliminary conditions for a resolution to the conflict. The Church asked the government to allow the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights entry into the country as soon as possible; to suppress paramilitary entities, like the so-called Sandinista Youth; to stop police repression; and to commit to a national dialogue with disaffected groups. By the end of the month, however, Brenes called off talks with the government. The two sides could not agree even on an agenda for the negotiations. The protests and violence continued. In July, around seventy student protesters fled their university campus and sought refuge inside the Church of Divine Mercy in Managua. According to custom, churches are sanctuaries, but that didn't keep the paramilitaries from circling this church and filling it with bullets. The siege lasted for fifteen hours. The people inside spent most of that time on the floor of the nave. The bullet holes that punctured walls and holy images have not been covered up; visitors can still see them. The priests have preserved them as evidence.

I spoke with a Nicaraguan woman named Clara—a schoolteacher in her thirties living in the United States—whose elderly parents live in Managua near the Church of Divine Mercy. "My parents were up all night because they heard the bullets being shot at the students. That was a traumatic moment. They lived through the [Sandinista] revolution. The shooting exposed a wound that was deeply buried in them and they thought they would not have to revisit. After that they decided to sell their business and live a quiet and withdrawn life."

Most Nicaraguans I interviewed for this article asked that their names not be printed. They were, understandably, concerned for their own safety. But Israel González Espinoza left safety behind a long time ago. The twenty-eight-year-old journalist has been living in exile in Spain since 2019. His family is still in Nicaragua and lives under constant threat; on one occasion, his parents were assaulted by paramilitaries. Israel says he doesn't need to speak off the record because he is already a public figure, and he seems to have embraced this role. Nicaragua, he tells me, "is an immense prison." Ortega is "a *caudillo* [strongman], such as Latin America has always had." He likens Ortega to previous dictators: "Videla, Stalin, Somoza, Franco."

The mention of Somoza is particularly telling. It implies that Ortega has become the very thing he once opposed. This is now a common opinion, held even by some leading Sandinistas who fought alongside Ortega in the 1970s. "Somoza" might refer to any one of three Nicaraguan presidents: Anastasio Somoza García, Luis Somoza Debayle, and Anastasio

Somoza Debayle. Directly, or through figureheads, the Somoza family ruled Nicaragua from 1937 until their overthrow in the Sandinista Revolution in 1979. They were ruthless dictators, owners of vast quantities of land and capital, and, according to the opposition, stooges of the United States, which occupied Nicaragua intermittently—and meddled in its politics constantly—from 1912 to 1933. The Nicaraguan National Guard, which protected the Somozas, was trained by the United States.

The current crisis in Nicaragua can be traced to three basic elements of Nicaraguan history: the many U.S. interventions, the cultural influence of the Catholic Church, and the 1979 revolution. The memory of the U.S. occupation is summoned by Ortega and Murillo whenever they wish to rally the base or denounce their opponents: so-and-so is an imperialist, a traitor, a gringo. These charges are almost always baseless, but they appeal to memories of a real trauma. Nicaraguans suffered terribly under the U.S. occupation. The early U.S. interventions were part of the so-called Banana Wars, a time when, stimulated by victory in the Spanish-American War, the United States flexed its muscles throughout Latin America. Sandinista historians will tell you that Nicaragua was the first victim of aerial warfare; historians of the U.S. Marine Corps confirm that the Nicaraguan conflict was one of the first that employed dive-bombing.

In the early 1960s the Sandinista National Liberation Front consolidated several anti-Somoza movements. By renaming themselves after Augusto C. Sandino, the FSLN tried to assume the anti-colonial mantle. They saw the struggle against the Somoza dynasty as an extension of the earlier fight against the American occupation. Marxist ideas would soon influence the FSLN's leaders: the Cuban Revolution of 1959 loomed large for them, just as the Mexican Revolution had for Sandino himself. Most of the Sandinista leadership eventually became Marxist-Leninist. In 1979, after more than a decade of conflict, the Sandinista campaign succeeded in overthrowing Somoza Debayle.

"The truth is that the Nicaraguan Revolution was very popular," Israel says. "Many people believe that its errors could have been reformed." Most historians acknowledge that the Sandinista government implemented successful programs promoting literacy and improving education. Dora María Téllez, once a guerilla leader who fought alongside Ortega, is respected for her achievements as minister of health in the 1980s. (Téllez eventually accused Ortega of becoming a dictator, to which he responded by putting her in El Chipote.)

Many of the improvements in land reform and living conditions for which Ortega has taken credit came not from the FSLN's revolutionary vanguard, but from lay-led Catholic organizations inspired by liberation theology (see Eileen Markey's "When the Laity Led," October 2019). While the Sandinista leadership tended toward Marxist materialism, the masses who supported the revolution remained majority Catholic. At the time, some Catholic theologians attacked liberation theology as a pernicious heresy that gave Commu-

Cardinal Leopoldo Brenes (left) and Bishop Silvio Báez (right) in Diriamba, Nicaragua, July 2018

REUTERS/ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

nists a toehold in the Catholic-majority countries of Latin America. In practice, though, liberation theology was not so much an academic synthesis of Marxism and Christianity as a movement that reminded the Church of a traditional teaching: the Christian transformation of the world, and the redemption of history, has a material and social dimension, as well as a spiritual and personal one.

In the 1970s, Nicaraguan society was so deeply Catholic that opposing the Church openly was not an option. The Sandinistas rejected the official atheism of the Cuban Revolution and developed alliances with the religious communities inspired by liberation theology. These alliances were always provisional and uneasy. The clergy and the FSLN leadership remained wary of each other. In 1993, when Cardinal Miguel Obando y Bravo, then-archbishop of Managua, bumped into the Sandinista commander Edén Pastora at the Mexico City airport, the churchman asked the revolutionary whether he had reconciled himself with God. Pastora responded: "Your Eminence, I am in harmony with God." The bishop then asked, "How many have you killed?" Pastora froze, and could not answer. But the next time he saw the bishop, Pastora told him, "In this room, you could not fit all the people I have killed. And in your house, you could not fit all of those who I have ordered to be killed.… Your Eminence, never ask a person that question again. Understand that God makes justice through the arms of men."

Justice-through-arms remained the FSLN's philosophy after it took power. No sooner had the revolution succeeded than a counterrevolution was underway. A right-wing militia, the Contras, launched an offensive funded by the United States. Soon, more than half the state budget was devoted to military spending, and social and economic policy became a secondary focus. The Sandinistas were also engaged in a violent conflict with the Miskito people, whom they had displaced from their land. Elections were held in 1984, and Daniel Ortega, now the head of the FSLN, won with more than 60 percent of the vote. But in 1990, he lost reelection to a center-right candidate, Violeta Chamorro. Her win was part of a wave of liberalization that broke through Latin America in the late 1980s and early '90s, when Chile, Argentina, Paraguay, Brazil, and several other countries re-established democratic norms after a period of dictatorship. But in Nicaragua, the triumph was short-lived: Ortega returned to the presidency in 2007 with just 38 percent of the vote—and with no intention of relinquishing power.

Nicaraguan democracy has been falling apart ever since. Shortly after his new term as president began, Ortega made a power-sharing deal with the right-wing politician Arnoldo Alemán, a former president and notorious kleptocrat. Then, in 2009, the Sandinista-controlled judiciary voided presidential term limits—a decision that would have been controversial anywhere but especially in Latin America, where term limits are widely seen as a bulwark against tyranny. Ortega won the 2011 elections with about 40 percent of the vote, and the 2016 elections with 70 percent.

In 2016, there were already accusations of voter fraud and intimidation, but the next elections, in 2021, were dismissed as a sham by most of the international community. Allied governments in Cuba, Bolivia, and Venezuela recognized Ortega's victory, but left-wing governments in Chile and Peru did not. Neither did Costa Rica, Panama, Colombia, and Ecuador. The United States refused to recognize the results, while Russia accepted them at face value.

The United States may become more interested in Nicaragua's political crisis as it becomes clear that Ortega's reign of terror is producing ever more refugees: in June alone, Nicaraguans were detained over 7,000 times at the U.S.-Mexico border—up from 534 times in January. This influx of refugees, coupled with Russian support for Ortega and the Sandinistas' ties with China, means that Nicaragua is poised to become a flashpoint in the emerging Great Power struggle. The recent expulsion of the EU ambassador to Nicaragua, as well as the Nicaraguan government's preemptive rejection of the newly appointed American ambassador, have made it unmistakably clear which side of this struggle Ortega is on.

I asked three exiled Nicaraguans whether they were satisfied with Pope Francis's response to the persecution of the Church in Nicaragua. The first answered: "Many Nicaraguans were disappointed that the Vatican relocated clergy openly supporting of democracy [e.g. Archbishop Báez], and Francis's silence and reluctance to name the evil forces responsible has caused much doubt and soul-searching." The second answered: "The response has been perceived as too detached or simply unhelpful by many. The local Church, on the other hand, has largely emerged as the single recognizable institution that stands out well above any foreign entity in its courage and support of the popular majority in Nicaragua." The third answered: "No."

This opinion is shared by many human-rights advocates. "What the Nicaraguan faithful need now from the pope is a clear denunciation and expression of solidarity," writes Teo A. Babun, the founder of a faith-based nonprofit that does humanitarian work in Latin America. To his critics, Pope Francis's words about the situation in Nicaragua sound hesitant and weak. He has called for "dialogue" and "peace," expressed "concern" and "sorrow," and encouraged an end to violence. Earlier this year, Francis insisted that a Ukrainian and a Russian carry the cross together during the Good Friday Stations of the Cross in Rome, a gesture which angered some Ukrainians, who thought it suggested a moral equivalence between the invaders and the invaded. The pope's critics found a common note in the pope's language about Nicaragua and the war in Ukraine—a false note.

Pope Francis's cautious response to both conflicts exemplifies a perennial Vatican approach to international relations. This approach reflects the fact that the Vatican is a unique global actor: it has almost no territory to defend and no army with which to defend it. Its only real power is its moral

authority. It can therefore act as an unthreatening mediator between nations. So Pope John XXIII was able to help defuse the Cuban Missile Crisis by secretly contacting Nikita Khrushchev. But this role of mediation requires a pope to keep channels of communication open and to hold off on making definitive statements until absolutely necessary. So when, exactly, *is* it absolutely necessary? When does an irenic neutrality tip over into complicity with an evil regime? Pope Francis, who once suggested that NATO bears some responsibility for the war in Ukraine, has lately shifted his rhetoric and called out Russia as the aggressor. Whatever its merits, the Vatican's approach is not likely to satisfy those living under siege or forced into exile.

Those who prefer a more confrontational approach to the Nicaraguan crisis look to John Paul II as a model. When he visited Nicaragua in 1983, his attitude toward the Sandinista government was unambiguous. He declined Ortega's invitation to pray at the graves of Sandinistas killed by Contras—the pope believed this would be interpreted as a sign of support for the revolution. Hundreds of Catholics sympathetic to the Sandinistas attended the papal Mass, carrying banners bearing revolutionary slogans. When their chants interrupted the Mass itself, the Sandinista cabinet members, sitting near the altar, joined in. The pope, visibly angered by the interruption, warned of wolves in sheep's clothing as he turned his stern gaze toward the Sandinista leaders. He preached about a peace and unity that transcends politics, and finished by speaking some words in the Miskito language—an expression of solidarity that reportedly upset the Sandinistas.

The fruits of John Paul II's approach can perhaps be measured by the fate of Fr. Ernesto Cardenal, a famous poet, friend of Thomas Merton, and—at the time of the pope's visit—the minister of education in the Sandinista government. A famous photograph shows Cardenal kneeling piously before the pope and the pope wagging his finger at him. "Normalize your status with the Church," the pope told him. John Paul II did not want clergy involved in electoral politics, especially politics with ties to communism. Years later, Cardenal did reconcile himself with the institutional Church and, like other Sandinistas, denounced Ortega's regime. His funeral was held in the cathedral of Managua and concelebrated by the archbishop and the nuncio. Pro-Ortega partisans interrupted the Mass with shouts of "traitor!"

So perhaps John Paul II's severity had something to do with Cardenal "dying a son of the church," as Israel put it. But it did not end Sandinismo or inspire the slightest contrition on the part of Ortega himself. Would things be different now if John Paul II had struck a more conciliatory note all those years ago? It's hard to say. Vatican diplomacy is sometimes cunning like a serpent, and sometimes harmless as a dove. At one moment, a pope may play the role of a prophet, publicly denouncing injustice; at another, he may do more good by phoning a prime minister in private. Both approaches are represented among Church leaders in Nicaragua: Archbishop Álvarez strikes a prophetic posture, while Cardinal Brenes plays the diplomat.

The last time Clara visited her parents in Managua was in the summer of 2021. Something had changed since her previous visit. That summer, she saw "fewer people out in the streets, less shopping, fewer people in bars and restaurants. *Crickets*. Different feel to the city, more crime." There was also more regime propaganda—more banners and slogans—and more police. Nicaragua is obviously going through a crisis, and Ortega is clearly becoming more ruthless. But Nicaragua has passed through many other periods of turmoil: occupation, dictatorship, revolution, civil unrest. People figure out a way to live amid this instability. As Clara told me,

> What always strikes me [about] Americans' perspectives on Nicaragua is how easily they go to a place of *anomaly*. That *this* [current crisis] is a huge anomaly in the life of people in Nicaragua. There's always a need to put a stamp on it, to say, "*horror!*" While all that may be true from a certain point of view…you can't imagine how many people in the street make fun of Ortega. Or make fun of his wife. How much *picardía* [mischievousness, cunning] there is, even through the trauma.... There are any number of comedic pieces and memes that have taken shape lately at the expense of Ortega's wife. There's a spirit of…not wanting to live this reality by Ortega's terms only. My family members weren't talking about this [crisis], and if they do, it's for short periods. There's a sense that life goes on.

Ortega's dictatorship runs on memories of a dead revolutionary dream. Alternative ideologies are equally dead. Of Arnoldo Alemán and the political Right, Clara says, "I wouldn't be able to speak of a single person who would support him. There is no such thing as an Alemán legacy." Of Violeta Chamorro and the neoliberal center: "Chamorro ultimately spoke for that small, elite, upper-middle-class population that could identify their liberal values with her. But I don't think she was a revolutionary leader that could really unite the country and bring prosperity for all." What remains in Nicaragua is a rump ideology of brutality.

What kind of country will this ideology produce? "The aspiration of the Ortega regime is to create a kind of North Korea of Central America," said former Vice President Sergio Ramírez last September from exile in Spain. A successful novelist, Ramírez was one of the original Sandinista revolutionaries and, like Ernesto Cardenal, Dora María Téllez, and so many others, broke with Ortega and suffered the consequences. But, he continues, the Pyongyang model isn't feasible "because [Nicaragua] occupies a different geographic space, a different reality." This may be cold comfort to those living through Ortega's deranged attempt to become a new Dear Leader. The people of Nicaragua will have to rely on their *picardía* and their saving "sense that life goes on" as long as Daniel Ortega and Rosario Murillo cling to power.

SANTIAGO RAMOS *is a contributing writer for* Commonweal.

Dante in Exile

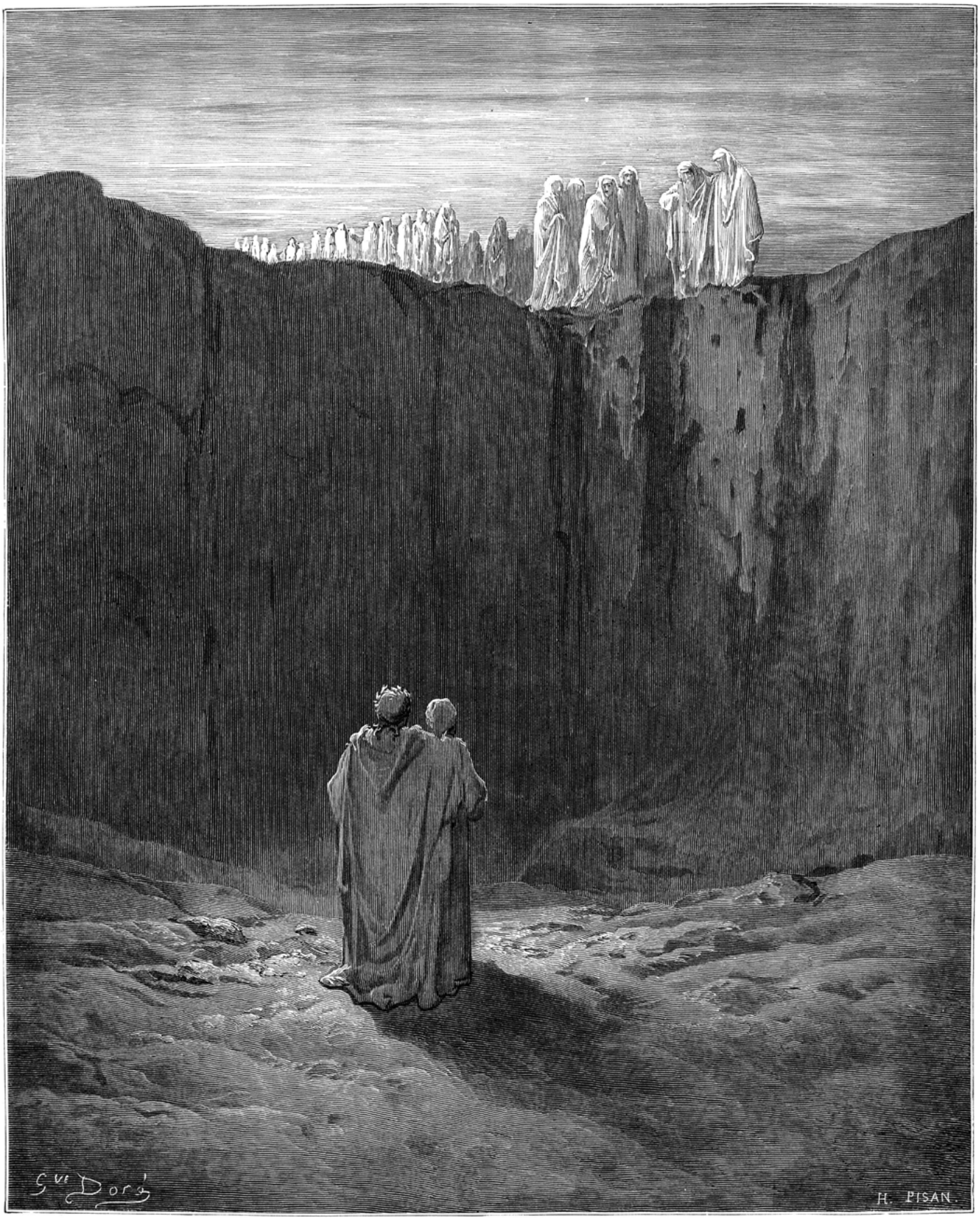
Denys Turner

Only in the silence of Paradise does poetry come home to its 'abiding city.'

"Here is no abiding city," reads the Letter to the Hebrews. In 1302, Dante Alighieri was about thirty years old, active in the vicious politics of Florence, but on the wrong side. While he was away on diplomatic business in Rome, the victorious party, in a bitter coup d'état, took the opportunity to exile him from Florence, the city of his birth and the place of his lifelong desire, his "abiding city." On pain of death he was required to pay an unjust fine, which he couldn't do because the wherewithal to pay it—his home and property—had already been confiscated. Thereafter for nineteen years, Dante lived as an embittered exile, wandering around northern Italy wherever he could find patrons—in Lucca, Verona, and finally Ravenna—and until the day he died in 1321, his home was "nowhere," for nowhere else could replace his Florence.

It was from that "nowhere" that in 1308 Dante began to write the poem that he called, simply, "Comedy." He completed it in 1320 and died the next year, an exile to the end. He was buried in Ravenna, and, despite all the efforts on the part of the Florentines to bring him home, he remains in Ravenna to this day.

An etching from a scene in Dante's Purgatorio by Gustave Doré, circa 1868



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Hell is a linguistic and theological equivalent of the astronomers' black hole that sucks all language, perception, and experience into its emptiness.

Affecting Dante no less intimately was another experience of alienation, another homelessness, that of his native Italian language. It too was abroad in Italy, likewise having "no home." It was the tongue of a place that was not yet a nation, its people not yet a people, and Dante's Tuscan vernacular was but one dialect among many. With lovely irony he wrote in his essay *De vulgari eloquentia*, a Latin prose work on the superior merits for the lyric poet of his native Italian vernacular, that just as he himself is homeless, so too is the language of his birth, the speech he calls the *lingua che chiami mamma o babbo*, that idiom in which an infant first learns to call upon "mummy and daddy." In truth, he complains, there is no shared community of which his native Italian is the vernacular: it is indeed a courtly language, but it lacks a court, "it has left its scent in every city but has made its home in none." Either way, whether as to his language or to his politics, Dante is a poet of exile. Perhaps he is the greatest writer in a genre of homelessness that seems to be the natural and spontaneous idiom of the poet. Poets may indeed write letters home, but they send them only from abroad.

From exile, then, Dante began his *Comedy*, composed in extraordinarily disciplined vernacular poetic forms. It is a work that in good part invents the poetic language in which it is written, the language of an Italy that will not exist in unified political reality for another 550 years. In his search for a poetic home, he struggles against the rootlessness of intellect that results from his domestic displacement. For intellect too needs a social world in which to be at home. And if his exile is a political and literary reality, it also has a deeper theological meaning. The *Comedy* is not just a writing composed in exile; exile determines the form of its writing. And as the exiled Dante is a vagrant, so is his theology: the *Comedy* is the cry from the heart of an uprooted soul in search of an "abiding city." It is the poetry and theology of that search.

Where will the peregrinations of the homeless Dante take him? First, they will take him to Hell. The *Comedy*'s journey begins in uncertainty, confusion. Before it has even started, he fears where it might lead, and he protests, "Why me? What business of mine is this?" For as the *Comedy* begins, Dante, "at a mid-point on life's journey," is lost on a bare and nameless mountain and threatened by three wild beasts: a lion, a leopard, and a she-wolf. They represent some three vices or other (commentators differ as to which) and they threaten Dante because, lost and without bearings, his is the absolute vulnerability of a person who is faced with pure choice, as it were, "out of nothing." For on that bare mountain there are no givens that he can count on to stabilize and direct his search. Dante is no hero, unsurprisingly, for he lacks even that minimal sense of self that would ground *any* possible choices.

He is not in Hell. Not yet. The condemned in Hell are not, like Dante, lost for want of bearings. Hell is home to the ultimate choosers, who think that the ultimate truth is an ultimate choice. But Dante understands that in Hell there are no journeys, no forks in the road, indeed no roads at all, no route maps, only the endlessness of repetitive circles, which, being circles, lead nowhere. Dante, by contrast, has a journey ahead of him, and a journey needs an itinerary and a landscape it will track through. He may not yet have discovered the map of that journey, but there is one, and there is a starting point, and he discovers that any step taken along that route will lead him *through* Hell, like it or not, from beginning to end. And he recoils: "This is madness" he protests, and it takes the interventions of a pagan Roman poet, Virgil, moved by St. Lucy and ultimately the Virgin Mary herself responding to Beatrice's prayers, to persuade him to take even a first step forward into Hell.

We too ask: Why must he go through Hell? Why may he not take note of Hell's horrors and himself steer clear? It takes little time for Dante to understand the answer, which is that Hell is as much a place in him as it is a place he is in, and if he is ever to overcome its hidden power over him, he needs to expose it, acknowledge the infernal in himself. His journey is not just an optional visit. He must go through it if he is to learn hard truths about himself. As he travels through Hell under Virgil's guidance, the distinction becomes clear between his telling of what he witnesses there—learning about himself as one passing through—and Hell's own vernacular as the speech of those sunk forever in its unchangeably infernal conditions. The tensions here are acute. Hell's vernacular is just wretchedly empty chatter. It is pitiable to hear, since the stories of grown men and women, some formerly fine poets, have, as Courtney Palmbush puts it, the obsessive tedium that other people's home videos impose upon all but their psychiatrists. In consequence, it is impossible for Dante to respond to them in kind because Hell so drags their narratives down that they fall to the level at which there can be no poetry at all, a level so low it taxes the limits of Dante's poetic powers to describe them, though he himself is not there as one condemned.

The hells of the condemned are indeed terrible. But there is no true tragedy in the tales the

condemned tell in the *Inferno*. Though Dante does his best in Canto 5 to give voice to the pathos of those two great adulterous lovers of the Middle Ages, Francesca da Rimini and Paolo Malatesta (he faints at the impossibility of responding as sympathetically as he would wish), theirs is not the voice of tragedy. For tragedy is a drama of death's learning and discovery, and Francesca and Paolo have learned absolutely nothing in Hell. Hell's outcome is unchangeably the same, a dead end. And if that is so for Francesca and Paolo, it is all the more true of the bragging and unteachable Ulysses in Canto 27, who is the very image of rootless intellectuals and their ambitious quest for a form of knowledge and virtue that owes no loyalties to any wider community. His is the unhinged mentality of the self-enclosed university professor of our times. It is yet truer of Ugolino's pathetic dumbness at the sight of his children's starvation in Canto 32, which in degree of horror falls just short of Satan's own ultimate silence, whose mouth has neither word to utter nor sustaining food to chew. In a cannibalistic inversion of the Eucharist's perfect integration of bread and word, Satan's mouth is silent and it serves only to endlessly masticate on the indigestible gristle of his own treacherous progeny, Judas, Brutus, and Cassius.

Therefore, the emptiness of Hell's silence is ultimate, the opposite of the silences of Paradise: it is possible to read the whole of the *Comedy* as a demonstration of all that language can articulate, the poetry and the theology, in that space that falls between the dumb silence of Hell at one extreme and the articulate silence of Paradise at the other. In any case, as Dante descends deeper into Hell, its own vernacular is increasingly weighed down by pressures more primitive than any that poetry in its lowest capacity can reach. And when, in his vision of Satan, Dante stands on the edge of the final abyss of meaninglessness that he has been forced to witness, he protests that his poetic resources are wrung dry and he has no language hellish enough to match its depravity.

> If I had rhymes that rawly rasped and cackled
> (and chimed in keeping with that cacky hole
> at which, point down, all other rock rings peak),
>
> I might then squeeze the juices of my thought
> more fully out of me. But since I don't,
> not without dread, I bring myself to speak.
>
> It's not (no kidding) any sort of joke
> To form in words the universal bum,
> No task for tongues still whimpering 'Mum!' and 'Dad'!

Dante can gesture to that infernal language, but not from personal experience except insofar as in Hell there is an image of a meaningless abyss discoverable in himself too. Dante fears that in reporting on the pain of the condemned (some of them friends of his) in a manner so objective and detached, he is indirectly admitting to a Hell of his own just as he describes theirs. They do not despair because their condition is eternal; their condition is eternal because they despair, all redeeming conscience having disappeared without a flicker of remorse. Such self-knowledge as they retain is emotionally and morally paralyzing, falsifying all. They falsify all by way of a cynical, empty parody of truth-telling. What the condemned tell Dante of their guilty deeds is true enough, but only in the way that persons trapped within the circles of their own mendacity have become indifferent to the consequences of such truth as they acknowledge. In a perverse way they "know" their sins—they are not deceived as to the fact of them. But, other than in that admission of dead fact, they falsify everything. For "I am a wretched sinner" can be both true and a secret device of a hypocritical, deceitful complacency. That is why there is no way out of Hell. Souls in Hell have disabled even the truth they acknowledge. That is why they have closed its gates permanently upon themselves.

In this way, Hell is a linguistic and theological equivalent of the astronomers' black hole that sucks all language, perception, and experience into its emptiness, and there devours it forever. Hell corrupts everything, especially truth, for even the truths told in it are lies. It is emptiness as a way of life. It even has its own corrupted mystery, or mystification: the inverse of the higher "unknowing" of the mystical. Whereas the mystical is too full of meaning for creaturely language to contain it, Hell's emptiness is too complete for any language, even the poet's, to express the degree of its failure.

For that reason, Dante's fear that in describing the Hell of the condemned he might be personally submitting to Hell's power is groundless. That the question arises for him at all answers itself. Dante can reflect truthfully on what he sees there in a way that Hell's inhabitants cannot because his experience in Hell is purgatorial. Dante can *visit* Hell, but is not, as the condemned are, entirely and eternally sunk in it. And it is precisely because he is not there as one condemned that Dante is able to speak of it truthfully. Dante in Hell is hovering in that uneasy space created by the constructive fantasy of *Inferno*, the poetic device that enables him to say that he is at once a visitor there and, by way of that fantasy, is engaged in a real journey of self-discovery. For that reason, Virgil can lead Dante out of Hell. The condemned, who are at no reflective distance from their plight, ultimately fail to grasp the truth of it: Satan is the father of lies. He even lies when he tells the truth. And so it is that Dante and Virgil climb down Satan's inert body only for Dante to discover that in truth, he is climbing up onto the lower slopes of Mount Purgatory.

Purgatory is the inverse of Hell, and if there are tensions in the poetics of *Purgatorio* too, they are quite different from those of *Inferno*. Here again he must learn the local vernacular, Purgatory's idiom being that of repentant sinners speaking in hope of the salvation they have won but do not yet have the capacity to enjoy. In Purgatory that "baby talk," the idiom of Dante's poetry that had no place in Hell, is now exactly appropriate. Purgatory's vernacular is that of the infant's

It is only because of Dante's conversion to an entirely new life in Purgatory that he can understand and tell of Hell in a way its inhabitants cannot.

longing, of dependence and trust. *That's* how to talk in Purgatory, but even at the end of the journey, so close to emerging from Purgatory into Paradise, Beatrice has to sharply rebuke Dante for still speaking in an alien, adult, hellish tongue that has no place there. For Dante, she notes, does not smile. He is all moral grit and no grace. In her sternest rebuke, she tells him that here in Purgatory we learn how to smile, for smiles are heaven's vernacular.

Thus Dante is told that the speech that he must finally learn is not at all the vernacular of the sinful humanity that is his *lingua franca* as a mundane author. In Purgatory, Dante is drowned in Lethe's waters, the waters of forgetting, that purge the mind's memory of those traces of sin that remain as a burden of guilt unexpurgated. Here Dante "remembers" Purgatory's vernacular, a language that is rescued from its condition of fallenness and restored as the common tongue not of the misnamed "original" sin, but of the yet more truly original condition of the primary innocence in the earthly paradise. It is the true original speech of Adam and Eve before the Fall, and, in a reversal of the Fall's history, in Purgatory their primal innocence is now recovered. We do not in our fallen, living condition have this language at our command except in the traces of it that remain in those ineradicable moments of what the Western theological tradition calls *synderesis*, a primary will for the good, more primitive and more properly human than the "operative" will that can be led astray—and, in consequence of the Fall, often is. Even within our fallen condition, fragmented remnants of a holier will have survived the devastation of the Fall unscathed. It is a primal will that Julian of Norwich was, later in Dante's century, to say had never consented to sin, and never can. But because of Adam's sin, these primary traces of conscience are only the broken fragments of that original lost condition. They are the residues of the lost vernacular of Eden's garden, and in Purgatory Dante must learn to retrieve that grammar and syntax, its poetry and its imagery, as his natural human language, as his true vernacular finally recovered. Hence that complex, mysterious succession of televisual images in *Purgatorio*'s final canto, reflecting the visions of the book of *Revelation*, that at once reach out to the final meaning of *Paradise* but only strangely, elusively, prophetically. For Dante cannot pass out of Purgatory until he has learned to speak this true human vernacular and in it write the poetry of *Paradiso*.

Therefore, whereas Hell's is a mindlessly grim vernacular—a sort of unreflective grunt language—Dante's poetry in Purgatory is challenged in a different way. Now he must relearn that characteristically human vernacular that he, along with every human, had lost in the chaos of the Fall. It was sin that had denied him the poetic voice, and his writing of the *Comedy* is akin to telling the tale of its recovery and the recovery of its place, its "city," the city of the repentant, the primordial city of our creation, restored. For this reason, the tension between Dante's poetic sensibility on the one hand, and the experience that challenges his powers of description on the other, requires for its resolution a second, remedial silence—a silence more acute and painful in that it, for the time being, suspends his poetic powers entirely. It is Beatrice herself, the muse, object, and agent of his poetry, who must first reduce him to helpless silence, to the tears of a whimpering baby, to a linguistic point zero, to a baptismal drowning in Lethe's waters, before he can hope to recover the true voice of the poet, the voice that speaks not only of, but more fundamentally out of, the innocence of the earthly paradise regained.

It is here in Purgatory, then, that Dante learns how to write the *Comedy*, including even *Inferno*. Here, in Purgatory, he recovers the discourse of the poet who could write adequately of Hell. It is only because of Dante's conversion to an entirely new life in Purgatory that he can understand and tell of Hell in a way its inhabitants cannot. For it is in Purgatory that Dante has been baptized into that "justice and primal love" that on the one hand made Hell, but on the other is wholly beyond the reach of those within it.

Upon his exit from Purgatory, Dante has yet to learn how to write of and from within Heaven. For in Heaven alone are all Purgatory's hopes fully and finally met. Only here will Dante arrive at the place wherein he will find a poetic self adequate to the love that Beatrice had called upon him to show her. Only now may he enter heaven.

But is Dante truly in Paradise? Yes, he is. But also, no, he is not. The theological model for the ecstasy with which *Paradiso* ends, and so the *Comedy* too—the ecstasy where, Dante says, his *alta fantasia*, poetry, finally fails—is scriptural. Specifically, Dante's language recalls that of Paul's rapture in the opening verses of the Second Letter to the Corinthians. There Paul says he "knows a man" who was once taken up into the "third heaven," but whether he was in the body or not

while being "taken up," he "does not know." Paul's rapture as a theological model for the concluding canto of *Paradiso* is striking because right from the beginning of it Dante tells you that he is writing out of an overwhelming awareness that he too "does not know." In Canto 2 he asks his readers to leave the poem alone and not to read beyond the *Purgatorio* if they must insist upon some peremptory resolution of its mystery. But, he adds, you can write poetry *out of* that mystery, so long as you don't expect poetry to resolve it. Indeed, poetry is exactly what you *must* call upon when faced with mystery's ultimacy.

One way or another, for Paul it is an eschatological moment. It is an instant of Heaven, brief and exceptional, and he quickly snaps out of it into an unambiguous pre-mortem embodiment. But traces of that rapture—itself beyond all communicable experience—remain with him in their effect upon his mundane condition as the Apostle to the Gentiles. Because of it, Paul was able to write the Second Letter to the Corinthians, and all else that he ever wrote, as if they were halting translations into a worldly vernacular of a celestial experience that is fully expressible only upon death. All Paul can say is that what he saw in that rapture was the whole point of his life, the meaning of his conversion, the source of all his preaching, the cause of his sufferings and persecutions and the power of them, through grace, to redeem; he saw the temporal narrative of a life contained in an instant, the earthly sequence contained in a vision at once momentary in act and timeless in content, life's long sequences compressed into an eternal "now." It is the exact antitype of Hell's empty black hole.

And the same moment of ecstasy with which Dante's *Paradiso* ends likewise contains the whole of the *Comedy* in an instant of incommunicable silence. And though it is with that ecstatic moment in the silence of Heaven that the *Comedy* ends, it is on account of that silence that Dante, like Paul, can write anything of it at all. Now, "midway in life's journey," Dante can begin to write that first canto of *Inferno*. As T. S. Eliot, thinking of Dante, wrote in *Four Quartets*, "in my end is my beginning."

Whatever may be the epistemological standing of Dante's closing rapture, in it is a third and final moment of language's failure, the antitype of the false speechlessness of Hell. The insufficiency of human language goes beyond even that of the purgatorial vernacular. All that Dante can say of it is that it is a moment of knowledge in perfect harmony with love. And what Dante in the *Vita nuova* called "love's knowledge," the *intelletto d'amore*, has for him a theological resonance too, recalling a Western tradition that originates in Gregory the Great, who spoke of a love that on its own terms is an understanding, one that surpasses all the knowing of intellect. Gregory said, *amor ipse intellectus est*: love has its own way of knowing. As Dante puts it, in that final *raptus*, his will was moved by nothing but "the love that moves the sun and the other stars."

That's what you can say *about* this final ecstasy: Dante's witness to it in *Paradiso* is akin to that which Herbert McCabe once described of the young child who for the first time is invited to join in the conversation of her parents and their adult friends in their local pub. There is joy and amazement for the child in the invitation into the adult company, though they drink beer and she only lemonade; and though they share the conversation with her, it is so far above the child's comprehension that if afterwards you were to ask her what they spoke about, she would be able to report little of it. Still, she knows that at last she has grown up beyond her wildest dreams, that she has been introduced to a new form of life in which she has it all to learn, and that, now and forever after, adult learning has begun. *Paradiso* describes how Dante finally reaches the place where he may learn the adult tongue, Celestial. This, at last, is the vernacular of the place to which poetry ultimately points, though it infinitely exceeds poetry's capacity to contain it. Poetry's fulfillment therefore comes only at the end, in the third silence, that of Paradise. Only here in a final silence does poetry finally come home to its "abiding city."

The silence in which the *Comedy* ends is, therefore, filled with a new meaning now fully realized in the beatific vision. That final vision, Dante says, will be experienced as a true homecoming out of exile, for the blessed will recognize it as the place to which they have always belonged, though they had been led astray along many a diverted path in the meantime. It was in God's eternal knowledge and will that they existed before they were created. And it is to that same place they are to return—to the "mystic rose," the Church triumphant, a flower in the bloom of a million petals. In consequence, the heavenly vernacular of that vision will at that point be no unrecognizable foreign language. On the contrary, it will give truer expression to what in some way we had always known how to say—as when in our naïve and simplistic early drafts of a poem or a novel we may in an inchoate and stumbling way show signs of what we intended to say, though what we had written didn't yet say it. In the concluding paragraphs of his earlier *Vita nuova* Dante said that his vision of Beatrice, retrieved mystically from his earthly loves, had required of him a wholly new way of writing about her significance. That "new writing," that revisionary narrative, became his *Comedy*. The *Comedy* may in that way be wholly new. All the same, Dante may legitimately claim that when at last he got it right he was then able to see that those early writings were already drafts, hints of what he had all along *meant* to say—and if the *Comedy* is new, it is old news recovered anew. Now he can rightly claim to have come home to a truth of his own that he hadn't realized till then he *already* possessed. That, Dante says, is how it will be in Paradise, a true memory at last restored. It will be the "abiding city" to which, from exile, he has at last come home.

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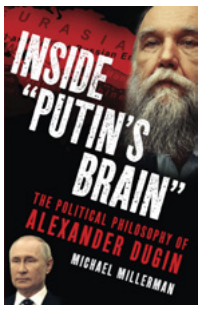
Just Call It Fascism

Matt McManus

Alexander Dugin's fraudulent 'fourth way'



INSIDE "PUTIN'S BRAIN"
The Political Philosophy of Alexander Dugin

MICHAEL MILLERMAN

$19.99 | 250 pp.

Much has been written about Alexander Dugin, the Russian firebrand often called "Putin's Brain" by both his defenders and his critics. Dugin was born into a well-off Soviet family in 1962, and spent much of his youth rebelling against communism, flirting with everything from Satanism to fascism. Despite this, he greeted the end of the Cold War with ambivalence. Witnessing the humiliation of Russia by the United States left him with a deep resentment that pervades all his work. It's the resentment of one who considers himself a superior man held back by decadent forces that somehow manage to eke out victory after victory. After a short career as an influential member of the National Bolshevik Party, Dugin published *Foundations of Geopolitics* in 1997, the first of many polemics against America, Atlanticism, liberalism, and, worst of all, McDonald's. Since then, he has become an icon of the far Right in Russia and across the globe. His manifesto *The Fourth Political Theory*—a schizoid mix of Heideggerian-Deleuzian ontology, postmodern relativism, anti-liberal fist-pounding, and megalomaniacal geopolitics—has become the unofficial handbook of postmodern reaction. As chronicled by Benjamin Teitelbaum, Steve Bannon even made a special pilgrimage to pay homage to the master—despite the fact that Dugin has often described the United States as the cutting edge of "global idiocy."

Alexander Dugin

REUTERS/ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

Michael Millerman, the author of *Inside "Putin's Brain": The Political Philosophy of Alexander Dugin*, has the dubious honor of having done more to popularize Dugin's ideas among English speakers than anyone else. Millerman received his PhD in political science at the University of Toronto, writing a controversial thesis that was later turned into the monograph *Beginning with Heidegger: Strauss, Rorty, Derrida, Dugin and the Philosophical Constitution of the Political*, published by the far-right Arktos Media. In my review of that book for *Merion West*, I criticized Millerman for defending Heidegger and Dugin without drawing attention to their glaring moral and political failings. Millerman's latest book repeats this error, treating Duginism with an alarming lack of critical scrutiny. Unfortunately, there is a growing demand for books that popularize modes of far-right and fascistic thinking that were supposed to have been buried after Auschwitz, but *Inside "Putin's Brain"* stands out: it is one of the more ambitious whitewashing efforts I've ever read.

Millerman insists on treating Dugin as a "political philosopher," where the "relevant points of reference are people like Plato, Aristotle, Nietzsche, and Heidegger." And not just *any* political philosopher, but one who describes himself as a "mythical Merlin" figure engaged in "supra-human contemplation" and who is at the same time the founder of an empire. Dugin's grandiose aspirations are a touchy subject for Millerman, who insists that it is "all too easy for unimaginative, hollowed out professors of philosophy and political science to scoff at such an image. But the fact is that the philosopher-founder is a well attested topic in political philosophy." What the "professors" are in fact scoffing at is the suggestions that Dugin belongs in such auspicious company. Indeed, it is too flattering to compare Dugin even with other far-right icons such as Carl Schmitt or Martin Heidegger; he's clearly a minor-league intellectual figure, somewhere between Julius Evola and Olavo de Carvalho.

Still, it is fair to call Dugin a political philosopher if all one means by that is someone professionally engaged in the discipline regardless of the plausibility or attractiveness of his work. The title is not necessarily an honorable one. One can be a maniac and a political philosopher simultaneously, as Dugin demonstrates. At various points in his book, Millerman

Any honest philosopher would readily acknowledge that a huge part of assessing a political philosophy is examining its practical implications.

describes philosophy as an "auspicious activity." At the conclusion of *Inside "Putin's Brain"* he excuses his lack of engagement with the practical implications of Duginism, including Dugin's support for the war in Ukraine, on the strange grounds that "nothing [Dugin] could say about oil prices" would be as important as his commitment to the "big questions and giving them their due." In short, discussing the real-world implications of Dugin's ideas would besmirch his dignity as a philosopher.

But Millerman is wrong. Any honest philosopher would readily acknowledge that a huge part of assessing a political philosophy is examining its practical implications. The chief topic of Plato's *Republic* is only secondarily the metaphysical doctrine of the forms; justice takes priority, including questions about the responsibility of philosophers in and to the city. Emphasizing justice isn't, as Millerman implies in *Beginning with Heidegger*, some excuse to constrain far-right thinking in the name of liberal prudence. Pre-Socratic thought may have begun in wonder and metaphysics, but philosophy only grasped what Paul Tillich would call its "highest concern" when Socrates began to contemplate questions of justice and goodness. One cannot simply bypass ethics on the way to metaphysics, or construct a metaphysical political philosophy that has nothing to say about what should be the first concern of any political community: justice. This is especially true when your metaphysical speculations are as fantastical as Dugin's are.

Unsurprisingly, Millerman doesn't want to scrutinize the practical or moral implications of Dugin's philosophy too closely. One finds very few references to the wars of aggression that Dugin has defended—wars that have brought about immeasurable human suffering. Millerman does acknowledge that the war in Ukraine has led to a growing number of commentaries on Dugin, many of which are, in his judgment, the "hysterical ravings of overzealous liberal lunatics." Millerman thinks that Dugin's Western critics lack imagination; they focus on little things like war crimes and lose sight of the really important issues, such as Dugin's theoretical dalliances with postmodern French theory.

The two most important books for understanding Dugin as a political philosopher are his *The Fourth Political Theory* and *Martin Heidegger: The Philosophy of Another Beginning*. The titles of these books tell us a lot about where Dugin belongs in the history of right-wing thought. One mistake people make about the Right is to assume that it is simply committed to defending the status quo, or to managing change more cautiously than liberals do. Some variants of conservatism do indeed fall into this paradigm, but not all. From the violent counterrevolutionary movements of the eighteenth century to Trump's depiction of foundational American institutions as corrupt and broken, the Right has long had a more insurrectionary side. For a revolutionary reactionary like Heidegger, for example, conventional conservatives lack any real nerve or daring in their efforts to save "Western civilization" by turning back the clock to some idealized version of the recent past. For Heidegger the history of Western thought can be understood as a long descent into nihilism that started with Plato's fatal decision to conflate "being" with ideas, and so with the "being of beings." This error led eventually to the modern Cartesian view that external "beings" were in fact simply matter to be manipulated by conscious subjects for their benefit, with no one's viewpoint or desires privileged over anyone else's. This turned the whole world into what Heidegger called a "standing reserve." And he believed that these metaphysical errors had bled into modern politics. In his *Introduction to Metaphysics*, he dismissed liberalism and communism as "metaphysically the same." Both, he believed, are egalitarian, humanist doctrines committed only to material flourishing, mostly arguing with each other about technical matters like which economic system will create better refrigerators. It fell to people more metaphysically sensitive—people like Adolf Hitler—to save the West by forcing a new beginning, by going back to the energy and vision that philosophy possessed before it was corrupted by Platonism. This would require a rejection of modern egalitarianism, democracy, and freedom for the inauthentic "mass of people." A more authentic philosophical elite would have to take charge. Dugin is especially attracted to this idea. In his book on Heidegger, he echoes the Heideggerian sentiment that the masses are "insignificant swarms."

> There, other mountain peaks are clearly visible, whereas the insignificant swarms in dark valleys below are indiscernible in the present much like long ago. A true thinker knows as little about the details of society in which he lives as he does about those of the times long gone. Yet the voice of Being is audible to him, as it emanates from the ancients clearer and louder than the itching on the part of the senseless masses, both ancient and modern.

Dugin reworks Heidegger's elitism to make it serve the purposes of his own Eurasian national-

ism. Megalomania may convince far-right thinkers that they soar high above the rest of us, but that's only because falling feels a lot like flying until you hit the ground. Much of Dugin's political philosophy is directed against liberalism and liberal society, but he rarely bothers to discuss liberal political philosophy on its own terms. Search his books for knowledgeable discussions of Mill, Rawls, or Korsgaard and you'll usually come up empty. At most you'll find a few summary clichés and rote references, often accompanied by rapid-fire denunciation. While Dugin is willing to take some communist ideas seriously, all he is willing to take from liberal philosophy is its endorsement of "freedom," which he reconceptualizes beyond recognition. But liberalism itself, he insists, must be "defeated and destroyed," along with everything else that comes from the West. As he writes in *Eurasian Mission: An Introduction to Neo-Eurasianism*:

> I share the vision of René Guénon and Julius Evola, who considered modernity and the ideologies derived from it—individualism, liberal democracy, capitalism, and so on—to be the causes of the coming catastrophe of humanity, and the global domination of Western attitudes as the final degradation of the Earth. The West is approaching its end, and we should not let it pull all the rest of us into the abyss along with it.

So what is Dugin's alternative? His constructive proposals, such as they are, recombine various elements of what he calls the three major political traditions of the twentieth century: communism, fascism, and liberalism. It is perhaps worth noting at the outset that all of these had their origins in the dreaded West. As already noted, he borrows the rhetoric, if not the substance, of "freedom" from liberalism—and even that, one senses, is a debt Dugin wishes he could avoid. From communism he appropriates some of the Marxist critiques of capitalism and market society, along with a critique of American imperialism. But he chucks the integral materialism, scientific epistemology, and the egalitarian humanism Marxists share with the liberal tradition, which, as Eric Hobsbawm points out, always ensured that most socialists felt a greater affinity with liberalism than with reaction. Finally, from fascism he takes the myth of a transcendent people, a cyclical view of time in terms of decline and rise, and much more. Dugin wants to dispense with fascism's racism and its flirtation with biological determinism, but not with its ultranationalism or militaristic imperialism. In *Eurasian Mission*, he makes it very clear that the road from fascism to his "fourth political theory" is far shorter than the road from either liberalism or communism.

From the beginning, these syncretic efforts are intellectually opportunistic: Dugin irreverently plunders whatever ideas and arguments happen to be available in these earlier traditions because he is incapable of saying anything truly original. To his credit, he's creative at coming up with novel terminology. In *The Fourth Political Theory* he toys with a number of labels for his new politics. One of his favorites is "Eurasianism," which draws from the "Conservative Revolution" of 1920s and '30s Germany as well as the "fundamental conservatism" (a.k.a. "traditionalism") of the self-described "superfascist" Julius Evola. If so-called "third-way" politics is notoriously vacuous, Dugin's fourth way is a not-very-convincing disguise for one of the three ways he claims to be superseding (hint: it's not communism). Yet Millerman insists that we take Dugin at his word:

> An obstacle to...study has been the impression that Dugin's self-presentation as a political theorist is little more than a façade meant to present as legitimate an underlying illegitimate, unphilosophical neo-fascism. However, a commitment to sound analysis should caution us against sharing that judgment. It could only be a conclusion, not an *a priori* position, that Dugin's concepts and projects are best understood as fascistic. Taking Dugin's self presentation as a political theorist on its own terms is a better way to begin.... The cover art for the Russian version of [*The Fourth Political Theory*] illustrates the point. It depicts a square divided into four parts. One part shows a hammer and sickle, another fasces; a third, the dollar sign. The fourth part shows a question mark. The fourth political theory is marked by the question mark, in contrast to the hammer and sickle, fasces, and dollar sign.

But in this case the old advice is sound: do not judge a book by its cover. A diagram is not an argument, and sometimes a question mark is not really a question mark.

Even if we take Millerman's cleaned-up version of Dugin's "right-wing populism" at face value, we would still have to reject it as implausible and unjust. In his great book *Conservatism*, Edmund Neill observes that a common practice of right-wing thinkers is to develop "symbiotic opposites to progressive concepts in order to rebut them." There are two clear examples of this practice in Dugin's work: first, his relativistic particularism; and second, his approach to democracy.

One of the more surprising features of Duginism is its willingness to flirt with cultural relativism as a means of opposing liberal universalism. He'll often insist that contemporary postmodern leftists like Foucault and Derrida have shown that all kinds of universalism—including humanistic doctrines like liberalism and communism—are in fact very much the contingent intellectual products of a particular civilization. Each civilization has its own "episteme" that cannot be legitimately exported. Dugin will therefore insist that Russia has its own "special truth," which the West cannot fully comprehend or criticize from its external perspective. He then goes on to argue that we should welcome the emergence of a multipolar geopolitics of different civilizations, each oriented by their respective characters and truths.

Of course, Dugin himself has never been shy about critiquing the West from *his* external perspective. Or about (rightly) condemning American imperialism one minute and enthusiastically cheerleading Russian imperialism the next. The

What if the actual human beings who make up the "people" want to choose a different destiny for themselves? Too bad: the elites are under no obligation to indulge the "senseless masses."

problem here is not just personal hypocrisy but logical incoherence. A Western liberal could simply reply to Dugin that it is the common conviction of her own civilization, its "episteme," that everyone in the world should one day adopt the Western worldview—that the particularism of the West just *is* an endorsement of liberal universalism. And how can Dugin, as an outside observer of the West, criticize Western civilization without abandoning his own relativism? When he rejects the West because of its "untruth" or decadence, as he frequently does, is he not imposing his own "episteme" beyond its proper boundaries?

What's more, many of the people Dugin lumps into "Eurasian" civilization don't seem to buy into his "special truth." This obviously includes the thousands of Russians who are bravely resisting authoritarian tyranny in their own country, and we should always remember that the first victims of a dictator like Putin are his own people. But it also includes the efforts of countries like Ukraine to move closer to the West. Dugin insists that these popular movements are

> almost always aimed against those societies or those political regimes that actively or passively resist the global oligarchy, challenge its interests, and try to maintain some independence in matters of policy, strategy, regional affairs, and economic measures. Thus, "color revolutions" occur selectively, organized via mass media networks deployed by the globalist elite. These are a twisted parody of revolution, and serve only counter-revolutionary purposes.

But while Dugin talks a lot about the authentic "people"—the ones who subscribe to his "special truth"—these are mostly an abstraction, and very different from the real-life people who make up the actual political communities he pretends to be describing.

Dugin refuses to follow Foucault et al. to the obvious conclusion of their theory: if it is wrong for one civilization to impose its contingent vision of the truth on another, it is no less wrong for one group of people within a civilization to impose its vision on another group. Why, then, is the Russian state in a position to impose its very peculiar version of the truth on its citizens? If Dugin applied his relativism consistently, he could not suppport the use of state power to persecute sexual minorities or countercultural movements. Indeed, the postmodern relativism Dugin endorses would seem to end in the radically individualist idea that each person's private episteme is his or her own and no one can legitimately impose their own episteme on anyone else in the name of some higher cause.

That brings us to Dugin's attitude toward democracy. In his *Eurasian Mission*, he claims the "the Eurasianist concept of 'democracy' (*demotia*) is defined as the 'participation of the people in its own destiny.'" But what kind of participation are we talking about? Not, evidently, the processes of representation and collective deliberation that we usually associate with democracy. Instead, participation in "destiny" seems to mean a passive acquiescence to the grand political projects envisioned by people like Dugin. As Millerman puts it:

> It is neither elites nor masses that make the decision for the project of authentic existence, but Dasein ["being there"] itself as a whole.... Yet it is the single ones (the philosophers, historians, and leaders who lead the people to its destiny) who carry out that project. A people only truly has a destiny when it chooses to live authentically.

In short, "Eurasianist democracy" doesn't mean democracy as anyone since the ancient Greeks would understand it: rule by the people. It means an abstract "people" (*narod*) choosing as one to live authentically. What exactly it means to live authentically is decided by elites who act not in their own interests—perish the thought—but on behalf of "Dasein itself." These elites are the spokesmen for the true destiny of the people, one so profound that they alone are deep enough to see it. But what if the actual human beings who make up the "people" want to choose a different destiny for themselves? Too bad: the elites are under no obligation to indulge the "senseless masses." Dugin writes that "the Western system of formal, electoral democracy...will be replaced by an organic democracy which mandates creative participation by the best representatives of the communities in the national government. This type of democracy [is] democracy by the citizenry, not by the mob."

In *The Jargon of Authenticity*, Theodor Adorno points out that this kind of obscurantist rhetoric has proven endlessly valuable in justifying domination, whether by the market or by fascists. Market actors justify the hegemony of capitalism by appealing to the expression of individual authenticity through conspicuous consumption, and end up creating a mass of homogeneous consumers. Fascist ultranationalists demand authentic commitment to great projects by the people, and end up imposing conformity through terror and violence. The same process can be observed in Duginism. It begins by fatuously demanding a crusade against the imperial power of liberal universalism in the name of authenticity. It ends with Dugin cheering on a war where sixty-year-old conscripts die in the Donbas

to defend Russia against imaginary conspiracies led by shadowy Western oligarchs.

Dugin isn't just a "right-wing populist." He's a fascist. He believes that decadent liberal materialism constitutes a nihilistic threat that can be overcome only by ultranationalists engaged in a "global revolutionary struggle" against the West. "Only this war is legitimate, just and moral. Only its rules and purposes are justified and worthy of respect. Anyone who is not involved in this war on the side of the Revolution is already helping the global oligarchy to maintain and strengthen their power." Elsewhere he writes, "War is our homeland, our element, and our natural, native environment in which we must learn to exist effectively and victoriously."

Millerman denies that Dugin is a fascist. He points out that Dugin condemns biological racism and even rejects nationalism because a "people (*narod*) and the nation are different." Dugin prefers to think in terms of civilizations, not states. But this is entirely consistent with fascism. As Roger Griffin rightly notes in his book *Fascism*, not only did twentieth-century fascists often insist that a mythologized "ultranation" exceeded the boundaries of the nation-state; but they would also appeal to this myth in order to legitimate their wars of expansion and violence. Indeed the constraints of the nation-state were precisely what fascists rebelled against in their genocidal crusade for a new European order and lebensraum.

> While in the interwar period the fascist 'ultra-nation'…was overwhelmingly identified with the nation-state as the context and framework for national rebirth, even then myths of imperialism, pan-Slavism, pan-Latininity, a New European order, a Greater Germanic Reich and a rejuvenated Western civilization occasionally extended the core entity at the heart of the fascist's imagined community far beyond the historical and geographical contours of the political nation state.

Dugin envisions a renewed and expanded Russia serving as the cornerstone of a proud Eurasian civilization. Strategically allied with a colorful cabal of authoritarians, white nationalists, fundamentalists, and other charming characters, this civilization will go to war with the decadent West, defying its universalist pretensions. Indeed, it already is at war with the West as far as Dugin is concerned, since the Ukrainian conflict is just one front in this greater struggle.

Dugin likes to talk about destiny. The destiny of twentieth-century fascism was to cause immense suffering before being consigned to the trash heap of history. The question now is how much suffering twenty-first-century fascism will cause before it meets the same end.

MATT MCMANUS *is a lecturer in political science at the University of Michigan and the author of* The Rise of Post-Modern Conservatism *and the forthcoming* The Political Right and Inequality.

POETRY

MY THURSDAY TRUTH

Roy Nathanson

My Thursday truth hides in a mist of overtones—
I know it's in there, hair slicked back, hiding
the molten core. So I keep blowing until it
whirls my head back, and my truth knows
I'm dizzy. It hears me slobbering up and down
the horn till my shoulders tighten, and
my swagger goes limp. Then my truth
goes so sharp, I forget about tuning altogether
until the whole damn floor drops and I find
myself, down there in the ballroom
shaking my two left feet—waiting
for my truth to waltz me out of Thursday.

ROY NATHANSON *is a saxophonist, poet, and composer. He has written two books of poems:* Conversations and Other Songs *(MadHat Press, 2020) and* Subway Moon *(Buddy's Knife Editions of Hamburg, 2008). Roy has written songs for Mavis Staples, Jimmy Scott, Elvis Costello, Debbie Harry, Jeff Buckley, and others and has recorded ten CDs with his longtime band The Jazz Passengers.*

'We Are Not Yet Christians'

An interview with Jean-Luc Marion

Jean-Luc Marion is professor emeritus of philosophy at the Sorbonne and retired professor of Catholic studies, the philosophy of religions, and theology at the University of Chicago. Over the past twenty-eight years, he split time between Chicago and Paris, where he also taught at the Institut Catholique. He is known for his contributions to modern philosophy, especially phenomenology, and to theology, including the study of the early Church Fathers. In 2021 Marion was awarded the Joseph Ratzinger Prize for his contributions to theology. He is a member of the Académie Française (elected 2008, received as an immortel in 2010), the Pontifical Council for Culture, and the Accademia dei Lincei in Rome. Among his numerous awards are the Grand Prix de Philosophie de l'Académie Française, the Karl-Jaspers Prize of the city and University of Heidelberg, and the Humboldt-Stiftung Prize. Among his books in English are: Givenness and Revelation *(the 2014 Gifford Lectures),* God Without Being, The Erotic Phenomenon, Negative Certainties, Believing in Order to See, *and* The Rigor of Things. *The following interview took place before a live audience at the Lumen Christi Institute at the University of Chicago. It has been edited for clarity and length.*

KENNETH L. WOODWARD: Professor Marion, there has been, as you know, considerable comment over the years about your "turn to theology" from philosophy. But it seems to me that you've always had a deep interest in theology, going back to your student days in Paris. You had regular access then to an informal community of scholars that included great French theologians like Henri de Lubac, Yves Congar, and Louis Bouyer, whose works were so fundamental to Vatican II. You were also something of a student journalist. What was it like working at such a young age with those towering figures?

JEAN-LUC MARION: Well, here is the background. In 1967 I was admitted to the École Normale Supérieure against very tough competition—just before the student protests and all the other political and social turmoil of 1968. Intellectually, the future of the society was being completely reframed, a future without Christianity. I decided to focus on philosophy and the choice was whether, like other Christian students, I should save my soul, so to speak, through the psychoanalysis of Jacques Lacan, the deconstructionism of Jacques Derrida, and the structuralist Marxism of Louis Althusser. All of them were teaching at the time and so it was easy to follow them. I took a different path.

KW: Which was?

JLM: There was a group of us students at the Sorbonne who loved discussion. We determined to be as good as everyone else in mastering our courses, but at the same time we also determined to acquire a deeper knowledge of the Christian tradition. So from the beginning, we took a double load of courses.

KW: Double courses at the Sorbonne?

JLM: No, we got instruction privately and not for grades as an informal student group at the Basilica of Montmartre, first with Jean Daniélou before he became a cardinal, then with Fr. Louis Bouyer, the great liturgist and Lutheran convert, and after that with the Jesuit Henri de Lubac. Under their guidance, we also produced a scholarly publication called *Resurrection*. Five years later we were asked to be part of the French edition of *Communio*, which meant that we got to study with Hans Urs von Balthasar, who gave seminars at his place in Switzerland before producing each issue.

KW: Many philosophers have said that a certain attitude is required in order to philosophize. For example, the neo-Thomist Josef Pieper said a philosopher had to have a sense of wonder. Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel said "radical amazement" is required. You have said the capacity to be astonished is essential. What do you mean by astonishment?

JLM: Good question. If I may be a bit polemical, I would say that the greatest possible failure for a professional philosopher is never to be astonished. And many philosophers are in that situation. They philosophize using a set of concepts or tools that protect them against encountering anything new. They have enough ways to make any question lead to a (pre-determined) answer, or even to disappear. But my experience of philosophy—and it's why people like Descartes or Heidegger were so important—is that philosophy begins when you have this gift of a question that resists an answer. By "answer," I mean one that is based on what was known before that question was asked. A new question opens up a new landscape that you cannot walk through unless you get a new pair of shoes.

KW: So, in order to philosophize, you have to adapt to the question?

JLM: Yes, a great philosopher is someone who has decided to modify a set of concepts in order to face the question and not extinguish it immediately. Many philosophers are firemen: there is a fire, they rush into it in order to extinguish it. In philosophy, I tell my students, if you read a book that you understand well, drop it. You could have written that book. If you read a book you don't understand but you guess that

something is there, keep it open. Read only books you don't understand. And after some time, you will at least understand what it is you don't understand and why you don't understand it. And then you will start to philosophize.

KW: I've been doing just that the past few weeks, reading your own books for the first time. You mentioned that when you were a student you had an extraordinary experience while walking in the Luxembourg gardens.

JLM: That's true.

KW: How would you describe that experience and its impact? Was it an astonishment, a sudden illumination, or an intuition?

JLM: Well, it was not a spiritual experience. It was a very straightforward intellectual experience. In the Jardin du Luxembourg, there are beautiful trees, there are charming people, there are pools of water. It came to me that the fact that things like trees and people and pools of water *are*, in the common understanding, is not the most important characteristic of things. What's important is what things *mean*. Once you come to the conclusion that a thing exists, now what? And so it is with God. It is not a big deal to say that God exists. The question is how, why, and what does it mean for me? And what does it mean for God? These questions are much more important, much more difficult to understand, and much more astonishing.

KW: How would you describe your relationship with the extraordinary French philosophers of your generation—I'm thinking of Gilles Deleuze and the previously mentioned Althusser, Lacan, and Derrida? As a Catholic, did you ever feel like an outlier to this group?

JLM: That was a strange thing. I never felt like an outsider. In intellectual circles—at least at that moment—provided you knew the stuff and you could argue, you were accepted, as were many of my Catholic friends. There was no question: if you knew Martin Heidegger on some point better than Derrida did, they would discuss it with you. Many of them were raised Catholic, like Althusser and Deleuze, who was absolutely brilliant. I remember talking with Deleuze when he was dying because he smoked too much. We discussed my book, *God Without Being*, and he wanted to know how I was able to stay with Catholicism when he could not. Later he committed suicide.

KW: *God Without Being* was the first of your books to be translated into English. Could you say something about your theological objections to the metaphysics of being?

Pope Francis presents the Ratzinger Prize to Jean-Luc Marion, November 13, 2021.

CNS PHOTO/VATICAN MEDIA

JLM: Let's be clear, this book was written against Heidegger, not Thomas Aquinas. Against Heidegger because he insisted that the question of being is the most important question in philosophy, not the question of God. And as long as we are unable to find a new approach to being, the possibilities of new interrogations about God are closed. My point is that God is not limited to being. The question of God is original in itself. So I had to investigate the traditional view that God's existence is demonstrated by metaphysics—that is, by rational theology or ontology broadly understood. That meant I had to face Aquinas. But I want to emphasize that I'm not opposed to metaphysical questions, if by "metaphysical question" you mean a question about the greatest properties of things. Indeed it is exactly to reopen those questions that I do philosophy and phenomenology. I started modestly, not as a philosopher but as a historian of philosophy. And what I discovered is that the world of metaphysics did not impose itself on philosophical language before Aquinas. And even he had many reservations about that. After Aquinas, metaphysics dominated philosophy all the way down to Hegel.

KW: Would you say that the domination of metaphysics was in some ways responsible for modern atheism?

JLM: I'm convinced of that, because metaphysics was so powerful, successful, and enduring. It is a system of a priori concepts like being, substance, formal logic and so on that allows you to have the potential answer to any question in advance. This way, God is understood as a special case of being…an exceptional being.

KW: The supreme being.

JLM: Yes, God was to be understood using a concept that could be applied with reservations to all other beings. So from Aquinas down to the end of the seventeenth century at the latest, it was easy for Christian theology to be accepted in universities and to prove the existence of God because the metaphysics of being was all part of a general picture and structure of philosophy.

KW: And after that?

JLM: Critics of Christianity found it easy to say, negatively, that this God reached by rational theology is not at all the same as the God that Christians believe in. And making the same argument positively, there were other thinkers, from Pascal to moderns like Kierkegaard, who insisted that the God of Christianity was much *more* than the God of philosophy.

KW: So, by uncoupling the question of God from being, you in effect freed the Christian understanding of God to be God.

JLM: No, to be what the human mind, without revelation, takes for granted God is. Most of us have a sort of spontaneous idea of the divine, which is based on some natural experience. That's good, as far as it goes. But Christianity is nothing other than the event of Christ, an event that comes from *elsewhere*. It cannot fit exactly what was expected. So, the Christian God, to be Christian, should be different from any other "pre-owned" representation of God. When you have a prior understanding of what God should be, the temptation is to measure Christ against this prior representation.

KW: Which takes us to another of your books, *Believing in Order to See*. You have a great appreciation of paradox, or at least reversals, and that title is a good example. You write that, "one can lose one's faith, but not because one gains in reason." In fact, you argue the reverse is in fact true: namely that in losing one's faith, we are actually losing reason. How do you explain those seeming paradoxes?

JLM: A paradox is just the correct formulation of an issue you don't understand, and the answer to it is one you could not expect. I think that in any science, paradoxes are crucial. When there is no paradox, there is no possible improvement in knowledge. So the question is how you get into the paradox and how you get out of it. But if there is no paradox, there is nothing to say.

KW: What must you believe before you can see?

JLM: The formulation itself, believe in order to see, comes from the oldest translation of the Greek Bible. It means if you don't believe, you will not understand. Why? Even with a methodological problem, you have to believe that the problem is correctly expressed at the moment when you are asked to give a solution to the problem. You have to believe or trust that the problem is not nonsense. So you cannot face a question without some trust that the question is meaningful.

KW: How does that relate to the question of God?

JLM: In the case of dealing with God, you cannot hope to understand—even partly—what is going on in a text or in an event if you don't admit that God is really involved in that text or event. Otherwise, you have no reason to understand what is going on in an event or text.

KW: What does it mean to "have reason"?

JLM: I'm going to be very Aristotelian here. Aristotle says that the level of rationality one can expect from an issue is established by the issue itself. When you are trying to understand something you meet with your senses, your rationality is about sensible data. On more abstract issues, the rationality will be more abstract. The rationality has to be appropriate to the level of abstraction.

KW: Give me a concrete example.

JLM: For instance, in personal relationships—friendships, love and like matters of the heart—you are committed to a very precise rationality. There are different steps that you cannot avoid, or if you do, everything is over. So, in the case of personal relationships, you must be involved in the relation if you want knowledge. If you don't trust, if you don't admit that you are committed to that person, if you want to remain neutral, there will be simply no understanding of the encounter. So, your faith, your trust, your commitment—whatever you want to call it—is a part of the rational interpretation of any phenomenon. Faith is not to take for granted something that is not real. It is to admit that, without some trust, I will not be able to get into the plot.

KW: You also point to the paradoxical nature of the Beatitudes and many other sayings of Jesus, the paradox being that we cannot turn them into a moral code, much less a sociology. What, then, are we to do with them?

JLM: Part of the power of those paradoxes is that we cannot do much with them. It is as if Jesus is showing us how much his way of thinking of God differs from ours. And that that is how the Father thinks. But it is beyond our grasp. The point of the paradox is to make it clear that we all have a long way to go. We are not yet Christians.

KW: You say something similar about miracles. You write of miracles as we find them in the gospels that "they offer us the purest examples of phenomenological givenness." Many people have trouble believing in miracles. And yet, you don't.

JLM: Well, with a question like that, you have to go to the history of philosophy first, and deconstruct it a bit. The conception of miracles is a very modern concept. Miracles were discovered, so to speak, in the seventeenth century, not only among English philosophers like Locke and Hume, but also many in France. During that period, to have a miracle you had to have two conditions. First, that there are rules or laws of nature that are universal and unbreakable—no exceptions. Second, that a miracle is an exception to the rules of nature.

KW: So miracles were, by definition, irrational.

JLM: Yes, during the Enlightenment in France, there were even Catholic thinkers like Nicolas Malebranche who explained miracles by saying that in the past, God produced miracles because people were so stupid that God had to impress them with tricks. But now that we are rational, there is no need for miracles.

KW: What's different now?

JLM: Today, we no longer have such laws of nature. We have only competing theories in fundamental physics and so on, but no unified rules.

KW: But we also have statistics that imply certain regularities in nature, don't we?

JLM: Statistics give us approximate interpretations of laws of nature, not laws that are absolutely certain. Even in philosophy, I don't know any serious philosopher today who endorses the position that there are a priori concepts like laws of nature. Not in phenomenology certainly, and not in analytical philosophy since the end of logical positivism, which was once so dominant here at the University of Chicago.

KW: So where does that leave the question of miracles?

JLM: In our postmodern society, I would say a miracle is something that apparently contradicts what we assume to be probably the rule. In fact, the category of miracles can be used, quite apart from religion, for anything that is exceptional, unexpected, or unexplained, but nevertheless makes sense and is trusted by people. It is simply a certain kind of what I call "events," a certain kind of phenomenon.

KW: I want to turn to another major point in your theological reflections. Among the many names of God, you have given priority to love, or agape, over other names like the infinite, the true, or the good. Moreover, you contend that "neither the Torah nor the wisdom literature nor the synoptic Gospels chance it." And you go on to argue that "the revelation of love as the final name of God represented precisely what Christ's contemporaries could and did not want to hear." That's a powerful statement. Why was that?

JLM: Because I think that the Jewish contemporaries of Christ who were the most observant—I mean those who attended the temple, the Pharisees, and even the lower classes of Jewish people—were obsessed by the fact that that they were the sons of Abraham, that they had the Torah, and the promise of land. For many of them, this was the revelation of their God. And it's why they were also obsessed by the re-establishment of the kingdom of God in Israel. Of course, we now know from Biblical scholars that the love of God is already a part of the First Testament in many ways, but not the crucial point.

KW: And in the New or Second Testament?

JLM: Yes, of course God's love is very much a part of the New Testament, but it is not until Letter of John (1 John 4) that God is *named* agape, or love.

KW: There are many other names of God. Why choose love?

JLM: Well first, very early on I studied the so-called negative theology of Dionysus and others and learned that the first thing to say is that there is no name for God. All names

are only analogical. And later when I began my study of the names of God, I found that in Dionysus, in Justin, in Origen, in Gregory of Nyssa, that God is named eros, and that the opposition between eros and agape, for instance, is just a fabrication. I was also impressed to find that Aquinas was the first to have said that the first name of God is being, as in Exodus 3:14. But in the same years that Aquinas made that important move, Bonaventure escaped the traditional order of God's names and said that the first is agape. I paid attention to that. Once I lectured on *God Without Being* in Rome at a time when my position was not well received among the pontifical universities, to say the least. At a dinner afterward, a friendly cardinal from the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith told me, "If I understand you well, you are a Bonaventurian." It was a very polite way of saying, "You are not a Thomist."

KW: If a student comes to you and says "Professor Marion, why should I study theology?" What do you tell him?

JLM: Because it is fun! It is the most exciting field for research because it encompasses everything. Among the secular disciplines, philosophy is the most powerful, the most exciting, the most difficult. But in theology, you are talking about everything: art, for instance, and literature—everything. In theology, you can even look down, so to speak, on philosophy, which can get a bit narrow-minded from time to time.

KW: So is there a gift that theology, at least Christian theology, can give to philosophy?

JLM: Oh, yes. Even Heidegger had an insight about that when he said, "Only a God can save us," meaning us philosophers. I don't take that for granted. Philosophy can disappear. It has happened to other disciplines in the past; it can happen again. Perhaps it will be saved by literature, perhaps by theology.

KW: Let's turn to the Church and saving the Church. You have said of French Catholicism that it has been tempted by two "heresies": integralism and progressivism.

JLM: Yes, we French have provided some of the best heresies in the twentieth century.

KW: In the United States, we have our own integralists and progressives among the bishops, the clergy, and laypeople, in Catholic media and movements. What advice do you have for Catholics of each faction?

JLM: The same advice that I have tried to give to French Catholics: don't pay too much attention to the Church as an organization. I mean, the Church is not the City of God; it is not even our bootcamp on earth. It is the place where we are called to try to behave as Christians.

KW: What *should* we attend to?

JLM: The most serious issue is the organization of each of *us*. If you want to do something to reform the Church, start by reforming yourself and perhaps there will be some consequences for the Church. We all know what is going wrong in the Catholic Church. For us it is not new. I could not imagine that the Church is without sinners. What is surprising is not that there is sin in the Church—even at a systemic level as an effect, as people say, of clericalism and abuse of power. What *is* surprising is that the Church remains the best washing machine to make white linen out of dirty linen. That is, to produce some saints, some holiness.

KW: Another Frenchman, Léon Bloy, famously declared that there is but one sadness, and that is for us not to be saints.

JLM: Yes, and at the purely institutional level, when you compare the churches with the academic world, the business world, the military, and political administrations, the churches are not the worst places. In the business world, for instance, people say, "Of course there is corruption." We know business is dirty, and we are used to that. There is no scandal there. In the case of the Church—fortunately—the contradiction between what the churches are and what they are supposed to be *is* a scandal.

But to be fair, we should admit that each of us is in the same situation as the Church, because we contradict what we say in our behavior. So, yes, the Church is not perfect, and it will never be. That's why I'm allowed to be a member of the Church. And that's also why self-proclaimed saints who take on the role of the reformer are always a bit suspect to me.

KW: You have had some pretty pungent things to say about Church reformers. You have urged French Catholics to "leave ecclesiastical reform to workers who specialize in domestic repairs," which may be a little bit difficult now that the laity are being called upon to lend their expertise to ministries of the Church.

JLM: And they are doing a good job, especially women at the parish level.

KW: Agreed, but let's get back to Church reformers. You're wary of Christians who claim to speak prophetically to the Church or to society. Your wariness seems appropriate because in American public life and in our churches, we tend to drape the mantle of prophet around anyone who speaks out about social ills—but only those with whom we already agree. On the other hand, we have witnessed a Martin Luther King, a Dorothy Day, and a handful of other genuinely prophetic figures. How do you distinguish between the authentic prophet and the sham?

JLM: First, I'm not qualified to distinguish among the prophets—in that case, I would claim to be a prophet myself! Second, it takes time to judge whether someone is truly a prophet. What is his or her legacy? History is instructive. The great originators or reformers in the Church are always people who at first were not well received, like many of the founders of religious orders. It's also true of originators in philosophy. It takes years to judge the impact. You judge by the results, and I think there are no other rules.

KW: You write that Christians should live by a different ethic; specifically, the ethic embedded in the words of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane, "Father, not my will, but yours be done." That seems impossible to achieve or even attempt in a culture built economically, psychologically, and prescriptively on self-willed individuals. In such a culture, how does one learn to do the will of the Father?

JLM: Why is our society at many levels ruled by the obsession of each individual to achieve his own will, his own self-creation or project? In fact, this is an effect of what Nietzsche very well described as *der Wille zur Macht*. That is usually translated as "the will to power," but the more precise meaning is "willing for the sake of willing itself." And that is what we see today.

KW: Is this really new?

JLM: I think so. In the past, people wanted to make money so they could spend it on things they needed or wanted. Now, we want to make more and more money for the sake of what? We don't know. It's like in business: corporations have to get bigger and bigger. Why? Just because that's the way it is. And this can go on indefinitely because there is no goal. We find ourselves in the terrible situation of being locked in the jail of self-affirmation.

KW: Some might say the jail of self-creation.

JLM: Creation is not something that comes from the creator. Creation is something that comes *over* the creator. The creator, the artist, is the first to be surprised by what has happened. So, Mozart or Tintoretto have no ambition to self-affirmation. They were surprised by the things they could do.

KW: So willing just for the sake of willing is…

JLM: It's nihilism. And Jesus is the one who says I never do *my* will. When I speak it is not *my* words. Which is very strange for us because to be sincere, we assume, is to speak your own thoughts, your words. Jesus, however, says you can trust me because I never say what I think, but only what the Father thinks. But what is really extraordinary is that Jesus is able to *do* the will of someone other than himself. That is the most difficult thing we can ever do.

KW: And so the message for contemporary Christians is what?

JLM: I would say the ability to give up one's own will is a very great strength for Christians. As long as they will only to achieve their own goals, they are really no different from anyone else. And that is especially important for political leaders. When most great leaders fail, it is because they are unable *not* to follow their own will. The tragedy of dictators is that the real world disappears when they insist on doing their own will.

KW: In 2020 you received the Ratzinger Prize in theology and while in Rome, you had a visit with Pope Francis. You have said you admire his metaphor of the Church as a field hospital. What was your impression of the man himself?

JLM: It was a brief experience, very formal. But I knew Bergoglio before he was elected pope because I was invited to address an international conference at the Jesuit university in Buenos Aires, where he was trained as a student. There I read a text published by him when he was archbishop of Buenos Aires, and in it I discovered the world of his theology.

KW: Meaning what, exactly?

JLM: Well, he is the first pope to be born in a megapolis, a place where poverty is more clearly seen than in this city or Paris, a place where there is no social lift. You can have a very good education; still, you will never reach the upper classes. It's a very hierarchical society where the question of those who are left behind is crucial—the poor, the elderly. So for him, poverty and the questions of the unborn and of pollution and so on all come together.

KW: Very different from the previous pope.

JLM: People who contrast the ideological positions of Bergoglio and Ratzinger are not aware that in the matter of liberation theology, Bergoglio played a great role as the deputy of Ratzinger. Because of his experience with the very poor, he was able to make a discernment between the different kinds of liberation theologies and so keep the best kind in Argentina.

KW: So you see more continuity between the two popes.

JLM: And between Pope Francis and Pope Paul VI, who initiated the reform of the Curia. It took a long time, but under Francis it has been done, and so far it appears that it is a good reform.

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RAND RICHARDS COOPER

Careening Toward Disaster

'Tár'

Few directors have whetted anticipation more keenly, or for longer, than Todd Field, who burst onto the scene in 2001 with *In the Bedroom*, a devastating account of a middle-aged couple who suffer the sudden, violent loss of a grown child. Field's insight in this near-perfect film lay in understanding how the seismic pressures of grief will exploit the fault lines of even a happy marriage, setting off eruptions of wounding rage. Script, camerawork, editing, and acting all combined to capture a marriage imploding in recrimination, and the result was a deftly calibrated, profoundly harrowing study of two people driven wild by grief.

In the Bedroom notched five Oscar nominations and thrilled critics. Eager fans had to wait five years for *Little Children*, which added three more Oscar nominations to Field's résumé, and then fifteen *more* years, during which the director pursued a number of unrealized projects—including a planned Showtime adaptation of Jonathan Franzen's novel *Purity*—before deciding to build his third movie around a highly topical and high-concept question: In the age of #MeToo, what if the Harvey Weinstein–like perpetrator were a woman, and a lesbian to boot? And thus we have *Tár*, a workplace-ethics, sexual-exploitation drama that offers a brooding, somber meditation on the pathology of power.

Tár is a very long movie that seems like two or even three different movies bundled together. Its first hour-plus sets up as contemporary social realism, beginning with an onstage interview with the famed conductor Lydia Tár (Cate Blanchett) by the *New Yorker* writer Adam Gopnik, who plays himself. Gopnik's fulsome introduction of Tár details her glimmering résumé and lauds her as an EGOT—winner of Emmy, Grammy, Oscar *and* Tony awards. Having conducted all Big Five American symphony orchestras (New York, Boston, Cleveland, Chicago, Philadelphia), Tár is now ensconced as the first female conductor of the vaunted Berlin Philharmonic, and Nan A. Talese at Doubleday is publishing her memoir, *Tár on Tár*—"a perfect stocking stuffer," Gopnik chortles, "if you have a really big stocking!"

Tár herself—or rather, her onstage presence in the interview—is just as impressive. Describing her ethnographic field work in the Amazon; citing her mentor Leonard Bernstein on the concept of *teshuvah*; detailing the crisis in Gustav Mahler's life when his wife, Alma, left him for Walter Gropius; telling a droll story about a seventeenth-century French composer who injured himself with his conducting staff and died of gangrene—bing bang bop, it's the nimble cultural volleying of a performer at the top of her game, as well as an adroit rendering of a highbrow, 92nd-Street-Y kind of Manhattan cultural event, where the apt reference or zingy bon mot triggers a murmur of faintly self-congratulatory pleasure—the smart interviewer, the brilliant cultural star, the audience that *gets* it.

Tár's performance continues in the next scene, during the master class in conducting she teaches at Juilliard, where she prowls the room, dishing out an entertaining but caustic monologue and wielding a stiletto wit on students to reinforce her points. It is an old-school, deeply male pedagogy, replete with smiling, scathing takedowns; and our awareness of the dissonance between Tár's overbearing teaching style and our era's sensitivities creates a gripping dramatic irony, as we watch her careening heedlessly toward disaster. When a student conductor remarks that he's "not really into Bach," explaining that "as a BIPOC pangender person, Bach's misogynistic life makes it impossible for me," Tár pounces. Scolding the kid—"Don't be so eager to be offended!"—she then sits him down next to her at the piano, where she plays a Bach melody and continues riffing at his expense. If Bach's talent can be reduced to his category, she warns, "so can yours." Reminding the class that the composer of the piece under consideration is (a) Icelandic, and (b) "a superhot young woman," Tár asks, "How can any of these things possibly relate to the person you see sitting before us?" Humiliated, the student leaves.

Evidence of the conductor's toxic egotism continues to pile up back in Berlin, where she lives with her long-suffering wife, Sharon (Nina Hoss). In a startling incident at their young daughter Petra's school, Tár approaches another little girl, who has been teasing Petra, and smilingly informs her that "if you do it again, I will *get* you." Add a series of desperate emails from a female former student that hint at inappropriate behavior on Tár's part, plus a new young cellist she clearly seems to be grooming, and we think we know what we're in for: a tightly focused realist drama of an arrogant icon's comeuppance and downfall, via social-media opprobrium and the cudgel of cancel culture. It's going to be enjoyable, in the manner of Jack Nicholson's demolition in *A Few Good Men*. We expect we may even see a courtroom.

But this is not quite what Field has in store for his overweening protagonist, or for us. The second half of *Tár* takes surprising, even jarring turns, especially once we learn that the desperate former student has committed suicide—and see Tár hurriedly deleting all her emails. Yes, Tár's actions do catch up with her, including a video of her bullying the student in the Juilliard class, and serious professional ramifications do ensue. Yet *Tár* isn't really about cancel culture. Cancel culture provides the spark, but

what Field is interested in is the combustion: not Lydia Tár's professional undoing, but her psychological unraveling.

That unraveling begins with Field (who also wrote the script) titrating in small, strange impingements on Lydia's reality—disturbing little sonic mysteries, appropriately enough. The intruding chime of a doorbell coming from somewhere uncertain. A strangled cry of anguish Tár hears while jogging in the woods. A loud ticking as she lies sleepless at 3 a.m., which turns out to be the metronome in her study. Who turned it on? A beeper that goes off in the middle of the night. Is it her fridge? And there are other enigmas. Who has anonymously left Lydia the gift of a Vita Sackville-West novel—and what is the honeycomb or maze-like pattern drawn on its title page?

Having established a texture of meticulous realism, Field then undermines it, importing gothic tropes that introduce an unexpected ominousness into his film. In one scene, Lydia enters her daughter's room to find the same honeycomb pattern executed in Play-Doh and her daughter hiding behind diaphanous curtains, whispering. Viewers may be forgiven for thinking they have been beamed into *The Omen*. When Tár subsequently discovers the honeycomb pattern drawn on a note in her assistant's apartment, then suffers a nightmare of being immolated on a bed in the middle of a lagoon, and *then* experiences a bizarre and disturbing encounter with a haggard neighbor, whose naked and desperately ill elderly mother has to be lifted onto her commode, the movie slides into nightmare. Ominous camera angles follow Tár through her flat; a surreal sequence in which she follows the cellist into an abandoned building leads to a scary encounter with a snarling, wolf-like dog.

These scenes of peril and fear pump sinister unreality into the film until the line between what's actually happening and what might be happening only in Tár's tortured imagination is all but effaced, culminating in her calamitous undoing at opening night of the Berlin Philharmonic's Mahler concert. But is it really happening? Or are we seeing a dire revenge fantasy playing out in the conductor's tormented mind?

One can trace this sinister quality through the disparate materials and scenarios of Todd Field's three films, to differing effect in each. Where the almost deranging gloom of *In the Bedroom* welled up from depths of grief and despair, Field's next film, *Little Children*—in which a bored young housewife conducts an affair with an equally bored father she meets at their kids' playground—is drenched in an ominousness that can't be accounted for by its familiar suburban agenda of marital ennui. Watch

Cate Blanchett in *Tár*

the movie's trailer and you might be forgiven for thinking that it is a horror film. It's John Updike meets *The Babadook*.

Field is drawn to situations of latent dread, where a roiling disturbance lies beneath a still surface. In *Tár*, Field works out the surface/depth dichotomy in ways that burden both the balance and the pacing of the film. *Tár* is too long—an hour in, all we have is one interview, one class that goes south, one lunch meeting, and some basic establishing of characters—and its drama is lopsided. The conductor's undoing doesn't even begin, really, until almost two hours in, and then unrolls with frantic haste. Rumors erupt, there's a social-media blowup—and before we know it, protestors are massing, Tár faces dismissal, her wife abandons her, her star cellist ruthlessly mocks her, and she is losing her mind.

The haste makes for uncertain storytelling and the sense of incompatible cinematic modes forcibly yoked together. We are jerked from the prosaic to the paranoid; a scene of Lydia at a legal deposition is followed by bad-dream shots of people silently turning away from her in a parking lot, or heads around a boardroom table turning in unison to stare at her. Suddenly, madness looms. When neighbors knock at the door of her Berlin flat to inform her that they are showing their next-door apartment to potential buyers and to ask her to refrain from playing the piano during the showing, Tár slams the door in their faces, then picks up an accordion and plays it with harsh Brechtian dissonance, lurching around her apartment while cackling, "Apartment to sell, apartment to sell!"

Lost amid the surreal strangeness is a short sequence at her old family home in a drab working-class New York neighborhood, and a curt interaction with a man who is presumably her brother; the scene seems like a remnant from a narrative strand eliminated from the film. It is followed by the abrupt close of the movie, worlds away from Berlin and New York in the far reaches of Asia, where Tár—presumably banished to the outermost orbit of the classical-music cosmos—conducts the score for some sort of video-game cosplay before an audience dressed in elaborate animal costumes. And so what began as *A Few Good Men* before becoming *The Omen* and then veering into the surreal paranoia of *Repulsion* now ends with *Requiem for a Heavyweight* refracted through *Eyes Wide Shut*. Some movies persuade by raising more questions than they answer. Others merely baffle. *Tár* is a bit of a mess.

What isn't at all a mess is Cate Blanchett's performance. To the cascade of accolades currently pouring down on her I will simply add a dollop of awe at the versatility of her long career. Both the variety and the sheer amount of acting on Blanchett's résumé make Lydia Tár look like an underachiever. Her stage work has reached from Sophocles to Shakespeare, from Chekhov to David Mamet. She got her first Oscar nomination for playing the young Queen Elizabeth in the eponymous 1998 film. Not to be typecast, she also played the elf leader Galadriel in all three *Lord of the Rings* blockbusters; starred opposite Bruce Willis and Billy Bob Thornton in the 2001 crime comedy, *Bandits*; had the leading role in Kieślowski's *Heaven*, playing a grieving woman driven to a desperate act of terrorism; channeled a tomboyish Katharine Hepburn in Scorsese's *The Aviator*; and acted one of the six versions of Bob Dylan in the 2007 Todd Haynes novelty tribute film, *I'm Not There*.

The title of that last film might stand in for the basic mystery of Blanchett's power as an actor. The critic Stephen Holden has praised her "mercurial fluidity," and indeed Blanchett seems to be everyone and no one—a protean and unearthly quality captured perfectly by Jack Davison's highly abstract photos of her in a recent *New York Times Magazine* cover article. When Meryl Streep performs—another actress famed for chameleon-like powers of sympathy—you somehow never forget that this is Streep performing. Blanchett is more of a mysterious dissolver. Her presence on the screen is so variable that in looking back over her credits you can be surprised: Oh, she was in *that*? Early in her career she often played callow, feckless lightweights. (Remember the maligned would-be girlfriend in *The Talented Mr. Ripley*, or the posh schoolteacher victim of Judi Dench's sexual predation in *Notes on a Scandal*?) But as Blanchett has aged, her face has become more interesting, and she has grown into a capacity for a jagged intensity by turns commanding and disturbed.

One wonders if this quality is what tempts directors toward explorations of paranoia and madness. With a nod to Blanchett's triumphant portrayal of Blanche DuBois in the Broadway revival of *A Streetcar Named Desire*, Woody Allen's *Blue Jasmine* (2013) cast her as a Manhattan socialite adrift and penniless after her corrupt hedge-fund-manager husband goes bankrupt and kills himself. The clash of arrogant superiority and sexual coquettishness with the humiliations of penury drew from Blanchett a mesmerizing performance that the film purveyed through closeups of her face, now defiantly serene, now furtively calculating, now harrowed and absent. Blanchett's intensity pushed *Blue Jasmine* beyond the narcissistic anxiety that is Woody Allen's lifelong go-to theme, toward something Allen has rarely touched: psychosis.

Blanchett drives *Tár* toward the same dark depths of torment. In the culminating throes of the film, we see the conductor sprawled on her couch, head in her hands and hyperventilating with despair, or watching an old video of her hero, Leonard Bernstein, as tears stream down her face—and we know we are watching, suitably enough, an *egregia maestra* of the art of acting.

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SNOW GLOBE

Judith Skillman

How many snow flakes fall on this house
with the red roof. A deer comes to graze—
washed in umber, white-tailed, it nuzzles
drift-fixed wands of blackberry, pulls stems
frothed with inch-thick hoarfrost. Icicles bloom
from failing gutters. If you peer close
a woman wanders from room to room,
glaze-eyed, looking for her lost romance.

Fixed diagnoses: *hallux rigidus,*
spinal stenosis, sifted by a demiurge.
Listen as she washes miniscule dishes,
china small as atoms. After the urge
to leave home wrests loose of the glass
she sits down alone to watch Christmas.

JUDITH SKILLMAN *is the author of more than twenty full-length collections. Visit www.judithskillman.com*

The Mystic Adventures of Rodger Kamenetz

JASON BERRY

The Jews' history was huge and murky
no room for it anywhere in Europe.
If only the Jews could inherit Texas
it might be big enough to hold their past.

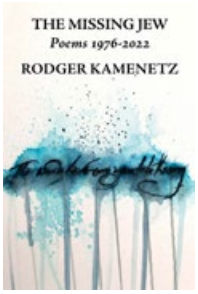
The Jews who went out West
wore cowboy hats
like Cousin Dan from Oklahoma
who showed up at my grandfather's funeral
by uncanny instinct
in his cowboy hat and boots
and just sat in the living room
while we stared.

—"The Invisible," Rodger Kamenetz

In an author's note on this enlarged collection of his first book, American Jewish poet Rodger Kamenetz writes of being "acutely aware," in 1976, that his earliest works "had chosen me." In his description, the creative moment was instantaneous:

> The poems came out in a rush, typed on an old Royal standard typewriter on a continuous scroll. They were not then written on cut pages meant to be published in periodicals, they were an unrolling, ongoing noisy family of poems demanding to join the family.

That scrolling, which followed the deaths of his paternal grandparents, left Kamenetz with an uneasy feeling about an opaque ancestral map, "a missing world of Jews from the Old Country."



THE MISSING JEW
Poems 1976–2022

RODGER KAMENETZ
Ben Yehuda Press
$19.95 | 246 pp.

> In the great silence which is the desert
> at the center of Jewish learning
> which is no paradise
> all the laws, written and unwritten
> have their common root
> in the Tree of No Knowledge.

Many years later, the poet located towns bearing the Kamenetz surname in Ukraine and Belarus.

The arc of this poetry collection, which spans more than four decades, creates a viewfinder on the evolution of Kamenetz, now seventy-two years old. The search for origins that had charged his early poems later opened, during his forties, into an ongoing spiritual odyssey that remains relatively rare among American writers—the mystic's quest for God. Kamenetz's journey quakes with Christian echoes, yet his baseline is the Kabbalah, the ancient mystical teachings of Judaism.

Kamenetz, who lives in New Orleans, has produced seven books of poetry, five nonfiction works, and numerous essays. Since retiring several years ago from his position as a professor of literature at Louisiana State University, he has worked as a dream analyst, generating essays on what he considers a sacred essence imbued in the story fragments embedded in sleep.

The turning point in Kamenetz's career came with his 1994 bestseller, *The Jew in the Lotus: A Poet's Rediscovery of Jewish Identity in Buddhist India*, which the documentarian Laurel Chiten later turned into a PBS film. The book recounts a historic dialogue between Jewish rabbis and the Dalai Lama; it appealed to Jewish audiences hungry for deeper spirituality. Those urges, Kamenetz surmised in 1997, stemmed in part from aftershocks of the Holocaust: "It was hard to find Jewish teachers who weren't angry at God. And if you are angry at God, you can't teach the deeper, sweeter parts of Judaism."

Sweetness surfaces in the later poems of *The Missing Jew*, written since the mid-nineties. They show Kamenetz's leap from the unknown provinces of a young poet to the broader vistas of hope experienced by the older writer. Consider the following lines, in which we hear Kamenetz speaking to the nineteenth-century Ukrainian Hasidic master and mystic, Rabbi Nachman of Bratzlav:

> Reb Nachman, look at me now. I'm trying to dance.
> Even from heaven where you study all day with the sages,
> It must be amusing to see my bony knees knocking,
> My knobby ankles' shining thin skin—it's a kind of dance
> We make here when we tremble or shiver.

The Jew in the Lotus emerged from a journey with a group of rabbis to Dharamsala, India, where Tibetan Buddhists led by the Dalai Lama had established a home in exile. Kamenetz, his wife, the novelist Moira Crone, and their two young daugh-

Rodger Kamenetz

OWEN MURPHY

ters had recently been traumatized by the death of their infant son. That aching loss shadowed Kamenetz's travels. *The Jew in the Lotus* explores meditation as a response to suffering, the immense spiritual wounds inflicted by the murder of two-thirds of all European Jews during World War II, and the Tibetan diaspora after the region was seized by the Chinese dictatorship. "Destroying Tibet's religion has been a key Chinese policy," Kamenetz wrote. "Monks and nuns have been singled out for public humiliation and torture."

At first, Kamenetz wasn't entirely confident about his encounter with the Buddhists. "I had hardly ever been what one could call a spiritual seeker," he conceded.

> I was deeply interested in Jewishness—as culture and history. But I wasn't looking to Judaism—the religion—for answers to my deepest problems.... I presumed that the participants in this dialogue would have strong religious commitments. I would be standing outside of that.

But it was the Dalai Lama who said to his Jewish visitors: "Tell me your secret—the secret of Jewish spiritual survival in exile." Kamenetz was moved. About a history that included more than two millennia of exile, persecution, the Crusades, the Inquisition, and pogroms before the Holocaust, he wrote, "Few outsiders have ever looked upon this survival as much of an accomplishment.... The idea that Jewish history, with all its traumas, is relevant to another exiled people was inspiring."

Buddhism is a religion without any central god. It focuses instead on the elevation of the mind, how humankind purifies suffering—which emerged as the central reference point between the rabbis and the Dalai Lama. One chapter in *The Jew and the Lotus* follows a wide-ranging discussion of angels. "Visualizing a world in which every blade of grass growing has a cheering section of angels is a powerful help," noted Kamenetz drolly:

> Logically, angels are either real or not real. But in the world of intuition, that logic no longer applies. Beautifully and profoundly, the image of two angels in dialogue captured the essence of the exchange between Rabbi Schachter and the Dalai Lama. Together they had raised the dialogue between Jews and Tibetans from the world of knowing to the world of intuition...a very high place to be.

Rodger Kamenetz grew up in a large Baltimore family. His father was a successful pharmacist, and the family attended a "cruise-ship synagogue with a pair of rabbis at the helm," as Kamenetz told interviewer Arline Klatte years later. "It was wonderful in some ways. It was liberal and socially engaged."

Kamenetz began writing poetry at fifteen. That year, in 1965, after tutoring Black students in a synagogue program, he marched with demonstrators

to Washington D.C. to protest the death of an activist minister in Selma, Alabama. He was perhaps the sole protester during the civil-rights era to recite T. S. Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" while marching. "Maybe I took pleasure in knowing Prufrock was even wimpier with women than I was," he noted in a 2016 essay defending Bob Dylan's Nobel Prize in Literature. "I could mock Prufrock's waspy tea party social life, his gentlemanly repression." But Eliot's verses also showed Kamenetz that poetry had an even greater potential:

> I never realized before how a poem could not just be a lyrical statement, but an entire world. The raw modernity of the diction was refreshing…the mix of high and low culture: "sawdust restaurants with oyster shells" and "In the room the women come and go / talking of Michelangelo."

In 1966, Kamenetz entered Yale at age sixteen. His output quickened as he went on to earn a master's degree in writing at Johns Hopkins, followed by another master's in 1975, this time in comparative literature at Stanford. Elation came as he followed Dante through the *Commedia*, reading the great epic in the original Italian; he also experienced a growing anger at T. S. Eliot's anti-Semitism, reflected in poems like *The Waste Land*. That reality soon supplanted Kamenetz's adolescent zeal. When he met Charles Reznikoff at Stanford, the senior Jewish poet replaced Eliot as a stylistic influence.

It took Kamenetz many years to work through his anger over Eliot's spiteful language. Eventually, he arrived at a place of literary detachment, publishing *The Lowercase Jew* in 2003. As a touchstone, Kamenetz cites Eliot's poem "Burbank with a Baedeker: Bleistein with a Cigar."

> But this or such was Bleistein's way:
> A saggy bending of the knees
> And elbows, with the palms turned out,
> Chicago Semite Viennese.
>
> A lusterless protrusive eye
> Stares from the protozoic slime
> At a perspective of Canaletto.
> The smoky candle end of time
>
> Declines. On the Rialto once,
> The rats are underneath the piles
> The jew is underneath the lot.
> Money in furs. The boatman smiles.

Seizing on Eliot's aversion to spelling "Jew" with a capital "J," Kamenetz in his volume's title poem puts Eliot on trial in a heavenly court.

> Bleistein here, pardon the cigar,
> Remember me, *palms turned out,*
> *Chicago Semite Viennese?*
> Like I'm some kind of ape?
> You didn't like my baggy pants.
> Now I'm here to take your measure.
>
> To prosecute is dreck, but I got assigned.
> You think God don't got a sense of humor?

For Exhibit A, Kamenetz's character, Bleistein, cites Eliot's famous "Gerontion":

> My house is a decayed house,
> And the jew squats on the window sill,
> the owner,
> Spawned in some estaminet of Antwerp.

On this, Bleistein zeroes in:

> *Squats?* what's the matter?
> Did you owe your landlord rent?
> And *spawned*—like a shrimp in a tank?
> … And what about the lowercase *j*?

As the trial unfolds, Kamenetz's earlier zeal—"Still I got to admire your style / the classy way you built those lines"—segues into the seasoned artist's wit. The Judge tells Eliot:

> When Hitler wrote crude poems
> on the walls of the heart,
> Like you he made a metaphor.
> Jews were pests.

Eliot protests: he can't be blamed for Hitler! "I wrote those lines before the war, / It was a different time."

The Judge remonstrates him: "You never once apologized, retracted or removed those lines."

Eliot ripostes: "But I won a Nobel Prize. Surely—"

Bleistein proposes punishment:

> Send him from here
> to Hyam Plutzik's grandson's bar mitzvah,
> For the Jews it will seem an afternoon,
> For him, a hundred years.

As the 2020 pandemic lockdowns began, Kamenetz followed the news of people clinging to life on ventilators and plunged into a can-to-by-canto commentary on *The Divine Comedy* via Facebook posts.

As Dante, full of fear, relies on Virgil during the descent through the *Inferno*'s nightmare phantasmagoria, Kamenetz detects Dante's "underlying reality."

> To pass through the gates into the underworld—into the depths of the unconscious as well—you must read not just the words but also images. You must do more. You must imagine the feelings.

Across the many months of following Dante out of hell, up the mountain of *Purgatorio* and into the *Paradiso*, Kamenetz found something powerful. As he told me in an email:

> Everything I valued in Eliot comes from Dante, his deepest source. My engagement with Dante has been a challenge yet in the end a confirmation of the teaching I draw from Rebbe Nachman of Breslov, whose early nineteenth-century kabbalistic tales touched many Jews. His tomb in Ukraine is a pilgrimage site. Dante and Nachman seem to be saying the same thing: The soul naturally longs for the good. Seeing the good in another is a blessing. Feeling love we live in joy. Learning to seek the good in others we seek the good in ourselves. Our longing for the good is ultimately our longing for God.

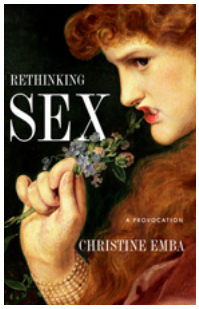
Though his journey is far from done, Kamenetz's search for God expands the spiritual vocabulary of our time, crossing the borders of faith, driven by a powerful compassion and a self-sustaining wit.

JASON BERRY *is the author, most recently, of* City of a Million Dreams, *a New Orleans history and the subject of his documentary film now in outreach screenings.*

Too Casual?

DANIEL WALDEN

We have seen, as of late, a surfeit of books and articles about the reconfiguration, the reimagining, the regrounding of sex. The philosopher Amia Srinivasan asks whether there is a "right to sex," and culture blogs conduct interviews with twenty-somethings who breathlessly insist that they have somehow made monogamy radical. Christine Emba has been part of these conversations: the *Washington Post* columnist has written a number of columns and short essays over the past several years that attempt to sift through both her own thoughts about sex and the experiences of others. The most persistent note in her work has been the profound *dissatisfaction* that young people, and especially young women, feel about their sex lives and past sexual experiences. She organizes and systematizes these thoughts in her book *Rethinking Sex*. How, she asks, can we rethink our assumptions about sex in order to make our encounters not merely consensual but *good* in every dimension?



RETHINKING SEX
A Provocation

CHRISTINE EMBA
Sentinel
$27 | 224 pp.

Emba is a conscientious writer, aware both of the scope of her project and of the limitations of any single author's perspective. She acknowledges that she will concentrate on the difficulties faced by women who have sex primarily or exclusively with men, both because this is the perspective that she knows best and because of the ways in which the social scripts of heterosexuality inescapably structure the sex lives of everyone else, heterosexual or not. She also argues—and her evidence puts her argument beyond serious doubt—that women are far and away the more aggrieved and more *often* aggrieved parties in these encounters, which is perhaps the most compelling reason for focusing on them. A great many people are quite unhappy in what we generally agree is an important part of their lives, and the cause of that unhappiness is worth investigating on those grounds alone.

Emba lays out the problem thus: the sexual revolution did indeed liberate sexuality in the sense that it removed many of the barriers to saying "yes" to sex that had traditionally constrained people and had disproportionately constrained women. What it did not do is address the many reasons why a person, especially a woman, might still want to say "no." Women now face much less social opprobrium for having sex, but even with the widespread availability of contraception they still bear far more of the risk of sex than men do, and the cultural imaginary that informs our conception of normal and acceptable sexual activity is shaped by a profit-seeking porn industry that caters primarily to the fantasies of men. Women have far more leeway to have sex with men—and face a great deal of cultural pressure to do so, even if only to lay claim to some worldly seasoning—but they seem to have no more positive reasons for doing so than before. Even the appeal of sex itself is often reduced, because porn has brought previously unusual and extreme sex acts into the mainstream of straight men's expectations. The result of this is that many straight women have come to dislike dating, and remaining single (and celibate) seems a lot more appealing. Men are affected by this as well: both men and women report feeling that their dates regarded them as disposable, and both report treating other people as disposable too. We need, Emba contends, an erotic *ressourcement*, a rethinking of sex down to its roots. We need a sexual ethic that is more grounded in the social and bodily particularities of men and women and that rejects a "throwaway culture" that treats people as objects. Only this radical reimagining can give us a culture of sex that respects the personhood of everyone involved.

The project is ambitious, and Emba doesn't pretend to offer more than a start. To her credit, she does not allow herself the luxury of detachment. It would be easy to let her interview subjects' experiences to do all of the talking without risking anything herself. Such a position would be safer, but it would also implicate her in a kind of documentary voyeurism. She opts instead to share her own experiences alongside those of her subjects, and her choice pays off admirably: a reader cannot help but agree that something *is* wrong with the way we think about sex, and that correcting this wrong demands more than a change in terminology or an adjustment to high-school sex-ed curricula.

But establishing that something is wrong is only the first part of the argument, and Emba's attempts to begin thinking about a solution often seem more like intellectual gestures than the foundations of an argument. This is most visible in her chapter on men's and women's difference, which attempts to grapple simultaneously with biology, socialization, and structural sexism under the umbrella of "difference." The

chapter culminates in a rough recapitulation of the argument first posed by the likes of Andrea Dworkin and Catharine A. MacKinnon: that the supposedly equal parties consenting to heterosexual sex are in fact not equal at all, and women are always-already coerced before sex is even on the table.

If this is true—and I think any serious consideration of the evidence thoroughly vindicates Dworkin and MacKinnon—then the problem is already well beyond the scope of anything that a different sexual ethic can remedy unless we are prepared to follow Dworkin, MacKinnon, Angela Davis, and so many other feminist thinkers into expanding our sexual ethic to include a sweeping commitment to radical political change. A political situation characterized by the presence of oppressed and oppressor classes—for this is precisely what Emba suggests by the constant presence of material and social coercion in women's sexual lives—will not be ameliorated by more considerate or courteous relations between them. There can be no ethical way for men to relate to women in such circumstances apart from a firm and conscious commitment to ending this inequality. But Emba does not demand such commitment, and what sort of solution she envisions is not clear. It has something to do with willing the good of the other, moral attention, and empathy. All these are good things in themselves, and good to apply to our sex lives; they also do very little to address the real constraints that women face.

It is in Emba's last chapter, where she begins to outline an answer, that the more serious flaws in her argument show themselves. After discussing several young women's positive experiences waiting to have sex or deciding not to have sex for a while, she poses two questions: "What if the answer was to have less casual sex? For that matter, what if the answer was to have sex under the standard of love?" Taking the relationship between these questions for granted is a failure of critical attention on Emba's part. That casual sex—that is, sex outside a lasting relationship commitment—cannot take place under the standard of love—that is, as part of willing the good of the other—is not obvious. In an essay titled "What Is Sex For?", David M. Halperin has argued that sex may aim inescapably at love even in the anonymous context of gay bathhouses, and indeed that the anonymity and social leveling of such places makes this aim *more* apparent rather than less. Whatever one thinks of that argument, Halpern's critique exposes the diversity of meanings that sex can bear even within distinct and bounded communities, and in so doing demands that we all think more deeply and critically about the limitations of our own contexts.

Indeed, it seems to me that a critical attitude toward context must be the basis of any sound sexual ethic, whether Catholic or otherwise. As Gareth Moore, OP, observes in his superb book on sexuality, *The Body in Context* (2004), our sexual acts are communicative but they are not propositional: they aren't part of the system of signs called language and so can't carry the same kind of immediate meaning, but they exist alongside language as gestures that can mean a great deal in particular circumstances. A pair of lovers might have sex after an exhausting fight in order to signal that the fight is over and all is forgiven, while lovers who parted as friends might have sex upon seeing one another again years later in order to show that their delight in one another is undiminished. It seems impossible to contend that the former wills the good of the other while the latter does not, and it would require undignified intellectual contortions to argue that two people who have sex as a fond gesture of remembered affection are treating one another as disposable. Nor is a commitment to permanence a guard against ongoing daily exploitation. That said, there are many good reasons for not having casual sex: we may be aiming at a higher good by following religious prohibitions, or guarding ourselves against sudden emotional attachments, or simply keeping a promise to someone we care about. But to pretend that people cannot make such gestures out of love is both foolish and unproductive. Emba's discussion identifies real, pressing concerns that demand to be addressed: the fact of casual sex is not one of them.

Far from undermining Emba's case, I think that Moore's insistence on the gestural status of sex helps refocus attention on the problem: the context in which many women are having casual sex makes it impossible for them to do so "under the standard of love"—that is, in a way that shows love both for themselves and for their partners. Prolonged abstention may very well be the only loving sexual response to such circumstances, but it is the circumstances that ultimately need to be changed. Halperin's "What Is Sex For?" illuminates an essential point: other contexts, with other ways for sex to mean something, are possible, and in fact are already here. They may not be what Emba has in mind because they do not allow sex to bear the sort of love that Emba would like it to, but their existence should inoculate us against the kind of pessimism about sex that she describes in her second chapter. Like many gay people, I will happily agree that something about heterosexuality is broken…but it doesn't need to be. It is possible, and indeed for Christians it is absolutely necessary, to build a political world in which men and women are genuinely equal—in which no unspoken distinction is made between the worth of men's and women's wants and needs and through which we can better see the abolition of social distinction to which St. Paul calls us. We are not yet there: there is still "Jew and Greek," the divide of ethnicity; there is still "bond and free," the divide of social caste; and there is still "male and female," the division of gender. In all these we set one kind of person over another. But Christ is among us, and so we know that the abolition of human division is real and working itself out. Christine Emba has written a book that underscores the need for that work to continue.

DANIEL WALDEN *is a writer and classicist. He spends his time thinking about Homeric philology, Catholic socialism, musical theater, and the Michigan Wolverines.*

The rebuilt Dzong of Shigatse with prayer flags, Shigatse, Tibet

LUIS DAFOS/ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

Distance & Destiny

MELODY S. GEE

Pilgrimage through prostration is the ancient Tibetan practice of traveling the earth one body-length at a time. Author Tsering Yangzom Lama explains the ritual during an interview with the University of British Columbia's Himalaya Program: the pilgrim lies prostrate with arms stretched overhead, rises, then lies down again, placing her feet where her fingers had marked the ground. In this way, Tibetans traverse the earth around a holy site or across the entire country, connected to the land that holds gods, spirits, history, and their very identity.

As described in Lama's debut novel, *We Measure the Earth with Our Bodies*, prostrations were a daily ritual in Tibet before the Chinese invasion and occupation. For her protagonist, Dolma, feeling the earth of her ancestral homeland is only a distant dream. Born in a refugee camp in Nepal, she has never known the land her family left behind. "To measure the earth with my body," Dolma yearns, "to know our country with my own skin. It seemed like the only way to fathom such a land." Tibet's landscape of plateaus, red mountains, and vast caves is as much a living character as the book's three female narrators—preteen sisters Lhamo and Tenkyi, who survive a brutal exile from Tibet, and Lhamo's daughter, Dolma, whom we meet fifty years after her mother's family became stateless refugees.

WE MEASURE THE EARTH WITH OUR BODIES
A Novel

TSERING YANGZOM LAMA
Bloomsbury Publishing
$24.30 | 368 pp.

In 1960, after years of militarized occupation and with the Dalai Lama in hiding, Lhamo and Tenkyi are forced to flee with the rest of their village. The Chinese have banned all religious practices, systematically tortured Tibetan nuns and monks, razed monasteries, and appropriated natural resources. "They will not be satisfied with our land," the girls' mother warns. "They want to possess our minds." As Lhamo and Tenkyi head south toward Nepal, another elder declares, "We cannot kill our enemies. We should do what our ancestors have done. Bury our things safely in the earth and leave until this madness ends." Many do secure their

last possessions underground, as if in the hands of a trusted loved one, before departing. The villagers bring only essentials. Most important is a statue, less than five inches tall, saved by a village elder from the ruins of a looted monastery. Sculpted from mudstone—the earth of their seized homeland—the skeletal figure wears a loincloth and looks skyward with a pained expression. The girls' mother recognizes it immediately: a nameless deity carved in a human image that healed her long ago and is known to "disappear and reappear as if by its own will. When the time is right, the Saint comes to those who need protection." The saint wanders, stateless as the people it blesses, bearing the entirety of Tibetan culture in its small figure.

By the time they reach their final refugee camp in Pokhara, Nepal, the sisters are orphaned and shattered. Though they have finally stopped moving, their lives are in no way settled. Severed from their people, culture, religion, and ancestral land, their camp is also isolated from Nepalese society, leaving them without a sense of place to even begin building a new life. This is the devastation of forced displacement—the erasure of past, present, and future. Despite everything they've lost, Lhamo and Tenkyi forge a life in the camp with relatives and neighbors. All the while, the Nameless Saint watches over the camp, blesses the waters, heals the sick, guides prayers, and keeps them safe. While he is near, there is a shred of hope: "One quiet day, we will walk back to the elevated land of our home, kneel down, and dig. And our lives will reemerge, unsullied by the bloodshed and sadness of the world. And the Bhomi, the People of the Snows, will live again as we have for thousands of years."

Decades later, long after the Nameless Saint has gone missing, we meet Lhamo's daughter, Dolma, a university student living with Tenkyi in Toronto and eager to become a scholar of Tibetan studies. Dolma is untethered and in-between, a stranger to her homes in both Tibet and Canada. Her mother remains in the camp scratching out a living and hardly able to bear their separation. In Toronto, Dolma reflects that the city "is the camp built anew…a copy of a copy of home. Another temporary stop in an endless journey." By this time, the Tibetan diaspora have waited and languished for over sixty years, wondering how the world has forgotten about them. "In the 90s the Tibetan cause was trendy, popular," Lama says in the University of British Columbia interview. "We had the Tibetan Freedom Concert, *Free Tibet* stuff everywhere. Then, the West decided that China would be a major trading partner."

It is Dolma who encounters the Nameless Saint, across an ocean and after all these years, in the home of a wealthy collector. At a party filled with well-traveled and supremely confident academics, Tibet becomes a subject of Western research and analysis, as Dolma's professors hold forth on tourism ethics, mimesis, and metaphysics. But for Dolma, the goal of becoming a scholar is not to acquire knowledge. She studies history as a way to return home. "I want to be close to them, closer than even prayer can bring me. I want to be near to these saints in their time, in their world." She is stunned when the keeper of the collector's art estate sneaks Dolma in to see the family's latest acquisition, a small mudstone figure with an expression of "devastating sorrow or blinding confusion, or perhaps even ecstatic revelation." There is no going back from this moment thrust upon her: "It's clear that my life has changed forever. The Nameless Saint has come to me and braided our fates together. Whether I find a way to bring him back to our camp or do nothing, I will never be able to move on from him."

As Dolma makes an irrevocable choice about the Nameless Saint, the narrative pulls us back to her mother and aunt's youth, and the novel's two timelines begin moving toward each other urgently to reunite all these separated lives. We see the saint heal young Tenkyi of pain, seizures, visions, and voices, before she departs the camp for school in a faraway city. Meanwhile, young Lhamo enters a difficult marriage while emotionally tethered to the young man who had arrived at the camp with the saint. This young man is the novel's fourth narrator and he too remains connected to Lhamo across years of travel to broker his people's relics and artifacts. With sections titled "Daughters," "Sisters," "Lovers," and finally "Self," the novel asserts that relationships are what remain to bind and ground stateless people.

Ultimately, Dolma must answer a call to return home to her mother and embark on an impossible journey toward the closed and heavily guarded border of Tibet, the home she has never seen but has fought for all her life. A third generation in exile, she draws nearer to the plateau that holds her gods, her ancestors, and the lives her grandparents and mother left behind. On Dolma's trek home, distinctions—between human and gods, present and past, destiny and choice—collapse in and around her, body and land shimmering with holy mystery. She must find a way to carry every scattered piece of her family alongside her grief, survivor's guilt, and hunger for both the past and wide-open future.

We Measure the Earth with Our Bodies asks: How do we live without home? Every character faces this dilemma unflinchingly, fully alive in prose rich with yearning, emotional depth, and courage. Out of the harshest landscapes and oppressions, the novel excavates exquisite tenderness. The power that Lama's characters possess goes beyond the ability to merely survive. These refugees who cannot measure the earth with their bodies must instead hold distances in their hands: "The distances we've traveled. The distances we dream of. For those of us who cannot return home, all the world is a dream."

MELODY S. GEE *is the author of* The Convert's Heart is Good to Eat, The Dead in Daylight, *and* Each Crumbling House. *She lives in St. Louis, Missouri, with her husband and daughters.*

Christmas Critics

Illustrations by David Sankey

VALERIE SAYERS

I've received many delightful doorstops at Christmas—novels and memoirs mostly—but I'd also like to make the case for a slender volume of fiction as the perfect gift. The best short fiction, no matter how distressing or depressing, creates possibility: the tale is quickly told, we readers are jolted, our angle of vision shifts. What better time for a new angle than Christmas, when our focus is on that most transformative of stories, the Nativity?

And what better time to briefly retreat from clamorous gatherings to the contemplative cloister of a short story? We can hide away for twenty pages and return to the Christmas feast guilt-free. In Hilary Mantel's superb collection, ***Learning to Talk*** (Henry Holt & Co., $19.99, 176 pp.), the stories all take place in the 1950s and '60s in the grimy industrial North of England—a setting that seems especially apt for Christmastime, when we celebrate a straitened family in a landscape made bleak by poverty. The fictional family Mantel follows in these six stories is, however, no holy family: the mother has moved her lover into the house and her husband into a bedroom down the hall. It's left to the eldest child to bear witness to the ensuing moral chaos by narrating their story with precise, odd details, all faithful to the skewed understanding of children. Increasingly aware of class and bias against Irish families like hers, the child is learning to talk properly in elocution classes, which Mantel skewers deliciously.

Learning to Talk may also provide some solace to readers stunned by Mantel's sudden death in September. Best known for her Booker Prize–win-

Though Mantel's tongue is tart, she names each and every struggle the family endures, an exercise in narrative empathy told in economic rather than emotional terms.

ning *Wolf Hall* and *Bring Up the Bodies*, she is as bracing a story writer as she is a novelist; a previously released collection, *The Assassination of Margaret Thatcher,* is also a knockout. The "new" collection was released in the United States shortly before Mantel's death, though it was published in the United Kingdom in 2003, the same year as her compelling memoir, *Giving Up the Ghost*. This edition includes a brief preface in which Mantel calls attention to the "autoscopic" nature of these stories—yes, they tell her family's story, but they don't sensationalize the central drama: it's too hard to believe anyway, she argues. Though Mantel's tongue is tart, she names each and every struggle the family endures, an exercise in narrative empathy told in economic rather than emotional terms. In the same story, the narrator says, "I like to understand history through figures and percentages of these figures, through knowing the price of coal and the price of corn, and the price of a loaf in Paris on the day the Bastille fell."

This fidelity to precise representation of a remembered or imagined world, rendered compactly, is also Alexander MacLeod's method, though the two writers could not be more stylistically different. Mantel's prose is dense with imagery, metaphor, and the constant threat that dark poetry might break out any minute ("the murky sheen of carnation water two days old. Reek of armpits, rattling cough"). MacLeod, by contrast, is lean, direct, subtle. A Mantel story starts at a high pitch; a MacLeod story builds mysteriously, magically. His casual tone and graceful, straightforward prose sneak up on the reader with appealing modesty. (Full disclosure: MacLeod was a thesis student of mine twenty-five years ago, but I didn't realize he had published a second collection until I heard him reading one of these stories on a *New Yorker* podcast.) Each of the eight stories in ***Animal Person*** (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, $27, 256 pp.) introduces a new setting (mostly in Canada, where MacLeod is a much-admired literary presence), a new set of characters, a new surprise. In the opening story, "Lagomorph," which won an O. Henry Award, the narrator says of understanding rabbits: "You just have to be patient and pay close attention and try hard to find the significance in what very well could be their most insignificant movements," an instruction that serves equally well as a guide to reading these stories. "Lagomorph" explores the connection between human and animal but also the animal in its narrator, whose wry voice guides us through the dissolution of his marriage and the enlargement of his heart. In "The Closing Date," a young couple checks into a cheap motel with their four-year-old daughter and meets a serial killer, who brings them all Mr. Freeze pops on a sweltering summer day. The familiar language of real-estate closings and marital sex masks the profound change he brings to their lives: for years to come, they will ponder their role in a murder that takes place in the room next door as they are making love. In another story, a young boy barely escapes the sexual advances of a playmate's father. Even the plots that build to the greatest sense of menace, however, are shot through with narrative generosity, an interest in killers and predators as well as victims and witnesses, a longing to understand the unfathomable and sometimes the seemingly unredeemable.

The last slender volume on my list isn't, strictly speaking, a novella, nor is it new: Sigrid Nunez's ***The Friend*** (Riverhead Books, $16, 224 pp.) was published in 2018, when it also won the National Book Award, but I have found myself re-reading it annually since then—besides, what better segue from a collection called *Animal Person* to a brief novel about a woman who adopts a dead friend's Great Dane and moves him into an impossibly small apartment? *The Friend* is a hyper-literary novel, full of references to philosophers, novelists, and creative-writing workshops, but it is not—as so many novels fitting that description are—obnoxious. It is, rather, charged with mystery and wonder as the narrator ponders her friend's suicide, the compulsion to write, the beauty of a suffering animal. Like Mantel, Nunez can be scathing in her wit; like MacLeod, she is drawn to the badly behaved. All three writers are dead serious about the power of fiction at its most succinct. I can't think of better Christmas wonders.

VALERIE SAYERS, *professor emerita at Notre Dame, is the author of* The Age of Infidelity and Other Stories *and six novels.*

ALEXANDER STERN

The word "compulsion" can mean two different, if closely related, things: "the state of being compelled" or an "irresistible, persistent impulse." The first suggests a force from

outside that compels us; the latter an internal addiction or craving. The internet seems to blur the line between the two. Much of online life comes across as compulsory, at least to those of a certain age and station. One simply "has to" be online for any number of reasons: to make money, be informed, keep friends, find love. But once we're there, life online quickly becomes compulsive. We lurk and loiter on social-media platforms designed to addict, mainlining content we don't, upon reflection, actually value; advertisers compete for and scatter our attention; low-quality, slanted information consumes us, inflames our emotions, and distorts our thinking. The upshot is that the forum for public and private life we are all but compelled to use is, at least in some ways, against us.

To put it another way—the way philosopher Justin E. H. Smith puts it—"the internet is anti-human." Smith's book, ***The Internet Is Not What You Think It Is*** (Princeton University Press, $24.95, 208 pp.), draws on the history of philosophy and technology to recontextualize debates over the internet and related technologies like artificial intelligence and try to "figure out what went wrong." Smith's method is genealogical—he thinks that we don't really understand the nature of the internet because we don't really understand where it comes from. He means this more in terms of the idea of the internet than the technology, but he also surveys a variety of technologies, both imagined and real, that prefigure the internet. (My favorite is an "infinite book wheel" from 1588.)

Smith's book, for better and worse, is short on solutions, but it does suggest that before we can improve our relationship with technology, we have to think differently about it. To take one example, the idea of high-powered computing systems that can take over some of the operations of human thought goes back at least to the early modern period. Smith cites the ideas of the German polymath, G. W. Leibniz, who invented, in addition to calculus, an early calculating machine. Unlike many of today's technologists, Leibniz believed that human consciousness could never be reduced to any mechanical process, no matter how sophisticated. The analogy between artificial and human intelligence breaks down. For Smith, part of what's gone wrong is that Leibniz's conception of computers as tools to be "subordinated to our own rational decisions" has given way to a conception of machines as "rivals or equals," capable of the same kind of thought as we are. This latter belief is not only a "science fiction" that neglects differences between minds and machines; it tacitly underwrites a regime that treats minds *as* machines—whether it be through advertising that attempts to mold our consumption patterns or language processing software that attempts to identify our innermost feelings.

The Twittering Machine (Verso Books, $10.78, 256 pp.) by Richard Seymour delves deeper into the effects of this regime on the human mind, including analyses of phenomena like addiction, celebrity, and trolling. Like Smith, Seymour refuses to blame technology itself for our predicament, but where Smith's lens is historical, Seymour's is psychoanalytic. "If we've found ourselves addicted to social media in spite of or because of its frequent nastiness," he writes, "then there is something in us that is waiting to be addicted." He sees the internet as concentrating and "collectivizing" pathologies in our culture—narcissism, gossip, lies, bullying, vindictiveness, and competitiveness—that long predate the internet.

Of particular interest is Seymour's account of what's been called a "post-truth" society. He doesn't think our epistemological ills are caused mainly by lies and misinformation that spread easily online, but rather the "rule of brute facts" itself. We've elevated mere information over meaning, "technique" over "truth." The result is a cascade of information that only serves to keep users stimulated and producing their own content in response to it. It leaves us less knowledgeable and more detached from any meaningful reality, whether or not the information happens to be true. "The problem is not the lies," Seymour writes, "but a crash in meaning."

Can meaning be recovered in the face of the twittering machine? Matthew B. Crawford's ***Why We Drive*** (Custom House, $14.39, 368 pp.) suggests that we might find a site of resistance in an older machine: the car. Crawford, a political philosopher and motorcycle restorer, is, to put it mildly, not a fan of autonomous vehicles. To him, they are the latest attempt to turn a place of attention and skill into yet another occasion for passive consumption and compulsion. In his previous book, *The World Beyond Your Head*, Crawford argued against over-designed, over-automated environments backed by a false, abstracted conception of human freedom that elevates choices made in complete independence of the environment. For Crawford, the limitations and feedback of the physical world are not constraints on freedom but conditions for it—as are embodiment, attention, and skill. "To drive," he writes, "is to exercise one's skill at being free."

With their highly mediated and mediatized cockpits, contemporary cars have already gone a long way toward disconnecting drivers from the road. Self-driving cars, according to Crawford, will complete the separation and leave us subject to new forms of surveillance capitalism as we are ferried to and fro by opaque, unknowable systems that reduce us to compliant consumers. The potential gains in safety and drop in emissions are, for Crawford, no justification for the further deference to machines and loss of sovereignty.

Crawford suggests that what is being lost is not just an opportunity to develop competence or exercise freedom, but also to contribute to the common good. At the end of the book, he cites a homily in which Pope Francis praised the citizens of Rome in part for the way "they confront its traffic with care and prudence" and in so doing "express concretely their love for the city" as "artisans of the common good." By contrast, Silicon Valley, Crawford writes, aims at a common good "achieved by engineer-

ing herd behavior without our awareness, in such a way that prudence and other traits of character are rendered moot." As tech takes the wheel from us in more and more areas of our collective life, one hopes it's not too late to turn this rival back into a tool.

ALEXANDER STERN *is the features editor at* Commonweal.

ADAM FLEMING PETTY

I'm tempted to say Robert Macfarlane is one of my favorite nature writers, but that's not quite right. He's one of my favorite writers, period, and nature simply happens to be his subject. But that's still not quite right. Nature, for Macfarlane, is less like a garden and more like a library. He goes to some landscape and peels back the layers of the earth like the pages of a book, reading the secret history written there.

Underland (W. W. Norton, $17.95, 496 pp.) ranks among his best work. He visits several different subterranean environments throughout the European continent, delving into the deep history of humanity's past. In the British countryside, he visits a gravesite some six thousand years old. There, a mother and her child, both dead in childbirth, were laid to rest. The mother's arm is outstretched to cradle the child, and the wing of a swan is placed on the ground. The child is laid there, upon the wing, within the mother's grasp. Such ancient grief, in Macfarlane's telling, is deeply moving. Elsewhere, he visits mithraea in the Balkans, shrines built in caves by Roman soldiers in honor of the god Mithras, a strange figure who emerged throughout the empire at the same time that the Church was beginning to form. And in a passage that I, very much a claustrophobe, found terrifying, he descends beneath the surface of Paris to explore the catacombs there. When he crawls through a narrow tunnel and almost gets stuck, I nearly passed out from vicarious fear. Thank goodness Macfarlane writes about such harrowing journeys, so I can read about them from the comfort of my own home.

Self-help books, as a genre, lay out the tantalizing possibility of elevating oneself above the average. Read this book and you'll be fabulously wealthy; read that one and you'll grow four inches taller overnight and cancel your credit card debt. Achieving mere normalcy, such books suggest, takes no effort at all. It is a state to be overcome. ***How to Be Normal*** (Belt, $12, 208 pp.) by Phil Christman toys with this idea in its very title. Who would ever need instruction on how to be normal? And why would anyone exert effort to reach such a state? *How to Be Normal* is not, strictly speaking, a self-help book. It is a book of essays that, as Christman writes, "examine things that have an air of banality, normativity, or averageness about them." Topics include masculinity, whiteness, the Midwest, religion, and marriage. In Christman's hands, these seemingly average topics reveal themselves to be full of strangeness and hidden assumptions. In the essay on masculinity, he avoids the usual traps of condemnation or blind worship to arrive at something more pointed and personal. "Masculinity is an *abstract rage to protect*," he writes. "I mean precisely the activities that stem from a fear that simple usefulness is not enough: that one must train and prepare for eventualities one has no reason to anticipate, must keep one's dwelling and grooming spartan in case of emergencies, must undertake defensive projects that have no connection to the actual day-to-day flourishing of the people one loves." This tension between abstract ideals and the particular people they're supposed to serve forms the basis for Christman's experience of his own masculinity. You see this tension elsewhere, as in the essay on Christman's native Midwest. That seemingly bland region, forever in tension between the bustling coasts, exists as a kind of sociocultural nexus. Vast, unwieldy forces have passed through the Midwest: land grants, grain transports. What looks like rigidity is the result of huge resources being brought to bear upon the land. Scratch the surface, even just a little, and you'll see the circuitry whirring away.

As a child, my father raised me and my brother right in the ways of the Lord. By that I mean he sat us down every Saturday afternoon and introduced us to the classics of science fiction: *Star Trek*, *The Twilight Zone*, *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*. This was our legacy and our heritage. Science fiction, as a genre, allows you to get right to the beating heart of issues that might otherwise remain abstract. Issues like technology and social unrest, but also issues of faith, belief, and how our increasingly futuristic world can make people behave so primitively. One of the fruitful science-fiction stories for such discussion is *Alien*, the original 1979 movie directed by Ridley Scott, as well as its many sequels. Sarah Welch-Larson dives deep into these questions in ***Becoming Alien*** (Cascade Books, $22, 144 pp.), a wide-ranging yet compact look at all six films in the series, from the original to *Alien: Covenant* (2017). Welch-Larson's guidepost for the study is the work of Catherine Keller, an idiosyncratic theologian who looks at the "deeps" from which God created the world, as recounted in the first chapters of Genesis. More than good and evil, Keller's work centers around what she calls "discreation," the process by which evil undoes the act of creation. In *Becoming Alien*, the struggle between the alien and the various forces that try to harness its awesome power is a story of discreation—of the chaos that can arise out of creation. Reading the book transported me back to those youthful Saturday afternoons, when watching movies would lead to long-winded discussions about the nature of the universe.

Over the past few years, Jesse McCarthy has become one of my favorite new writers. Anytime I see his byline in a magazine or online, I turn and/or click there immediately. Thankfully, a collection of some of his strongest pieces is now available. ***Who Will Pay Reparations on My Soul?*** (W. W. Norton, $17.95, 352 pp.) gathers pieces old and new into a single coherent volume, one that traces the trajectory of McCarthy's own life along with the wider topics of race, art, and culture. An African American man who spent much of his adolescence in France, McCarthy has seen up close the ways that identity, often held to be a static category, can bend and warp depending on one's context. A look at trap music, the offshoot of hip-hip that originated in the South before taking over the genre, locates its origins in the funeral marches of New Orleans, musicians parading through the streets with horns and a bass drum in a communal act of mourning.

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GABRIELLA WILKE

It's been three years of pandemic and we're not really out of the wilderness yet. I may not Google my state's Covid numbers anymore, but the virus still seems to stalk most gatherings. Visions of a once-hoped-for post-pandemic world have unraveled; we're left with more of the same. Perhaps that's why, on a perfectly still and sunny day, my skin will prickle with the sense that a pandemic-less path is nearby, running alongside us. Confronted with this parallel world, I feel not a yearning to return to normal, but rather a dissatisfaction that we've given up on trying to change. "We are not living an era of change but a change of era," Pope Francis said—in 2015. Despite opportunities to chart new courses, we tend to stick with the old. For those of us who have walked in darkness, how do we open ourselves to Isaiah's great light? In hard times, friends offered me books that inspired new ways of thinking. Through their loving suggestions, I now have three to offer you.

Louise Erdrich's ***The Sentence*** (Harper Perennial, $14.40, 400 pp.), set mostly in the first year of the pandemic, functions as a perfect antidote to works that force us to relive too literally those unsettling moments of 2020. Erdrich gives us a ghost story instead, whose protagonist is Tookie—self-described as on "the wrong side of the statistics"—who credits both her sense of oblivion and her resilience to a lucky-gened ancestor "who survived all of the Old World diseases that descended upon us." After years in prison, she now sells books at an independent bookstore in Minneapolis, where in November 2019 she becomes haunted by the ghost of Flora, the store's most annoying customer and a wannabe Indigene. As Tookie begins to investigate the book that killed Flora—literally, reading the book was fatal—the past begins to manifest itself. Flora soon proves to be one of many specters wandering in Covid's diseased air. There's more that haunts Tookie than she lets in, and other characters and places are revealed to be haunted as well. Through lockdown and George Floyd's murder, things veer even more out of control.

There's an understated brilliance in how the novel depicts the inexorable approach of a mental breakdown. Tookie's time in prison includes a period she likens to "the blank pages in a diary," loaded with meaning but unspeakable all the same. Over time, details emerge as Tookie tries to understand how to vanquish her ghost. Her coping mechanism in prison was "to read with a force that resembled insanity," something that later aids her ability to read what Flora's ghost wants. And as Flora becomes more plainly visible, so too does Tookie's past: "I became aware of my thoughts. My brain began combing apart the strands of what had happened during the years of my incarceration." Erdrich deftly plays the reader's expectations of what's real off what seems unreal: Is Tookie just losing her grip on sanity, or is the ghost the cause of the chaos? *The Sentence* masterfully asserts that it can be both.

Even as the novel tackles the pandemic and racial reckoning, it's also full of love and humor. The eccentricities of life at a bookstore are on full display, and there are even book lists in the final pages. Erdrich herself appears in the narrative. And throughout, there's appreciation for the range of things that offer to transform us, whether it be a confessional, a jingle dress, or, of course, a sentence.

In recent years, many people I admire have returned to the Psalms. This was often a search not for strength but for validation: we also feel loss, helplessness, anger. A welcome if non-canonical spin comes from the realm of science fiction: ***A Psalm for the Wild-Built*** (Tordotcom, $20.99, 160 pp.) by Becky Chambers. In this solarpunk novella, a monk, Sibling Dex, is moved to change their vocation by the desire to hear cricket song, something that has practically gone extinct in the transition of human society away from industry and fossil fuels. While life as a Tea Monk (work that is simply understood as "listen to people, give tea") offers Dex a chance to travel around the outer villages, brewing tea does not bring Dex closer to cricket song, prompting their quest into the wilderness. Along the way, Dex encounters a robot—Splendid Speckled Mosscap—on a quest of its own: finding out what human beings need. On their way to a remote hermitage, Dex and Mosscap take up philosophical conversations about robot consciousness, human nature, and purpose.

The tale offers quiet assurance for those trying to make sense of undefined desires and anxieties. When questioned about their change in vocation or why they need to find this hermitage, Dex leans into truthful uncertainty: "I don't know.… This is just something I need to do." We witness the transformative benefits of small comforts when a woman who comes for tea sits down and visibly slumps her shoulders, and our narrator notes: "She'd always had the ability to relax them; she'd just needed permission to do so." Ultimately, even a good and meaningful life doesn't protect Dex from feeling that something is missing: "What is wrong with me that I can have everything I could ever want and have ever asked for and still wake up in the morning feeling like every day is a slog?" Like Mosscap trying to understand human behavior, we're invited to meet these moments with curiosity and care. A gentler world is possible.

Perhaps as a way to acknowledge my personal sense of the disruptions of time, I finally returned to a book I had meant to revisit at the beginning of the pandemic: Eula Biss's ***On Immunity: An Inoculation*** (Graywolf Press, $16, 224 pp.), written in 2014. Much of the magic of my first reading back then was traceable to how many sources Biss draws from to interrogate the subject of immunity and vaccination: Dracula and Achilles, Sontag and *Silent Spring*, Voltaire and variolation. This time, I was struck by her deeper observations, the ones that endure across time and pandemics. Although Biss is in dialogue with a different pandemic (H1N1 in 2009) and a different kind of anti-vaxxer (other mothers), she is a keen observer of what informs our fears.

On the most fundamental level, that happens to be language. "Our understanding of immunity remains remarkably dependent on metaphor," Biss writes—and many such metaphors can be unsettling. Consider the militaristic examples: a body that "fights," is at "war," or is on the "front lines" against invisible "enemies." Our cells are like ourselves: they "eat," "mature," "read," "instruct." Biss cites research on the effects of using the body as a metaphor for a nation, which found that when two issues are metaphorically linked: manipulating a person's attitude toward one (a harmful infection) affects how that person sees the other (immigration). The power of words helps show how the field of alternative medicine has been so successful peddling a range of "natural," "holistic," and "detoxifying" balms.

Drawing on Donna Haraway and Wendell Berry, Biss also warns against "troubling dualisms" that pit science against nature or truth against imagination. Such dualisms are not only unhelpful, but also override the possible and necessary continuity between them. We could instead learn to accept a "cyborg" world, she writes, a world "in which we're all irrational rationalists." Thus the relationship between ourselves and technology could be a collaborative one, whether the danger is perceived or real—be it a bike, a breast pump, or a vaccine. But I'd also like to suggest that, at a time when those open to vaccination and those opposed to it are basically estranged from each other, it's a capacious way to sit with fear. Throughout these pages, Biss uses the vampire as a stand-in for a variety of anxieties, including disease, capitalism, and motherhood. "As a new mother I became fixated on [vampires] in part because they were a way for me to think about something else," she writes. Yet as she reveals in an anecdote about the weeks following her son's birth, the metaphor works not only as a vessel for her fears but a way to quell them, or to inoculate against them: a vampire cannot enter without permission.

GABRIELLA WILKE *is the marketing and audience development director at* Commonweal.

GRIFFIN OLEYNICK

At a recent in-person *Commonweal* gathering in New York, I cheekily asked some of my far-flung colleagues whether they knew Vincent Van Gogh's *Starry Night*, one of the most famous paintings in the world, and suggested they take advantage of their visit to go and see it on the fifth floor of the Museum of Modern Art, where, I claimed, they'd surely be blown away.

I wasn't entirely joking. *Starry Night* is an incredible work, and the fact that you have to push your way past throngs of tourists to get a good look does nothing to diminish its power. Like gears in a spring-loaded mechanism, every detail combines to produce an explosive effect: the olive-green cypress rising in the left foreground, the black-blue hills breaking like waves in the background, the humble houses with one or two lamps lit inside, all rotating around a slender, white church steeple that pierces the luminous swirl of sky. Van Gogh painted it during the day, rendering the dark night with thick curls of blue, yellow, white, and brown.

Apart from the aesthetic pleasure it gives, what's the relevance of *Starry Night*? Can we read it as a record of mental illness (Van Gogh loosely depicts his view from an asylum window), and thus as an indictment of a society that refuses to accommodate people who think differently? Or rather as an idealizing, idyllic picture of a lost harmony between humans and nature, a bond soon to be severed irrevocably by climate change?

In the opinion of Jed Perl, longtime art critic at the *New Republic* and a regular contributor to the *New York Review of*

Books, that all misses the point. "I want us to release art from the stranglehold of relevance," Perl writes in ***Authority and Freedom: A Defense of the Arts*** (Knopf, $20, 176 pp.), the sharpest, most inspiring book of criticism I read this year. True, art can shed light on social problems and may indeed inspire us to work for change. But art's primary task, Perl asserts, is not to "promote a particular idea of ideology, or perform some clearly defined civic or community service." Art is meaningful, valuable, and exciting precisely because of its *irrelevance* to our most immediate, surface-level concerns.

At the center of Perl's analysis is the notion that all art is the result of a tension between the authority of tradition on the one hand and the freedom of creativity and invention on the other. For Perl, no artist simply makes something new ex nihilo. First, an artist must complete a kind of apprenticeship, imitating and then mastering the models and forms that have preceded them. That process needn't preclude artists from exercising individual freedom. Perl points out that even medieval manuscript illuminators, who worked with limited physical materials and according to rigid formal conventions, often used such constraints as springboards for producing some of the most imaginative, fantastical figures ever drawn.

If, for Perl, the artist is both a "rationalist" and a "pragmatist," a skilled "maker" for whom "the job must get done," the true artist is also one who responds generously and wholeheartedly to a vocation to stand apart, and thus to be free. Among the many compelling examples Perl cites are Michelangelo, whose floating columns and skewed staircase in the vestibule of the Laurentian Library in Florence both respects and breaks with classical architectural theory, as if activating a new energy hiding in old forms; or Aretha Franklin, whose rapturous performance of "church music" before thousands of people in a Los Angeles theater in 1972 reveals her "at the height of her powers" even as she remains laser-focused on her craft and technique, the "nitty-gritty of her art." Perl sees the solitude Franklin experiences on stage as paradigmatic of what art can be at its best: a way of living in and engaging with the world that also takes seriously the fact—as well as the infinite, inviolable essence—of human interiority. "All eyes are on her, but she is alone with her vocation."

Though Perl never mentions her, those words could also describe Celia Paul, one of the most important contemporary British artists and author of the 2019 memoir ***Self-Portrait*** (New York Review Books, $29.95, 216 pp.). Known for graceful, intimate portraits of family members and, more recently, spare still lifes and quiet landscapes, Paul is also an extraordinarily gifted writer. She kept a diary when she was young. (The daughter of Anglican missionaries, Paul spent much of her childhood in India, then studied painting at the Slade School of Fine Art in London.) Now, at the age of sixty, Paul puts the same unassumingly curious, incisive voice to powerful new effect in retelling her long, emotionally abusive relationship with the British painter Lucian Freud, grandson of Sigmund and the father of Paul's son Frank.

The result is less an aggrieved, angry act of defiance than a confident, self-assured assertion of independence and freedom. "By writing about myself in my own words," Paul says, "I have made my life my own story. Lucian, particularly, is made part of my story rather than, as is usually the case, me being portrayed as part of his."

Grief and pain are present throughout, but that's not really the point of Paul's memoir, which also unfolds as an account of her total dedication to her art, a solitary endeavor always held in tension with her intense love for those closest to her, especially her mother, her late husband Steve, and her son. What most struck me while reading *Self-Portrait* is Paul's undivided and unwavering commitment to *routine*. Her self-imposed asceticism is precisely what enables her to focus—and thereby connect deeply with the people and places that surround her.

The artist's work lies not just in copying and then creating, but also in erasing.

In a sense, Paul's life literalizes the very artistic separation that Perl extols. Much of it takes place within the confines of her studio, housed in a small fourth-floor flat ("a climb of eighty stairs") in London's Great Russell Street, just across from the British Museum. Lucian Freud bought it for her in 1982, but Paul has since transformed the space into an inviolable sanctum ("No one can enter without my permission"). Like a monastic cell, the studio serves both as a metaphor for Paul's interiority and artistic vocation ("When I wake up, the first things I see from my bed are these huge figures of the Muses carved into the triangular summit of the pediment") and a concrete, physical space to work out her salvation ("The floorboards are bare and saturated with paint and turps. My painting clothes and paint rags have turned into encrusted rock formations").

Unintentionally, Paul also complicates and rounds out Perl's conception of art as a path to freedom. The artist's work lies not just in copying and then creating, but also in erasing: "Painting is the language of loss. The scraping-off of layers of paint, again and again, the rebuilding, the losing again. Hoping, then despairing, then hoping. Can you control your feelings of loss by this process of painting, which is fundamentally structured by loss?"

Even if I were a painter, I'm not sure how I'd answer Paul's question. Still, I'm grateful for her candor, her integrity, and her work, which continues to console me. Art can't solve our problems, or make up for our losses. But it might help us transcend them.

GRIFFIN OLEYNICK *is an associate editor at* Commonweal.

Santa Claus and Science

G. K. CHESTERTON

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I wish the subject I discuss here in a short article could be discussed in a big book, or a long series of books. I rather fancy that, if it could really be reduced to its elements, we should find the elementary truth about Catholicism and Protestantism and the present problem of our civilization. It would perhaps explain why, in the coming Christmas, many millions of our mature fellow creatures, so far from hanging up their stockings to have them filled, will rather hang up their hearts and heads and find them empty; and why they will continue to enact a fable for children to believe in, and for children who do not believe in it. For the sake of brevity, let me sum up such a scientific monograph under the heads of three or four questions.

First, who was Santa Claus, or who was he supposed to be? Why do we actually describe this domestic and familiar figure by a name in a foreign language that few of us know? Why should a sort of uncle or grandfather so intimate that he is allowed to enter by the chimney, instead of the front door, have on his visiting-card the rather florid name of a distinguished foreigner? The answer is important. It is because in my country the saints really have crept back again like spies. St. Nicholas of the Children may not come through the chimney like a burglar; but he was really admitted through the front door only as a foreigner. It is part of a paradox, that Protestant England satisfied

Bicci di Lorenzo, *Saint Nicholas Providing Dowries*, 1433–35

THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART / GIFT OF COUDERT BROTHERS, 1888

its intense insularity mainly by the use of foreign words. For instance, men cannot do without the image of the Mother of God; the veritable Queen of Hearts, with every sort of lovers in every sort of land. But the Victorians got over her omnipresence in all art by calling her "a Madonna," whatever that may mean. As it was British to talk of Mary only in Italian, so it was British to talk of St. Nicholas only in German. So we could tap all the traditional poetry of Christendom, without calling it Catholic or even Christian. It was a sort of smuggling; we could import Nicholas without paying the tax to Peter.

Second, everybody could then dispose themselves in elegant attitudes of sad sympathy and patronizing pity over a mere fairytale for children, which children themselves must soon abandon. Santa Claus has passed into a proverb of illusion and disillusion. A man wrote a poem about how he had ceased to believe in Santa Claus at the age of seven and in God at the age of seventeen; and explained how he really regretted God not much more than Santa Claus. The notion that the thing had ever had any relation to any religion, or that that religion had ever had any relation to any reason, or that it had been a part of a real philosophy with a fringe of popular fancies but a body of moral fact, never occurred to anybody. And I startled some honest Protestants lately by telling them that, though I am (unfortunately) no longer a child, I do most definitely believe in Santa Claus; though I prefer to talk about him in my own language. I believe that St. Nicholas is in heaven, accessible to our prayers for anybody; if he was supposed to be specially accessible to prayers of children, as being their patron, I see no reason why he should not be concerned with human gifts to children. I do not suppose that he comes down the chimney; but I suppose he could if he liked. The point is that, for me, there is not that complete chasm or cutting off of all relations with the religion of childhood, which is now common in those who began by starting a new religion and have ended by having no religion.

Third, do our contemporaries really know even the little that there is to know about the roots, or possible origins, of such romances of popular religion? I myself know very little; but a really complete monograph on Santa Claus might raise some very interesting questions. For instance, St. Nicholas of Bari is represented in a well-known Italian picture of the later Middle Ages not only as performing the duty of a gift-bringer, but as actually doing it by the methods of a burglar. He is represented as climbing up the grille or lattice of a house solely in order to drop little bags of gold among the members of a poor family, consisting of an aged man and three beautiful daughters who had no money for their wedding dowries. That is another question for our contemporaries: Why were celibate saints so frightfully keen on getting other people married? But anyhow, I give this only as one example out of a hundred, which might well be followed up if only grown-up people could be induced to take Santa Claus seriously. It looks as if it might be the root of the legend. To see a saint climbing up the front of our house would seem to most of us as odd as seeing a saint climbing down our chimney. Very probably neither of the things happened; but it might be worthwhile even for scientific critics to find out what actually did happen.

Fourth, what do our great modern educationists, our great modern psychologists, our great makers of a new world, mean to do about the breach between the imagination and the reason, if only in the passage from the infant to the man? Is the child to live in a world that is entirely fanciful and then find suddenly that it is entirely false? Or is the child to be forbidden all forms of fancy; or in other words, forbidden to be a child? Or is he, as we say, to have some harmless borderland of fancy in childhood, which is still a part of the land in which he will live; in *terra viventium*, in the land of living men? Cannot the child pass from a child's natural fancy to a man's normal faith in Holy Nicholas of the Children, without enduring that bitter break and abrupt disappointment which now marks the passage of a child from a land of make-believe to a world of no belief?

G. K. CHESTERTON *was a journalist, novelist, and poet. This was the last of many articles he wrote for* Commonweal.

IDIOM

Deborah Warren

Giunse per Maria il tempo di partorire;
ed essa diede alla luce un figlio . . .
(Luke 2: 6–7)

Mary didn't merely bring Him forth
in winter words and murk of night,
but idiom as bright as birth:
She gave Him to the light.

And the event is different: it's translated
into sunlight—into words that say
the same thing but illuminated,
turning night to day.

The words themselves become evangelists.
Telling the tale, they turn a phrase
—with verbal photosynthesis—
into an act of praise.

DEBORAH WARREN *is an award-winning author and poet, most recently of* Strange to Say: Etymology as Serious Entertainment *(Paul Dry Books, 2021) and* Connoisseurs of Worms *(Paul Dry Books, 2021).*

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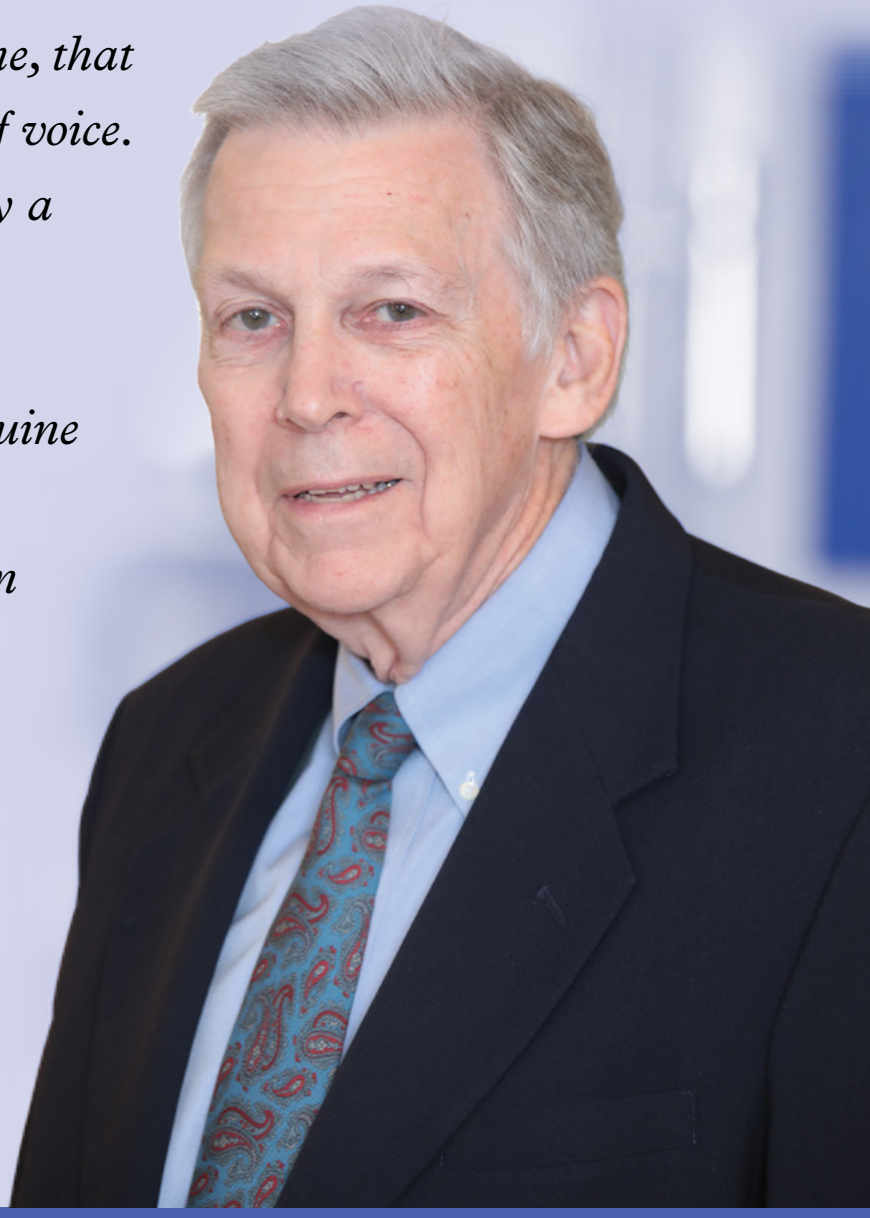
— DAN MURTAUGH
Co-Chair, the Edward Skillin Society



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